

The Azores

October 2nd-17th 2003

Steve Lister and Megan Hall

Introduction

We decided on this trip to try and boost our Western Palearctic lists by seeing the endemic Azores Bullfinch and hopefully finding some American vagrants, plus we were keen to visit this Atlantic outpost of Europe to savour some of the different islands.

At the outset we had very little information on birding in The Azores, beyond the selections of records published in *Birding World* most months and an excellent 'where to watch' article by Tony Clarke in the same publication (13:6:251-7); an earlier article by Tony had summarised records from 1998, the best-covered autumn so far (*Birding World* 12:5:205-12) but seems not to have kindled any great enthusiasm for the islands amongst British birders. An internet search produced a few trip reports, mainly in Swedish, but provided little in the way of further information as to which islands we should concentrate on. Getting in touch with SPEA (www.spea.pt), the Portuguese ornithological body, gave us a couple of contacts on the islands but no information on birding sites. We resolved to produce something that would be useful and easily obtained by any future visitors.

We got hold of a Sunvil brochure to see what they offered on The Azores (very few British travel companies cover them as there are no direct flights from the UK, and this explains why the islands are visited more by Scandinavians) and were pleased to find that they could do us a 'tailormade' package covering any islands that we opted for. The brochure proved very useful. We decided to fly, via Lisbon, to Sao Miguel (the only island where the bullfinch occurs and with some good lakes for American ducks and waders), then to Pico (the main island for whale-watching as well as being good for waterbirds), Flores (the most westerly island and with a good record for American birds, including the odd passerine), and finishing on Terceira (the island with the best WP site for American waders). As it turned out we also had a half-day on Faial during the transfer from Pico to Flores so we visited five of the nine islands.

The Sunvil brochure included a choice of accommodation on each of the islands we had chosen – we opted for ones that were reasonably situated for exploring each island, avoiding town centres except on Terceira, where we stayed in Angra do Heroismo, a World Heritage site. The price for two of us, including all flights and necessary transfers, bed and breakfast accommodation and car hire on all five islands came to about £2750 for our sixteen day trip. Extra to this were meals (not expensive), petrol (about 20% less than in the UK, and you use very little) and whale-watching trips (43 Euros for a three hour trip, ie about £30).

Itinerary

October 2nd Flew Heathrow to Lisbon (TAP) and Lisbon to **Sao Miguel** (SATA)
Casual birding and sea-watching from Hotel Caloura
October 3rd Sea-watching at Hotel Caloura

- Lagoa das Furnas and Terra Nostra Parque
Serra da Tronqueira mountain road
Praia beach
- October 4th Serra da Tronqueira coast road and mountain road
Lagoa das Furnas
Lagoa do Fogo
- October 5th Setes Cidades lakes (Lagoas Azul and Verde)
Mosteiros including sea-watching
- October 6th Flew to **Pico** (SATA)
Sao Roque shore
Lagoas do Capitao and Caiado
Lajes do Pico
- October 7th Lajes do Pico including whale-watching trip just offshore
Lagoas do Capitao and Caiado
Madalena harbour
- October 8th Lajes do Pico including whale-watching well out to the south-west
Lagoas do Capitao, Caiado, do Paul, da Rosada, and do Peixinho
- October 9th Lajes do Pico
Lagoas do Capitao and Caiado
Madalena harbour
- October 10th Ferry to Horta, **Faial**
Porto Pim, Capelinhos and Norte Pequeno (Bar Fim do Mundo)
Flew to **Flores** (SATA)
- October 11th Santa Cruz
Lagoas Seca, Comprida, Branca, Negra, Funda, Rasa and dos Patos
Faja Grande
- October 12th Ponta Delgada and Farol de Albarnaz
Lajes das Flores harbour
Faja Grande
Lagoas Seca and Branca
- October 13th Lagoas Seca, Branca, Rasa and Lomba
Flew to **Terceira** via Faial (SATA)
- October 14th Cabo da Praia quarry
- October 15th Ponta do Raminho
Ponta dos Biscoitos
Lagoas do Negro and da Patas
Reservatorio do Cabrito
- October 16th Lagoa Ginjal
Reservatorio do Cabrito
Cabo da Praia quarry
Serra do Cume
Vila Nova shore
- October 17th Flew to Lisbon (TAP) and on to Heathrow (TAP)

Notes on some sites visited

We used the Freytag and Berndt 1:75000 Azores map and it was fine for the main roads but less accurate for tracks, even on the larger islands such as Terceira. We were pleasantly surprised to be able to drive right up to nearly all of the lagoas on

Pico and Flores by using surfaced roads not shown on the map. Free maps available in resort usually showed the roads in question, often as tracks; Flores in particular has many good roads not shown on the F+B map.

Cabo da Praia quarry, Terceira

This is probably the main site in the islands. It is found by turning off the main road just south of Cabo da Praia as if heading for the industrial area adjacent to the harbour and then turning right at each junction until you see an obvious shallow quarry. A large warehouse was under construction and may soon obstruct the view as you approach. The quarry itself has a very uneven floor with a variety of vegetation and rock pools; it floods at high tide by water seeping through the narrow bank separating it from the sea. Birds do not seem to be affected by the change in water levels and, except for Whimbrels, do not seem to leave the quarry unless disturbed. You can get good views from next to the explosives compound or from the top of the bank, and it is possible to use a car as a hide and drive along a track across much of the area. There are some pools at the back of the site that are screened by Giant Reeds.

Lagoa do Ginjal, Terceira

This is the most productive of the few pools on Terceira; it is reached by turning off the EN1-1 road at an unmarked junction just after the 6km marker as you head north-east from Angra and then keeping left. Birds here were very easily disturbed. (Across the main road from here is a plastic-lined reservoir, **Reservatorio do Cabrito**; this was attracting large numbers of Yellow-legged Gulls for bathing and held the only Coot we saw on Terceira.)

Lagoa das Furnas, Sao Miguel



The east side

A large and attractive lake next to the main road to Furnas. Access by good tracks at each end. The southern shore, by Jose do Canto church, is sandy and has attracted waders. All of the water birds that we saw were in the narrower northern section, near the thermal area. There is a path all along the western shore.

(In nearby Furnas town the gardens at Terra Nostra Parque include three small lakes and have hosted a male Wood Duck for at least a year; originally regarded as wild it now keeps company with two Black Swans and two Mute Swans!)

Serra da Tronqueira, Sao Miguel

This range of hills is the only site for the Azores Bullfinch. There are three roads crossing the area; we birded two of them, the coast road north of Agua Retorta and the mountain road, a graded gravel track, from its junction with the coast road to the Miradoura da Tronqueira. The only place where we found the bullfinch was a 200 metre stretch of the mountain road about 3 km from the junction, a site marked by a collapsed yellow cabin set slightly back from the track on the right. There seemed nothing different about the habitat here and we were surprised not to see the birds elsewhere. Other sites where people have been successful recently are the area around the miradoura and the downward slope beyond there; the coast road, from Miradoura da Madrugada (not signed) has been suggested as a winter site.

Sete Cidades – Lagoa Azul and Lagoa Verde, Sao Miguel

These two very scenic lakes have an enviable list of American waterbirds between them but we saw nothing except a flock of Coots. Lagoa Azul is the better; all of the south-east shore is suitable for looking for ducks and waders and there is a good track to a picnic site. The shore adjacent to Sete Cidades town is similar and easily accessed. There is also a track along the west side of Lagoa Verde, which was totally birdless for us.

Another crater-lake on Sao Miguel, **Lagoa do Fogo**, has attracted birds and does look very good but views are very distant unless you walk down into the crater on what can be a very slippery path. We were there at dusk and it seemed as if all the Yellow-legged Gulls on the island were gathering to roost there.

Lajes do Pico, Pico



This small town, the location of the main whale-watching organisation, Espaço Talassa (www.espacotalassa.com), has a sea-wall overlooking a rocky shore that has attracted an impressive variety of shorebirds and herons, many from America. Views are easiest at low tide, when areas of flat, weed-covered rocks are exposed for birds to feed on. It is best to watch from the sea-wall – not only does it avoid disturbance but the rocks are very difficult to walk over. There is a small inlet at the southern end of town, opposite the secondary school, as well as the more obvious areas near the harbour at the northern end. It is easy to overlook birds, especially at high tide.

Lagoas on Pico



Lagoa do Caiado

There are several pools and small lakes accessed from the road that runs along the spine of the island. There are occasional records of American waterbirds. We checked two of them everyday and the others once, but were unlucky, seeing very little. **Lagoa do Capitaó**, signed off the EN-3, seems to be on the taxi-tour of the island due to its flock of Muscovy Ducks! A few km east, reached from the EN-2 by a narrow road opposite a disused house, is **Lagoa do Caiado** and just before this is a small pool on the south side of the road, not named on the B+F map. Continuing east on the narrow road you eventually come to a road on the right to **Lagoa do Paul**, perfectly good but not on the map at all. After returning to the ‘Transversal’ and continuing east you pass **Lagoa da Rosada** and then **Lagoa do Peixinho**, both visible close to the road.

Lagoas on Flores



Lagoa Branca on a cloudy day

The centre of Flores contains seven crater-lakes, all well sign-posted and with parking at viewpoints. They have nearly all produced birds of notes in recent years but most visits will find them devoid of birds. During our three day visit the only one with more than an odd gull or Grey Heron was **Lagoa Branca**; this large and shallow lake has a lot of grass and algae patches and looks much the most likely. The road to this lake passes between **Lagoas Comprida** and **Seca** (dry at the time) and also crosses a large marshy area with a couple of very small pools at the roadside, where we found a Garganey.

In the same area as the lagoas there is a rubbish tip frequented by gulls; this is beside the road about 2 km north of Lagoa Rasa.

Faja Grande, Flores

Here, the most westerly village in the Western Palearctic, Bobolink has been seen twice and other American birds several times. The area between the village and Poco do Bacalhao to the north is made up of tiny fields and big hedges just waiting for someone to find vagrants. There is a long boulder beach and a dramatic shore of mountainous black lava, truly impressive when the Atlantic breakers crash against it. On the road down to the village from the top of the scarp a path runs off on the right in between the two river bridges, signed **Lagoa do Patos**; this is an attractive pool that has held several Nearctic ducks. The path can be very slippery, but the pool can be viewed distantly from Miradoura Craveiro Lopes on the top road.

Systematic list of species recorded

All dates refer to October 2003

Records are grouped by island using the following abbreviations

SM = Sao Miguel

Pi = Pico

Fa = Faial

Fl = Flores

Te = Terceira

Cory's Shearwater (Calonectris diomedea)

Large numbers seen offshore, often close in.

SM 300 off Caloura on the evening of 2nd and 300 off Mosteiros on 5th

Pi 400 off Lajes do Pico on 9th

Fa 150 off Ponta dos Capelinhos on 10th

Fl 150 off Santa Cruz on 11th

Te 20 off Cabo da Praia on 14th, 25 off Ponta dos Biscoitos on 15th and 25 off Vila Nova on 16th

Manx Shearwater (Puffinus puffinus)

SM 2 flew north past Mosteiros on 5th

Little Shearwater (Puffinus assimilis)

SM 47 flew east past Caloura early on 3rd

Little Egret (Egretta garzetta)

Pi 1 at Lajes do Pico on 6th and 7th

Fl 2 at Faja Grande on 12th and 1 at Santa Cruz on 13th

Te 1 at Lagoa Ginjal on 16th

Grey Heron (Ardea cinerea)

SM 4 at Lagoa das Furnas on 3rd and 4th, 1 at Lagoa do Fogo on 4th, 8 at the Sete Cidades lakes on 5th

Pi 1 at Lagoa do Capitao on 6th and 8th, 1 at Lagoa do Caiado on 6th-8th, 3 at Lajes do Pico on 6th increasing to 9 by 9th, 1 at Lagoa do Rosada on

8th, 1 at Madalena harbour on 9th

Fa 6 at Porto Pim on 10th
Fl 1 at Lagoa Branca on 11th, 1 at Lagoa Funda on 11th and 12th, 1 at Santa Cruz on 11th and 13th
Te 2 at Cabo da Praia on 14th and 1 at Lagoa Ginjal on 16th

Eurasian Spoonbill (Platalea leucorodia)

Fl 1 first-winter at Faja Grande on 11th and 12th

Wood Duck (Aix sponsa)

SM 1 male at Terra Nostra Parque, Furnas on 3rd

Eurasian Wigeon (Anas penelope)

Te 1 female/immature at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

American Wigeon (Anas americana)

SM 2 female/immatures at Lagoa das Furnas on 3rd and 4th

(American Black Duck)

Fl 6 hybrids at Lagoa Branca on 11th and 4 there on 13th

Garganey (Anas querquedula)

Fl 1 eclipse/immature male near Lagoa Seca on 11th

Common Buzzard (Buteo buteo rothschildi)

SM Thinly distributed across the island, approximately 30 seen

Pi Less common than on SM, 6 seen on 8th

Fa 6 seen between Horta and Capelo on 10th

Te 2 at Ponta do Raminho on 15th and 5 at Serra do Cume on 16th

Eurasian Coot (Fulica atra)

SM 3 at Lagoa das Furnas on 3rd and 2 there on 4th, 16 at Lagoa Azul on 5th

Pi 1 at each of Lagoa do Capitaó and Lagoa do Caiado on 6th-9th

Fl 1 at Lagoa dos Patos, Faja Grande on 11th

Te 1 at Reservatorio do Cabrito on 15th and 16th

Ringed Plover (Charadrius hiaticula)

Te 3 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

Semipalmated Plover (Charadrius semipalmatus)

Te 2 first-winters at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

Kentish Plover (Charadrius alexandrinus)

Te 45 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

Grey Plover (Pluvialis squatarola)

Pi 1 at Lajes do Pico on 6th and 8th

Knot (Calidris canutus)

Pi 1 at Lajes do Pico on 6th

Te 4 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

Sanderling (Calidris alba)

Pi 2 at Madalena harbour on 7th and 10th

Fa 1 at Porto Pim on 10th

Te 50 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

Semipalmated Sandpiper (Calidris pusilla)

Pi 1 juvenile at Madalena harbour on 7th and 9th



Juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper, Madalena harbour, Pico. 7th October 2003.

Little Stint (Calidris minuta)

Te 1 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

White-rumped Sandpiper (Calidris fuscicollis)

Fl 1 flew over Lajes das Flores harbour on 12th

Te 1 juvenile at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th and a juvenile/first-winter there on 16th

Pectoral Sandpiper (Calidris melanotos)

Te 3 juveniles at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 1 juvenile there on 16th

Curlew Sandpiper (Calidris ferruginea)

Te 1 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

Common Snipe (Gallinago gallinago)

Pi 7 at Lagoa do Peixinho on 8th

Te 6 at Lagoa Ginjal on 16th

Dowitcher sp (Limnodromus sp)

Te 1 winter adult at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th was probably a Short-billed

Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa)

Te 3 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 2 there on 16th

Whimbrel (Numenius phaeopus)

All were checked for the possibility of Hudsonian Whimbrel

SM 1 at Caloura on 2nd and 5th, 4 at Mosteiros on 5th

Pi 2 at Lajes do Pico on 6th, 7th and 9th with 3 there on 8th

Fl 2 at Faja Grande on 11th

Te 4 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th, with 2 there on 16th, and 1 at Ponta dos Biscoitos on 15th

Greenshank (Tringa nebularia)

Pi 2 at Lajes do Pico from 6th to 8th and 1 there on 9th

Fl 1 at Lagoa Branca on 11th and 13th

Wood Sandpiper (Tringa glareola)

Te 1 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th

Turnstone (Arenaria interpres)

SM 5 at Praia on 3rd and 14 at Mosteiros on 5th

Pi 11 at Lajes do Pico on 8th, with smaller numbers on 6th-9th

Fa 1 at Porto Pim on 10th

Te 48 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 14th and 16th, and 4 at Sao Mateus on 16th

Black-headed Gull (Larus ridibundus)

Pi At Lajes do Pico 3 on 6th, 1 on 7th, and 5 on 8th

Lesser Black-backed Gull (Larus fuscus)

SM 1 at Praia on 4th

Pi 1 at Lajes do Pico on 6th

Fl 1 at the tip near Lagoa Rasa and 1 at Santa Cruz, both on 12th

Te 10 on fields near Lagoa Ginjal on 15th and 1 on a field at Serra do Cume on 16th

Yellow-legged Gull (Larus michahellis atlantis)

A very variable form as regards mantle colour and head streaking of adult birds

SM Very common around the coast. Apparently gathering to roost at Lagoa do Fogo on 4th

Pi Less common than on SM except on islets off Madalena

Fa Less common than on SM

Fl Small numbers at Santa Cruz and around the lagoas but 50 at the tip near Lagoa Rasa on 12th

Te Common around the coast and on fields; 500 in the Serra do Cume and Reservatorio do Cabrito area on 16th

Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus)

Fl 1 adult at Santa Cruz on 11th

Roseate Tern (Sterna dougallii)

SM 1 colour-ringed adult at Mosteiros on 5th

Common Tern (Sterna hirundo)

SM 50+ at Caloura on 2nd-5th, 120 at Mosteiros on 5th

Pi 60 at Sao Roque on 6th; 130 at Lajes do Pico on 6th had increased to 200+ on 7th
Fa 20 at Porto Pim on 10th
Fl 3 flew past Lajes das Flores on 12th
Te 20 in Cabo da Praia harbour on 14th and 16th, 2 east past Ponta dos Biscoitos on 15th, and 130 at Sao Mateus on 16th

Rock Dove (*Columba livia*)

Feral birds were seen commonly on SM, Pi and Te and less commonly on Fa and Fl

Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus azorica*)

SM 1 at Furnas on 3rd, 1 at Caldeira do Ribeira Grande on 4th, and 4 at Lagoa Azul on 5th
Pi 2 at Lajes do Pico on 7th, and a total of 7 more scattered around the island
Te 3 near Ponta do Raminho on 15th, 15 over Lagoa Ginjal, 5 at Serra do Cume and 5 over Reservatorio do Cabrito all on 16th

Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea patriciae*)

SM Common, with up to 30 a day seen along roads
Pi Common
Fa 1 at Porto Pim on 10th
Fl Fairly common
Te Common

Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)

SM Common in wooded areas
Pi Less common than on SM
Te Less common than on SM

Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*)

Fl 1 near Lagoa Seca on 11th and 1 at Farol de Albarnaz on 12th
Te 1 at Serra do Cume on 16th

Blackbird (*Turdus merula azorensis*)

SM Common
Pi Common
Fl Common
Te Common

Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla gularis*)

SM Common
Pi Common
Fl Common; 60 at Faja Grande on 11th
Te Common

Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*)

SM Common in wooded areas (R.r. azoricus)
Pi Common in wooded and scrub areas (R.r. inermis)
Fl Common in wooded areas (R.r. inermis)
Te Common in wooded areas (R.r. inermis)

Starling (Sturnus vulgaris)

SM Common

Pi Common; roosts on cliffs at Lajes do Pico and in trees at Madalena.

Fl Less common than on SM and Pi

Te Common; large roost in the gardens at Angra do Heroismo

House Sparrow (Passer domesticus)

SM Common

Pi Common

Fl Less common

Te Common

Common Waxbill (Estrilda astrild)

Te 15 at Cabo da Praia quarry on 16th

Chaffinch (Fringilla coelebs morelitti)

Individuals resembling both European and African sub-species groups were seen.

Generally very variable.

SM Common

Pi Common

Fl Common

Te Common

Canary (Serinus canaria)

Very common on all islands

Greenfinch (Carduelis chloris)

SM 1 at Lagoa Azul on 5th

Te 1 at Ponta do Raminho on 15th

Goldfinch (Carduelis carduelis parva)

SM 10 at Serra da Tronqueira on 4th, 2 at Lagoa Azul on 5th

Pi 2 at Santa Cruz on 8th

Fl 1 near Lagoa Seca on 11th and 2 at Farol de Albarnaz on 12th

Te 2 at Reservatorio do Cabrito on 16th

Azores Bullfinch (Pyrrhula murina)

SM 4, including at least 1 juvenile, 3 km along the mountain road at Serra da Tronqueira on 4th

Other wildlife observations

Cetaceans

We saw a Humpback Whale on 4th October and 7-8 Sperm Whales on 5th October, on both occasions while out at sea off Lajes do Pico on Espaco Talassa boats. We saw 10 Risso's Dolphins off Lajes do Pico on 4th October and 4 off Santa Cruz, Flores on 11th October. A group of about 20 Common Dolphins were feeding off Cabo da Praia, Terceira on 14th October.

Other mammals

Rabbits were seen on Pico and were common on Flores. An unidentified species of mustelid, possibly a polecat, was seen on Flores and three were found as road-kills, two on Flores and one on Pico. Day-flying bats, apparently an endemic species, were common on all islands except Flores.

Butterflies

Clouded Yellow (SM, Pi, Fa, Fl, Te) was much the commonest

Red Admiral (SM, Fl)

Painted Lady (Fl, Te)

Large White (SM, Pi, Fl, Te)

Monarch (Pi)

Contact details

Hopefully this report has been either interesting or useful, or even both. If you have any comments or questions feel free to contact us at

stevelist@surfbirder.com

We would be interested to receive any other reports or articles about birding on The Azores and would appreciate any references or links.

Steve Lister and Megan Hall

Loughborough

England