

AZORES

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Introduction

Early August is not the best time to visit the Azores, but the timing had been determined by the opportunities to see some species that are difficult elsewhere in the Western Palearctic. The first of them is Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata* which breeds every year or so on Vila islet, off Santa Maria (one pair usually, as far as I know).

The other “species” I wanted to see are summer-breeding and winter-breeding Madeiran Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma castro*. In the Azores, the summer-breeding population and the winter-breeding population differ in vocalisations, morphometrics, and have fixed differences in mitochondrial DNA. Although the situation is apparently not as clear cut elsewhere in the North Atlantic (Canaries, Madeira, Salvages) and more investigation is clearly needed, this situation suggests that the two populations may be split in the future. As they are impossible to separate at sea (and may be sometimes in hand) based on current knowledge, the only way to “tick” them is currently to visit breeding colonies. The only possible time to see both summer and winter birds in the same trip is August. There are still late summer birds in early August, and the first winter prospectors visit the colonies from mid-August onward.

The birds breed on protected islets where landing is restricted, so the only way to visit the colonies is to take advantage of visiting scientists who monitor the birds and ring them. For the moment, the scientist in charge of the program for the University of the Azores is a French friend of mine, Joël Bried. Since he only has a six-years contract there, and has been there for four years now, I decided to go this year, as it could have been my last opportunity. Joël usually rings the summer chicks in early August on Praia islet (off Graciosa), and visits Vila to ring Bulwer’s Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii* and Cory’s Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea borealis* chicks on Vila islet around mid-August. Furthermore, a visit to breeding colonies of “exotic” tubenoses was a child dream. Sleeping with Cory’s Shearwaters, Madeiran Storm-Petrels and Little Shearwaters calling around, Bulwer’s Petrels flying around, ringing chicks of petrels and shearwaters, was a dream made true.

The plans were thus to visit Praia islet with Joël first thing, to bird around the island by myself and to end with a stay on Vila again with Joël. As I decided to do the trip very late, I had trouble finding plane tickets, and I could not reach the Azores before 3 August. Another constraint I put on the time schedule was to do as many inter-islands transfers as possible by boat (to increase my chances of seeing seabirds). That was a very wise decision, as seawatching from land was very disappointing, to say the least... Only Cory’s, plenty of Cory’s, but nothing else!

Last, I had decided to spend one day on Terceira as late as possible, expecting more American vagrants later in August. That was not a useful decision, but that was difficult to foresee...Joël had planned to visit the seabirds colonies on 3-4 August on Praia, and between 11-14 August on Vila. Ferries do not sail regularly among the islands, except the three central ones (Faial, Pico, São Jorge), which makes planning a difficult task. I did not manage to fit a trip to Flores in the schedule. Fortunately, I did not need American Black Duck *Anas rubripes*. With all these constraints in mind, I ended up with the following itinerary:

Itinerary

03 08: flight from Lisbon to Terceira. Night at Terceira.

04 08: morning: ferry trip from Terceira to Graciosa to meet Joël there. Afternoon: visit to Praia islet. Night on Graciosa.

05 08: morning and early afternoon birding Graciosa (around Santa Cruz) on foot, evening ferry trip to Faial via São Jorge and Pico. Night on Faial.

06 08: day trip to Pico from Faial. Night on Faial.

07 08: ferry from Faial to Terceira. Evening birding on Terceira. Night on Terceira.

08 08: ferry Terceira to São Miguel. Picked-up a rented car in Ponta Delgada. Night on São Miguel.

09 08: day on São Miguel. Night on São Miguel.

10 08: morning birding on São Miguel. Flight to Santa Maria with Joël who arrived from Faial. Night on Santa Maria.

11 08: the boat took us to Vila. Night on Vila.

12 08: day and night on Vila.

13 08: back to Santa Maria in the morning, flight to São Miguel then Terceira. Picked up a car there. Night on Terceira.

14 08: day birding on Terceira. Flight to São Miguel in the evening. Night on São Miguel.

15 08: early morning flight to Lisbon.

General information

Most of the planning was made through the Birding Azores web site www.azores.seawatching.net.

Flights: SATA flights daily between all the islands. It is apparently less expensive to book tickets with them directly, asking from “tourist prices”, than buying a package including flights from and to Portugal + inter islands flights with TAP, as TAP does not have as cheap prices as SATA. In August, there are a lot of tourists on the Azores (by local standards), so booking late (as I did) can be a problem. For example, there were no seats left for Flores on some days. Booking in advance is thus essential.

Ferries: the timetables are available on the internet. There are two companies, only one reaching all the islands. It is not possible to book in advance by phone. You can only buy tickets in local travel agencies or directly on the boat. Just be there one hour before departure. They do not accept credit cards! There are always rooms on the ferries, so no worry about booking. If you plan to cross between Terceira and Faial, try to avoid the fast ferry (catamaran), which makes birding very difficult.

Cars: of course, birding with a rented car would have been helpful everywhere. Unfortunately, this was not possible because 1) car rental is VERY expensive in August and 2) on some islands (Santa Maria, Graciosa, Pico), it was just impossible to find a car, even 2 weeks in advance. The small islands have only few rental cars and they are all booked in August. I only managed to have a car on São Miguel (where it would be difficult to do otherwise) and on Terceira for my last day there (where I could have easily managed without it, in retrospect).

Accommodation: I slept in the car when I had a car, and slept outside on Vila. The two nights on Faial were spent at Joël’s place. Other nights were in cheap hotels (called “residenciais”, much less expensive than proper hotels), for prices between 15 and 35 euros per night. Last night on São Miguel (Ponta Delgada) at the Youth Hotel as everything is very expensive there.

Birding: for seabirds, the best birding was from the ferries. Two crossings proved successful: Terceira – Graciosa (Bulwer’s Petrel, Madeiran Storm Petrel and Little Shearwater) and Terceira – São Miguel (Bulwer’s Petrel and unidentified storm petrels). The other crossings

were a waste of time (Faial – Pico, Pico – Sao Jorge, Graciosa – São Jorge, Faial – Terceira). Seawatching from land did not bring anything good. For shorebirds, gulls and herons, August is a difficult time: there are people swimming, fishing or diving at almost every place where the coast is not vertical cliffs. It can take a full day to find something else than Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* or Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*. But good birds can turn out really anywhere.

Birds seen

This is not a complete bird list: regular breeding birds are usually not mentioned, as I did not see anything special. The breeding terrestrial species are all widespread and easily seen, and there is plenty of info in other travel reports or on the Birding Azores web site. Similarly, Yellow-legged Gulls, Common and Roseate Terns and Kentish Plovers are widespread and I have not reported them all. Whimbrels and Turnstones are also widespread and I have not reported them all. Cory's Shearwaters are extremely abundant and seen everywhere. All other species are mentioned.

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*

I saw the (unringed) male in Furnas (S. Miguel) on 09/08. It was accompanied by several (plastic ringed) Mandarin Ducks and Wood Ducks..., plus some purely exotic ducks. This bird is treated as “origin unknown” by the Portuguese Rarities Committee.

Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*

04 08: 2 from the Terceira – Graciosa ferry

08 08: 4 from the Terceira – São Miguel ferry

11 – 13 08: many adults and chicks on Vila, in burrows by day or flying around at night. A few adults seen from Vila on both evenings before dusk, but far away.

Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis*

08 08: 15 from the Terceira – São Miguel ferry

Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*

07 08: 1 from between São Jorge and Terceira (ferry)

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*

12 08: 2 seen while seawatching from Vila during the evening.

Little Shearwater *Puffinus assimilis baroli*

04 08: 1 from the Terceira – Graciosa ferry

11-13 08: Vila. 2 at sea from Vila at dusk on 11th, then 2 on land calling and visiting burrows (the same?) at night. 1 at sea from Vila at dusk on 12th, then 2 or 3 calling and visiting burrows at night.

Very early dates: Joël had never recorded the species on Vila during mid-August visits. The species breeds in winter in the Azores.

Madeiran Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma castro*

04 08: 6 well seen (some very well seen) from the Terceira – Graciosa ferry. *Rather obviously forked tail at close range suggests summer-breeding birds.*

Praia, one ad. incubating (*a late summer breeder*) and several chicks

11-13 08: Vila. at least 2 individuals calling at night on 11th, one landing at my feet (attracted by the torch light apparently). Night of 12th: 3-4 individuals calling (1 captured on the ground, 1 captured in a burrow).

Voice typical of the winter-breeding birds.

I was very lucky to have good views of adults of both forms. The summer-breeding bird on Praia was the last adult staying in its burrow by day in the whole colony. On Vila, Madeiran Storm Petrels generally return ashore from mid-August onwards, but they don't usually land and are only glimpsed in flight. Winter-breeding birds identified by voice (in addition, there is no summer population on Vila). Summer-breeding bird identified because incubating in August...

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

04 08: 1 on Praia islet (Graciosa)

06 08: 2 in Horta, Faial

09 08: 2-3 at Sete Cidades, São Miguel

14 08: 1 Terceira on a small inland lake

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

09 08: 2 Mosteiros (S. Miguel)

13 08: 2 Cabo da Praia (Terceira)

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

10 08: 1 juv at Lagoa Azul (S. Miguel)

07-08 08: 2 ad at the ponds in Praia da Vitoria (Terceira), with one juv there on 14 08

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

09 08: 1 ad at Lagoa Verde (S. Miguel)

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*

03 08; 07 08; 13-14 08: 1 +1cy (probably first-summer) at Cabo da Praia (Terceira)

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Cabo da Praia (Terceira): 1-2 on 03 08, 1 on 07 08, 2 on 13 and 14 08. Probably 1st summer (non-breeding +1cy)

04-08: Praia islet, Graciosa, 1 +1cy

05-08: Santa Cruz, Graciosa, 1 +1cy

Red Knot *Calidris canutus*

Cabo da Praia (Terceira): 1 ad B 07-08, 13-08 and 14-08.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Cabo da Praia (Terceira): at least 17 +1cy, 03-08, 07-08, 13-08 and 14-08.

05-08: Graciosa, Santa Cruz, 1 +1cy

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*

Cabo da Praia (Terceira): 1 ad B 03-08, 07-08, 13-08 and 14-08.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Cabo da Praia (Terceira): 1 NB +1cy (2cy?), 03-08, 07-08, 13-08 and 14-08.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

09-08: Mosteiros (S Miguel), 1 ad B

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Cabo da Praia (Terceira): 1 NB +1cy (2cy?), 07-08, 13-08 and 14-08.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

Cabo da Praia (Terceira): 1 NB +1cy (2cy?), 07-08, 13-08 and 14-08.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*

04-08: Praia islet, Graciosa, 1

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

07, 13 and 14-08: Cabo da Praia (Terceira), 1 +1cy

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*

06-08: Pico, Lajes do Pico, 1 1cy

Pomarine / Arctic Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus/parasiticus*

08-08: 1 ad/sub from the Terceira – S Miguel ferry, probably Pomarine with broken streamers but distant.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

09-08: S. Miguel, Povoação, 1

12-08: Vila islet, Santa Maria, 1 1cy

Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*

04-08: 1 ad on Praia islet, Graciosa (present since some time).

Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*

11 to 13-08: Vila islet, Santa Maria, 1 pair and 1 fully grown chick.

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*

07-08: Cabo da Praia (Terceira), 1

Azores Bullfinch *Pyrrhula murina*

09-08, S. Miguel, Serra da Tronqueira, 2 at least, well seen.

Seen along the small road through the Serra da Tronqueira (see Azores Birding website) but not at “the clearing with the yellow hut”. The birds were found further away, near the “pass” (the place where the road stops climbing and starts going down toward Nordeste). Just 100-200 m before the pass (on the Povoação side) there is a very small clearing along the road where I managed to see two birds, after a few frustrating hours waiting and many calls heard and a few flight-by observations.