

## Azores Birding Trip (26 July - 2 Aug 2010)

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Last week of July was planned to catch few interesting long-staying and local WP species in the Azores. Together with Hannu Palojärvi, Keijo Wahlroos and Timo Luhtala we explored on top of Sao Miguel also Terceira, Graciosa and Santa Maria. Below are the highlights of the trip.

Hispania/Finnair trip/flight had been reserved already in spring. Two of us had also better company with in Sao Miguel. July 26 we landed in the afternoon in Ponta Delgada (Sao Miguel). Afternoon was just holiday walking around Ponta Delgada shoreline. **Roseate Terns** welcomed us in the harbor.

Next day (27 July) was two cars heading in the morning towards Noroeste and Serra da Tronqueira mountain forest. It took for some time until we saw first pair of **Azorean Bullfinch**. A bit later another one was seen. When we continued further towards Pico da Vara and logged mountain hills, we found close to 10 other birds. At Pico da Vara mirador place was two pairs. In overall the open logged hill area was much better place to find Bullfinches than the forest itself. Also photographing was easy. Below is one shot of a tame bird.



*Azorean Bullfinches at Serra de Tronqueira and especially in the open hills until Pico da Vara mirador were easy to find.*

Then was a long drive down to Noroeste and further northern shore to Ribeira Grande, passing it and motorway to Ponta Delgada. We continued with Hannu to Lagoa Azul and Mosteiros on the western end. Up at the eastern side of the Lagoa Azul / Lagoa Verde caldeira very tame couple of Chaffinch, ssp moreletti, a male was used to tourists and let photograph itself just like a filmstar.



*Local Chaffinch subspecies is very contrastic compared to the Finnish ones.*

From the road/bridge between Lagoa Azul and Lagoa Verde we saw already well next target, **Pied-billed Grebe** which was near the shore on the northeastern side. We went closer and then it started to hide itself but I managed to take documentary shot of it. It has been there since last fall.



*Adult Pied-billed Grebe was well pulling itself deeper into the water and vegetation when we approached.*

It was nice WP tick to both of us, for me tick 644. When we returned to Ponta Delgada, we saw 4 **Eurasian Collared Doves** by the road in Candelaria.

In the evening we four men flew to Terceira. We had less than 30 minutes to check Paul de Praia ponds and best was an adult **Pectoral Sandpiper** feeding on the shore when the water level was low. Darkness already reduced our possibility for photographing.

July 28 was our destination in the morning Cabo da Praia and the place showed again its excellent wader place. During the morning we found minimum 4 adult **Least Sandpipers**, 3 adult **Semipalmated Sandpipers**, 1 adult **Semipalmated Plover**, 1 juv **Black-tailed Godwit** on top of usual **Turnstones** (15+), **Sanderlings** (3) and breeding **Kentish Plovers** (50+).



*First Least Sandpiper showed well but soon 4 were in the same picture confirming minimum amount of 4. They were rather movable, so it was hard to say whether number was even higher.*



*One Semipalmated Sandpiper (upper photo) had a ring on the right tibia. The lower photo bird was well allowing to photograph. Third bird was too far to photograph.*



*Semipalmated Plover stayed on the same rocks all the time when the water level was low but had disappeared in the evening when the water level was high and rocks covered by the water.*

Others saw a **Great Blue Heron** circling around the quarry when I was focused on wader photographing. Timo got some shots of it. Long staying 2cy **White-winged Black Tern** was feeding around the pools (below).



On our way to Praia da Vitoria on the harbor we saw first one adult **Spotted Sandpiper** and later the others saw another one when I was resting in our accommodation. Spotted Sandpipers were very scary. Fortunately Timo got some decent shots from a flying bird.

In the afternoon we visited again Paul da Praia and **Pectoral Sandpiper** was still there, now in a better light. Evening visit in Cabo da Praia did not bring anything new for us. Anyhow, both Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers were WP ticks to me (645, 646).



*This distant photo confirms Pectoral Sandpiper key characters: strong markings on the breast which sharply borders to the belly, also bill shape and light colored legs.*

Next morning (July 29) we had an early flight to Graciosa. Target of the day was Monteiro's Petrel. Ronaldo (boat captain) and assistant Pedro were waiting us at Praia harbor. At 9.30am we headed for 4-5 hours boat cruise around the island. We saw good number of Cory's Shearwaters but to our surprise not any petrels.

Ronaldo said that it was first time this summer that we did not see any petrels in the late morning and noon trip. Hence he agreed that another evening trip will be done without any extra cost.



*Cory's Shearwater was quite numerous on the western side of Graciosa.*



*Here we are heading to the evening trip with our zodiac boat.*

We left 6.30pm and first petrels we saw 7.30pm about 3-4 miles off Praia (and the breeding island). As they were hot season petrels, they are assumed to be **Monteiro's Petrels**. They flew like Leach Petrels, very fast and they were glyding like shearwaters. We estimated that in the following 1 hour we saw 15+ Monteiro's Petrels. As in the morning trip we said "NADA" (nothing in Portuguese), now we were very pleased for the good evening trip.



*Monteiro's Petrels were not easy to photograph as they flew very fast and made quick turns in a darkening evening. Key characters are still well visible in the two photos.*

Between the morning and evening trip we had two hours to explore in Graciosa. We tried to find Limeira pond without success. We drove a bit up west from Limeira and there we saw a bird which flew like a Shrike. Two of us got immediate impression that it was possible Woodchat Shrike (whitish upper rump, very small whitish area on the base of blackish primaries, dark tail, dark back and a bit lighter colored head). It flew 150m from us and disappeared behind trees after been visible a bit less than 10 seconds. We did not have time to search it anymore and realized later that it would have been first for Azores in case of Woodchat Shrike. Even Red-backed Shrike has been seen only 2 times earlier.

Next morning before our ferry to Terceira at noon we tried to search possible shrike more than an hour without any sign of it. The habitat was very suitable for the specie; fields, cows, some bushes, stone walls, etc.

On July 30 we drove around on western side of the island without anything special. It was time to return via Terceira to Sao Miguel.

On the ferry between Graciosa and Terceira we were not allowed to do seawatching from the sundeck (captain order). However, a bit after leaving from Terceira we learned that good number of passingers were on the sundeck. I had seen already one **Bulwer's Petrel** from the window but from the deck we saw 6 more between

1.5 - 2.5 hours after Terceira. Also three small petrels we saw and at least one was close enough to confirm that it was clearly Monteiro's based on similar flying style as yesterday and not showing toes beyond the tail. Others were too far away to identify surely. Flying style was anyhow the same as the identified one.

Bigger flock (50+) of small dolphins was on the way and yesterday evening we saw 5-8 Bottle-nose Dolphins very near our boat. Also few of us saw a whale yesterday evening when we were already returning to the harbour. I missed it.

July 31 was a relaxing and touristic day. We photographed Roseate Terns at Ponta Delgada harbour. We also visited Hotel Ponta Delgada where 2 **Rose-ringed Parakeets** were flying around. Several palms clearly have attracted them to stay around the hotel. Keijo and Timo had seen them from the first day onwards.

Already in Graciosa 3 of us had reserved return tickets for the last full day (Aug 1) to Santa Maria. Our target was Sooty Terns. Before it we had few hours to check Ponta Delgada harbor. To our surprise we found an adult **Spotted Sandpiper** which was also very tame and allowed well photograph it on the rocks 300m from the fortress.



*This adult Spotted Sandpiper was very co-operative for our photographing at Ponta Delgada harbor rocks.*

At noon we flew to Santa Maria and immediately took a taxi to drive us near to Ilheu de Vila. There we searched island terns a bit over an hour when a Common Buzzard flew close by southern corner of the island. Several hundreds of Common/Roseate Terns started to chase the buzzard away and among them we found two clearly bigger, longer winged and tailed terns which had uniform black upper part. **Sooty Terns** were seen (my tick 647). A quarter later another buzzard passed the place and again they all were up. The same two Sooty Terns were easily again found. Later we saw one bird sitting on a small rock on the southern part of the island where we saw them both time landing.

We walked around the airfield as we had read that Killdeer had breed there earlier in the summer. However, we did not find any sign of Killdeers anymore.

We had evening flight to Sao Miguel and last evening we spent all together with very good mood. The trip had well succeeded. It's worth to mention that on butterflies Large Whites were everywhere and Clouded Yellow was here and there. I saw also one Red Admiral in Sao Miguel.