

Birding Cape Verde, Gambia and Senegal on a cruise trip to Canary Islands 13-20.3.2013

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Cape Verde - African Egrets and Santiago specialties

I got a good offer of 25% discount from Kristina Cruises for a 10 days trip: Cape Verde - Western Africa (Gambia & Senegal) - Canary Islands. Cape Verde had few species which were missing in my WP list. Western Africa stops would provide some world ticks. Sea trip could offer some interesting seabirds between Cape Verde islands and Western Africa, as well as north of Dakar to Canary Islands.

Also Keijo Wahlroos joined to the trip. Additionally I learned that on the same trip was few other half active birders.

The plan was to take off early on March 13th from Helsinki but the flight was delayed 7 hours. Then at fueling stop in Faro lasted 8 hours and finally we arrived 4.15am on 14th in Santiago. The first planned birding in the afternoon on 13th was lost. The night sleep for the 14th was very short (only 2 hours) when we finally had arrived the cruising ship. We had agreed with Herbert Bëndendorfer who lives winters in Santiago that he would pick me and Keijo Wahlroos from Santiago Praia harbor. Also Erkki Hallila and Risto joined us.

First target was to see **Black Egret** and **Intermediate Egret** on the Barragem de Poilao. On a way there we saw one of the island visible species: **Grey-headed Kingfisher**.



Tens of Grey-headed Kingfishers were seen during the day. Its shiny blue upper side was very beautiful.

When we arrived to the reservoir, we soon picked up **Black Egret**. Keijo's only target bird was well seen. Keijo had seen Intermediate Egret already in spring 2002 in Sao Vicente. On my first trip 2007 the bird was not seen in Santiago or in Sao Vicente.



Black Egret made several times its "umbrella shadow" but a bit far away as all the photos I was able to take.



A local person walked by the shore line and chased all herons/egrets away. Then the Black Egret flew to a dead tree for a while.



Also the same tree hosted for a while local juvenile Purple Heron (*ssp bournei*).



Only ducks on the reservoir were **Blue-winged Teals** (a male and 3 females). They flew far away and to get only documentary shots when they were flying over the reservoir.



I shortly saw an egret flying nearby me and took few shots. Others did not see the bird at all.



To me the photo revealed immediately that I had seen **Intermediate Egret**, my second target species for the island. Luckily I saw together with Erkki the bird second time when it landed for a while in front of a hide on the southern part of the reservoir later in the afternoon. Keijo and Risto did not see the bird from their hide which was 150m further back.



Santiago has additional endemic species like **Iago Sparrow**, **Cape Verde Swift** and **Cape Verde Warbler**. All those species were numerous. Below photos from a male Iago Sparrow at the botanical garden.



Cape Verde Warbler I photographed on the reservoir. The bird looks like a juvenile bird with its fresh plumage.



The bird below I believed to be an adult Cape Verde Warbler but in fact it's female Spectacled Warbler. Thanks are due to C Hazevoet who gave me feedback. It looks clearly an adult bird which is searching food for its pulls on the nearby reedbed where it went.



We also visited Pedra Badejo beach and lagoon where we saw nice group of **Black-crowned Sparrowlarks** (a male and 3 females). The site together with the reservoir provided good group of waders to our trip list. On our visit we did not find any American waders.



We saw also a group of 45 **Helmeted Guineafowls**, few Kestrels (ssp *alexandri*) and a **Red-billed Tropicbird** at the harbor in the morning.

The day was excellent. We practically saw all what we were expecting to see. It was time to return our ship and prepare to move to another island during the night.

Vielen Dank Herbert und Eva für Ihre Freundlichkeit noch einmal! Ihre "Lunch" war super.

Cape Verde - Sao Vicente and the sea towards Western Africa

When the cruising boat left from Praia harbor in Santiago 7pm, it was so dark that birding was not anymore possible on the sea. Few hours later I got a phone call that a Leach's Petrel was found on the 7th deck on the back. I went to see the bird and confirm that it really was Leach's Petrel. It was then released into the darkness.

On March 15th I went together with Keijo already before 7am to do seawatching when we were approaching Sao Vicente. The sea was calm and empty. Only few shearwaters were resting on the sea but too far away to confirm id surely. They looked like Cory's / Cape Verde Shearwater.

Closer to Mindelo we saw two pairs of **Red-billed Tropicbirds** flying close to the shoreline cliffs. Their red bill was easily seen though the birds were flying rather far away.

When we arrived in Mindelo, we had immediately plan to take a taxi and go to Mindelo sewage works. Also Erkki's wife joined us for 3 hours trip. It took for a while until taxi driver understood what we wanted. Finally we arrived to the gate of sewage works. We got also permission to explore in the area.

Good number of waders and egrets/heron were there. Best to mention were two **Lesser Yellowlegs**, below photo from one of them.



We saw a Black Kite flying over the pools. It looked a bit strange due to its unusual pale color. I got few distant shots from it but the photo anyhow reveals Kite's unusually pale color.



Is it ssp *parasitus*? At least it has dark bill, not yellow like African Black Kites have. Otherwise it was paler than I have ever seen. The body underside was pale, also the head. Facial mask was darker like juvenile birds have. Keijo got very good shots when the kite sat on a pole.

Also local Kestrels (*ssp neglectus*) were seen in the area and few others around the town of Mindelo. Eurasian Spoonbill and White Stork were by the pools as well. Are they first migrants? Two Barn Swallows and European Bee-eaters were clearly migrants.

I rested in the afternoon on the boat. We left Mindelo 7pm and again we sailed through Cape Verde Islands through the night. When I woke up next morning (on March 16th), we were probably 20km SE of Boa Vista. The islands on the eastern side were well visible during the first hour.

First hour was quiet on the sea. Then 1-2 hours later we started to get first **Brown Boobys** and before noon we counted max 25 BBs around the boat to catch flying fishes.



First shearwaters were clearly **Cape Verde Shearwaters**. They were slimmer and had grey bill as can be seen in the a bit overexposed photo.





These birds look also a bit slimmer and longer tailed than Cory Shearwaters which we saw more (20+) further away on the sea. Cape Verde Shearwaters were only less than five during the morning.

We saw also small number of Madeira and/or Leach's Petrels. Most of them were too far away to be sure for the identity. Most identified were clearly Leach's.

Also few **Bulwer's Petrels** flew by, photo below.



Then around 11.30am Keijo found a white bird on the sea. It was a bit far but with the bins we could see that it clearly had a long white tail feather. However, the bill looked yellowish, not red. We took few photos to get confirmation what is really the color of the bill. It was **YELLOW**. The bird is **WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD!** What a big surprise. On the back it had also greyish band which the species has made by greater coverts.



Though the bird was very distant, it's possible to see long tail feather, yellow bill and some black color on the back of a white bird. Later we learned that it's a 3rd observation in Cape Verde and 5th for the WP. The area where the bird was is around Cape Verde Sea Mount in the nautical map. I verified the distance of the area from captain and he explained that it's 68 nautical miles from Boa Vista. So it's clearly inside WP boundary.

I considered Cape Verde Shearwater as a sure WP tick for the trip but WT Tropicbird was really something unexpected.

In the afternoon we saw few tens of Cory's Shearwaters and Leach Petrels. When I stopped seawatching 5pm, only a quarter later Keijo and few less active birders saw 2 **White-faced Storm Petrels** passing the boat.

Our seawatching provided good birds and it was really worth to spend the whole day on the deck to watch the sea. Tens of dolphins were also worth to mention.

Next three days we were going to be in Western Africa, two in Gambia and one in Senegal.

Gambia - short introduction to new birds in Western Africa

We arrived on 17th at noon Banjul harbor in Gambia. Already from the sunrise we did seawatching and saw now completely new species after Cape Verde. I missed few Pomarine Skuas further away on the sea when I woke up a bit late. Anyhow, Lesser-crested Terns, Northern Gannets (all subad), Lesser Black-backed Gulls (ssp *graelisii/intermedius*) and Pink-backed Pelicans welcomed us.

I had contacted Habitat Africa for 1.5 days bird guiding and Demba Semko was waiting us at the harbor. First afternoon we visited Abuko NR and nearby Lamin fields, which practically took the whole afternoon. On our return to our ship we stopped shortly at Cape Point to look shorebirds.

Next morning (March 18th) we went first to Brufut wood and after it to Tanji beach. Then we had a lunch break in Senegambia and after it we spent in Kotu (water treatments pools, fields, etc). Brufut wood was new place to me. I have visited Gambia on a similar cruising trip early 2007 led by Dick Forsman and other mentioned places were familiar from that trip.

The first day also Erkki and Risto joined us. Next day we did the trip together with Keijo.

We saw good number of nice species and below are some photos: **Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Stone Partridge, Bronze-winged Courser, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Long-tailed Nightjar.**







These two days provided also good selection of such species which are still missing on my WP list but are possible to see in WP. Below few photos of them: **Red-billed Firefinch**, **Reed Cormorant**, **Grey-hooded Gull**, **Royal Tern** and **African Pied Crow**.





Some work I have still ahead to get those species in WP, mainly in Western Sahara.

Those 1.5 days were very good and Demba made excellent work to us. Thanks Demba! I hope

that one day I can explore up to 2 weeks with your guidance in Gambia. These two days provided close to 20 new world ticks to me.

6pm on 18th we said goodbye to Gambia and continued our cruise towards Senegal and Dakar.

Senegal and the sea towards Canary Islands

We arrived in Senegal capital Dakar in the morning of March 19th a bit after 8am. Just before the harbor we saw several 2cy Audouin's Gulls and tens of Lesser-crested and Sandwich Terns.

As soon as we were able to leave the boat we went to the nearest taxi and got it with 100€ to drive to Bandia return with 3 of us. Erkki did not join as he had selected another boat arranged day trip. Bandia is 1.5 hour drive SE of Dakar. It's actually a reserve but we explored nearby the park, around the parking area and ate a lunch at the restaurant.

10km before Bandia we took a bit over an hour break to explore rather over savanna landscape. Soon we found **2 Double-spurred Francolins, 2 Temminck's Coursers, 10 Black-headed Lapwings, 1 Mottled Spinetailed Swift, 5 Blue-naped Mousebirds, 2 Desert Cisticolas, 2 Black Scrub Robins**, etc. It was very productive stop.

We continued our drive. First our driver drove us 25-30km forward to Bandia gate explaining that there is a good park. When we arrived to the place, it was golf course. We returned to Bandia southern border but on our drive we picked up at least ten Rollers on the wires: Abyssinian, Broad-billed and Rufous-crowned.

We walked the southern edge of the Bandia Park and found few interesting species: **Grey Kestrel, Red-necked Falcon, Pygmy Sunbird, 10+ Black Scimitarbills, 20+ Piapiacs**, etc.

Finally we went inside the park and mainly to eat lunch. Around the lunch area and parking place we picked up nice birds: **Vieillot's Barbet, Fine-spotted Woodpecker**, etc.

I did not carry my camera with me, so no photos from that trip.

After our lunch we had to start our return drive 3pm to be in good time at harbor and our boat which was leaving already 6pm. Over the harbor were 2 Peregrine Falcons hunting.

It was interesting to note that Dakar was full of Black Kites whereas in Banjul area sky was full of Hooded Vultures. Those Dakar Kites had surprising deep tail notch and a bit more rusty tone that I'm used to see in Finland. We even believed that few individuals were Red Kites but they were lacking grey color on their head and neck.

Next morning we were cruising 100 nautical miles west of Mauritania coast. Before 9am I picked up two whitish birds on the sea. Soon they took off and I photographed them. Long white tail feather and red bill confirmed their id: **Red-billed Tropicbirds**. The birds were around the same distance as we saw White-tailed TBs east of Boa Vista. See the color difference. The position of the birds was almost straight west of Nouakchott.



Grey Phalaropes were more and more numerous the further North we sailed. We counted that day total sum was 700-1000 Grey Phalaropes. Most birds were in a group of 1-4 but biggest groups were up to 80 birds.





All identified storm petrels were **Leach's Petrels** which we saw 50+ during the day usually singles but also in small groups up to 5 birds.



We saw also several **Black Terns** migrating to north and 80+ **Roseate Terns** were on the move as well.



The whole day we saw 50+ Arctic Skuas and they were also clearly on their northbound migration.



The day was also good for mammals. We saw small groups of Bottle-nose Dolphins and 5+ Whales (around 10m long) which I suspect to be Humpback Whales based on their fins and blows.



Small group of Bottle-nose Dolphins were following for a while our cruising boat.

Also few Cory's Shearwaters we saw in the morning.

The day provided well to watch throughout but next day (March 21st) was rather quiet when we sailed west of Moroccan coast. Gradually we also went further away from the coast towards Tenerife. In the morning we saw several Northern Gannets (3ad, 2 subad), less than 100 Grey Phalaropes, few Leach's Petrels and 55+ Arctic Skuas but otherwise the sea was very empty.

In Tenerife on March 22nd we rented a car from Santa Cruz and drove to Playa de Las America to search **Nanday Parakeet**. On the waterfront boulevard we found a pair flying pal tree line but otherwise we did not see other parakeets. Unfortunately Nanday Parakeet is still in E category but I hope that it will be upgraded to C category in the near future.

We saw good number of Rose-ringed and Monk Parakeets in Ten-Bel. Additionally we saw several **Berthelot's Pipits**, **10+ Canary Chiffchaffs** and **Plain Swifts**.

Last boat sailed last night to Gran Canary where we rented again a car on 23rd of March. We drove to St Bartholome area and searched there Lesser Scoup seen earlier in March. We did not find it. Otherwise the day provided mostly the same species as in Tenerife but it was good to find **African Blue Tits** and a singing **Turtle Dove**.

We departed our boat Kristina Katarina late in the evening and our flight towards home started after midnight. It was very good and interesting trip. I counted that total amount of species we saw was around 230. Most interesting was certainly Cape Verde part but certainly Western Africa provided nice selection of African birds. The cruise offered excellent opportunity for seawatching and it was really rewarding.

I'm sorry that many photos are not in quality wise good but more documentary type photos. Long distance and light conditions were very challenging.