THE CAPE VERDE ISLANDS

Sunday 14th March – Thursday 25th March 2010 (12 days)
Leader: Tony Clarke
Group Size Limit: 12

The Cape Verde archipelago lies some 450km off the coast of West Africa. This group of far-flung volcanic islands, towering up to 2800m out of the Atlantic, is one of the least known and least visited parts of the Western Palearctic region. Few ornithologists have managed to reach the islands, some of which are inaccessible except by boat. Here are found some of the most important seabird colonies in the Western Palearctic, with breeding-endemic Cape Verde Shearwaters (split from Cory’s), breeding-endemic Boyd’s (or Cape Verde) Shearwaters (split from Little), restricted-range Fea’s (or Cape Verde) Petrels, Bulwer’s Petrels, White-faced Storm-Petrels, Madeiran (or Band-rumped) Storm-Petrels, Red-billed Tropicbirds and Brown Boobies, as well as the only Magnificent Frigatebirds in the eastern Atlantic. The landbird fauna is quite fascinating. Although relatively impoverished, as is typical with remote island groups, there are at least 10 surviving endemic landbird species – Bourne’s (or Cape Verde) Heron (split from Purple), Cape Verde Buzzard (split from Common), Alexander’s and Neglected Kestrels (both split from Common), Cape Verde Falcon (split from Peregrine), Cape Verde Owl (split from Barn), Cape Verde Swift, Raso Lark, Cape Verde Warbler and Iago Sparrow. An eleventh landbird species, Cape Verde Kite (split from Red), is now thought to be extinct, and indeed the pure population may have been extinct for some time, the current theory being that the more recently surviving birds were a hybrid population produced by interbreeding with migrant Black kites. In addition, the islands hold the only Grey-headed Kingfishers in the Western Palearctic and the most accessible Helmeted Guineafowls, as well as Cream-coloured Courser, Black-crowned Finch-Larks, Bar-tailed Larks, Brown-necked Ravens and Common Waxbills. The avifauna of the Cape Verdes is still rather poorly known, as little work has yet been done here, and so ornithological surprises are still quite frequent. Well beyond the boundaries of the normal tourist routes, some of the Cape Verde Islands are devoid of modern amenities, including good hotels and roads. The islands were first discovered by the Portuguese in 1460 (or possibly 1456) and at that time they were entirely uninhabited, without any trace of prior human occupation. The islands were soon settled and by 1446 the inhabitants of Santiago had been granted the rights to purchase slaves in Guinea on the African mainland and supply the new colonies in Brazil and the West Indies. As a result of this unusual history, the present day population of the islands is a ‘creole’ mix of Portuguese and African. For most of their history these arid, drought-prone islands, which have little fertile land, have suffered from an impoverished economy. With little fertile land, farming has never been much more than subsistence, while local fisheries have never been developed. The situation became so bad that by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that many of the inhabitants were compelled to go to sea to earn a living, or emigrate to the New World. Some islands are still uninhabited, whilst others are quite undeveloped, although this is now changing as tourism finally reaches even these remote outposts. Visiting the more remote parts of the archipelago is still a challenge, but well worth the effort. We shall start our travels on the island of Sal in the northwest of the archipelago, but will pause only briefly here on our way to the island of São Nicolau, our base for boat trips to the island of Raso, the only home of the Raso Lark, and in search of pelagic seabirds. Next we travel to the arid island of Boa Vista, in search of Magnificent Frigatebird and White-faced Storm-Petrel, and finally to Santiago, by far the richest island for endemic landbirds in the Cape Verdes. This is a specialist tour for those who want to see the unusual and little-known endemics of these rarely-visited Atlantic islands. March/April is the very best time to visit the islands, for it is the start of the seabird breeding season (which is early in these low latitudes).

Tony Clarke has travelled extensively in the Cape Verde islands. Birdquest pioneered bird tours to the Cape Verde Islands as far back as 1985.

Itinerary

Day 1 Afternoon flight from London bound for the island of Sal, site of Cape Verde’s international airport, arriving around midnight for an overnight stay.

Day 2 This morning we will take a flight to the island of São Nicolau. From the airport we will travel through the rugged interior of the island until we reach the picturesque little harbour at Tarrafal where we will stay for four nights. We will have a first opportunity today to get to grips with our first Cape Verdean endemics.

Days 3-5 The beautiful island of São Nicolau is typical of the northern Cape Verdes, being a land of rugged, rocky ridges with steep, partly terraced hillside...
and tiny villages. Here we will have our first opportunity to watch the aptly named Neglected Kestrel (split from Common), which is fairly common. Virtually lacking sexual dimorphism in its plumage, neglectus has noticeably short wings and tail, giving it an appearance and hunting style very close to that of Seychelles or Mauritius Kestrels rather than Common. We will also encounter our first Iago Sparrows, a pretty endemic that was once lumped with the Rufous Sparrows of mainland Africa. Along the coastline we are likely to see some Yellow-legged Gulls of the form atlantis (a candidate for a split, as Atlantis Gull), while Fea’s (or Cape Verde) Petrels regularly pass by the island’s headlands. The western part of the island is a good place for Helmeted Guineafowl.

During our stay at Tarrafal we plan to make two boat trips in search of seabirds and that most isolated of the Cape Verde endemics, the rare Raso Lark. From São Nicolau we will sail eastwards towards the small and remote island of Raso. Most Cape Verde seabird species are only very sparsely distributed at sea, ranging over huge areas, but we should see plenty of Cape Verde Shearwaters (split from Cory’s) and small numbers of Boyd’s (or Cape Verde) Shearwaters (split from Little) and Fea’s (or Cape Verde) Petrels. The first two species breed only in the Cape Verdes, whilst the latter also nests in the Madeira group. We also have a very good chance of seeing some Madeiran (or Band-rumped) Storm-Petrels and with luck we will spot a Bulwer’s Petrel. Flying fish are frequently to be seen and there is a good chance that we will encounter some dolphins. After about two hours we will reach the ornithologically famous island of Raso (or Razo), which lies between São Nicolau and São Vicente, where we will make a landing. Here on this small uninhabited island, approximately 2.5 km in diameter, lives the entire world population of the little known Raso Lark – probably no more than 100-150 individuals. In addition to the famous lark, which is unusual in showing marked sexual dimorphism, Raso possesses several pairs of breeding Ospreys and an important seabird colony. Boyd’s and Cape Verde Shearwaters, Madeiran Storm-Petrel, Brown Booby and Red-billed Tropicbirds all nest here, protected by the sheer inaccessibility of this remote island. We will enjoy superb close views of the last two species, but the others only return to land after dark. From Raso, providing sea conditions permit, we will continue westwards towards the island of Branco. Branco is not only a spectacular ‘seamount’ of an island, rising precipitously from the Atlantic, but also harbours one of the largest seabird colonies in the archipelago. Good numbers of Cape Verde Shearwaters and Madeiran Storm-petrels nest on the rocky slopes, together with small numbers of Boyd’s Shearwaters, while a few White-faced Storm-Petrels have colonized a sandy flat. We should see most of the local breeding seabirds well, but during the day the White-faced Storm-Petrels are widely dispersed at sea, so we will count ourselves extremely lucky if we encounter one. (We have a much better chance off Boa Vista, where we also take a boat trip.)

Day 6 This morning we will take a flight to Sal and then an onward flight to the island of Boa Vista, where we will stay for two nights.

Day 7 Boa Vista, an island most noteworthy for its tiny population of Magnificent Frigatebirds, lies the northeast of the archipelago. This is the only breeding site of the species in the Western Palearctic and indeed anywhere on the eastern side of the Atlantic. We will visit an area where a few of the remaining birds are regularly to be seen soaring overhead or circling their breeding islet just offshore, which is shared with a large colony of Brown Boobies. Boa Vista is low lying and particularly arid, so it is not surprising that the island is one of the haunts of the Cape Verde form of the Greater Hoopoe Lark as well as other arid country birds including Cream-coloured Courser, Black-crowned Finch-Lark and Bar-tailed Lark. At a small lagoon fringed with mangroves and tamarisk we should find Grey Herons and Little Egrets plus a selection of migrant waders including Black-winged Stilt, Common Ringed, Kentish and Grey (or Black-bellied) Plovers, Sanderling, Little Stint, Wood, Common and Curlew Sandpipers, Eurasian Whimbrel, Common Greenshank and Ruddy Turnstone. We also plan to make another boat trip during our stay on Boa Vista, this time primarily in search of White-faced Storm-Petrel, which nests in numbers on some small offshore islets.

Day 8 From Boa Vista another local flight will take us across to the island of Santiago, where we will stay for three nights at the small fishing port of Tarrafal in the northwest of the island and then stay overnight at Praia before our departure. We will begin our exploration of Santiago today.

Day 9-11 Santiago is the largest of the islands and is certainly the most developed and prosperous. Praia, the small capital city of the Cape Verde Islands, is situated at the southeastern end of Santiago. As with all the islands, the inhabitants are a ‘Creole’ mixture of Portuguese and West African, but here African influences are strongest. Living standards are very low in the islands, but Santiago is blessed with more rainfall than most and has numerous small farms and plantations. The better-
watered valleys of the island, with their comparatively luxuriant vegetation, are the habitat beloved of Grey-headed Kingfisher and the endemic Cape Verde Warbler. In addition, these areas hold Spectacled Warbler, Blackcap, Brown-necked Raven, Common Waxbill, Spanish Sparrow and the endemic Iago Sparrow. Overhead we should see the endemic Cape Verde Swift, whilst the scenically spectacular and very rugged mountains of the interior, which are reminiscent of mountain ranges in the more arid areas of the African mainland, harbour the endemic Cape Verde Buzzard (split from Common), the endemic Cape Verde Falco (split from Peregrine), the endemic Alexander’s Kestrel (split from Common), the distinctive Cape Verde race of the Rock Dove and Helmeted Guineafowl. We will stay out until dusk hoping to see the endemic Cape Verde Owl (split from Barn). Although there are almost no wetlands on Santiago, Bourne’s (or Cape Verde) Heron (split from Purple) is restricted to the island and Western Cattle Egrets are local residents. The heron may have finished breeding at the time of our visit, in which case it could be much harder to track down, but if the rains have been good we may find one of the nesting colonies still active with a second brood. The birds nest in just two of the few remaining large trees on the island and we may be able to watch them bringing food for their young and wonder just how long this unique form will survive.

Day 12 Morning flight bound for London, arriving in the afternoon.

Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels on Sal, Boa Vista and Santiago are of normal Birdquest standard. On São Nicolau we will be staying in a simple but clean and comfortable guesthouse that lacks hot water. Road transport is by coach, minibus, 4x4 or small truck with seats in the back (the typical mode of transport on the smaller islands). Roads are mostly poor (although distances are short).

Walking: The walking effort is easy or moderate, but the landing of Raso requires a bit of agility.

Climate: The weather in the Cape Verde Islands will be predominantly warm, dry and sunny. It is sometimes rather hot at this season but, although it may become overcast, rain is most unlikely. Strong winds blow up from time to time and it can get quite cool out to sea, or from late evening to early morning on land.

Tour Price: 2010 (provisional): £2790, €3627, $5301 London/London (or £2160, €2808, $4104 Sal/Praia). Based on 5 or more participants.

Single Room Supplement: £198, €257, $376.

Basic Deposit: £300, €390, $570.

Supplementary Deposit (for those arranging international air travel through us, due 12 months prior to departure): £600, €780, $1140.