THE CAPE VERDE ISLANDS
The Western Palearctic’s Last Outpost

Tour Duration: 11 days
Group Size Limit: 10
Tour Category: Easy to Moderate

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 1466 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. 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 bit of a challenge, but well worth the effort.

Cape Verde Shearwaters (Tony Disley)

Frigatebird

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 species including Cape Verde Shearwater (split from Cory’s, and nesting only in these islands), Boyd’s (or Cape Verde) Shearwater (split from Little, and likewise only nesting here), Fea’s (or Cape Verde) Petrel (a species that breeds only in the Cape Verdes and the Madeira group), Bulwer’s Petrel, White-faced Storm-Petrel, Madeiran (or Band-rumped) Storm-Petrel (the local form being a candidate for a split as Cape Verde Storm-Petrel), Red-billed Tropicbird, Brown Booby and Magnificent Shearwater. 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.

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 a boat trip 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 more seabirds and landbirds that favour desert conditions, and finally to Santiago, by far the richest island for endemic landbirds in the Cape Verdes. Birdquest pioneered bird tours to the Cape Verde Islands as far back as 1985.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins late this evening on the island of Sal in the Cape Verde Islands, where we will make 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 three nights. We will have a first opportunity today to get to grips with our first Cape Verden endemics.

Days 3-4 The beautiful island of São Nicolau is typical of the northern
Cape Verdes, being a land of rugged, rocky ridges with steep, partly terraced hillsides 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 lago 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 and Boyd’s (or Cape Verde) Shearwaters 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 will make a boat trip in search of seabirds and that most isolated of all the Cape Verdean endemics, the rare Raso Lark. From São Nicolau we will sail eastwards towards the small and remote island of Raso. Most Cape Verde tubenose 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 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 fair chance of seeing our first Madeiran (or Band-rumped) Storm-Petrels and we may see one or two Bulwer’s Petrels. It is possible that splitting the Madeiran (or Band-rumped) Storm-Petrel complex will become much more widely accepted in the future: the local form in the Cape Verdes, jabejabe, perhaps being treated as specifically distinct and given the name Cape Verde Storm-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. 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 views of the last two species, but the others only return to land after dark.

Day 5 After some final birding on São Nicolau we will take a flight back to Sal for an overnight stay.

Day 6 Today we will take a flight across to the island of Boa Vista in the northeast of the Cape Verde archipelago for a two nights stay. We will arrive in time for some initial exploration.

Day 7 Boa Vista is noteworthy for its tiny population of Magnificent Frigatebirds. 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 over the main island or circling their breeding islet just offshore, which is shared with a large colony of Brown Boobies. Two other interesting seabird species occur here, and those willing to forgo the comforts of a hotel room will be able to spend a night on another small islet where White-faced Storm-Petrels nest in some numbers and there are small numbers of Madeiran (or Band-rumped) Storm-Petrels of the Cape Verdean form.

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 Sparrow-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. Nearctic vagrant shorebirds turn up here on a regular basis, so we shall be on the lookout for a rarity.

Day 8 After some final birding on Boa Vista we will take a flight back to Sal and then an onward flight to the island of Santiago, where we will stay for two nights at Praia.

Days 9-10 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 Alexander’s Kestrel (split from Common), the distinctive Cape Verde race of the Rock Dove and Helmeted Guineafowl. We will stay out until dusk in order 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 not be breeding at the time of our visit, in which case it can take more time to track down, but if there have been winter rains we may find the nesting colony still active with a second brood. The birds nest in just one 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. The endemic Cape Verde Falcon (split from Peregrine) is now very rare and probably critically endangered, so we shall think ourselves lucky if we come across one. (An additional endemic landbird species, the Cape Verde Kite, split from Red Kite, 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.)

Day 11 After a final day exploring Santiago we will return to Praia, where the tour ends late this evening.

Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels on Sal, Boa Vista and Santiago are of good or medium standard. On São Nicolau we will be staying in a simple but clean and comfortable guesthouse. 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.

Climate: The weather will be predominantly warm or hot, dry and sunny. 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.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are quite good.

Important: Flight schedules in the Cape Verdes change frequently and at short notice, but our itinerary in the islands has a built-in safety margin of extra time to allow for such eventualities.