



Red-billed Tropicbird at Praia cliffs, just 5 minutes from the airport! (DLV)

THE CAPE VERDE ISLANDS

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The Republic of Cape Verde is an island country 570 kilometres off the west coast of Africa, with ten main islands and numerous islets. It is volcanic in origin and was discovered and populated by the Portuguese in the 15th century. The avian highlights include 8 endemics, following IOC taxonomy, plus several distinctive forms, which might well be split off in the future. Combine this with some highly sought after Western Palearctic seabirds plus the possibility of a few additional vagrants and it makes the Cape Verde Islands an ideal destination for an easy paced ornithological break just within the boundaries of the Western Palearctic.

All endemics were seen on this year's tour, with highlights including fantastic views of breeding Red-billed Tropicbirds, hundreds of Cape Verde Shearwaters, many Boyd's and several (Cape Verde) Fea's Petrels and White-faced Storm Petrels coming to the chum on a pelagic off Sao Nicolau, as well excellent looks at endemic Cape Verde Warblers, Cape Verde Swifts and Iago Sparrows on Santiago. The rare Cape Verde Buzzard and the rarely seen Cape Verde Barn Owl showed very well, as did two unexpected Cape Verde Storm Petrels off Praia, while many Raso Larks obliged too. Bourne's (Purple) Herons were seen several

times, and in the rarity front the best birds were no less than 3 Black Herons in Santiago, a cracking subadult Red-footed Booby off Raso, as well as Intermediate Egret and Lesser Yellowlegs in Santiago. The two endemic forms of Common Kestrel – Neglected and Alexander’s – proved easy to see, while more widespread birds as Grey-headed Kingfisher, Brown-necked Raven, Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks, Greater Hoopoe Lark, Bar-tailed Lark and Cream-colored Coursers performed.



Red-footed Booby and Boyd's Shearwater off Raso. (DLV)

The trip started in earnest with a very enthusiastic, knowledgeable and well-travelled group, coming from various parts of Europe, assembling at Praia airport, on the island of Santiago. Those of us who had arrived the day before already spent the early morning seawatching from Praia lighthouse, where several (Cape Verde) Fea's Petrels were seen. After dropping off our bags in our rather luxurious seaside hotel, where we saw our first endemic lago Sparrows, we went straight to Praia cliffs. This is definitely one of the best places in the world to enjoy up-close views of breeding Red-billed Tropicbirds. And these elegant birds didn't

disappoint, at all. Up to 30 birds were seen here, flying just a few feet from us and giving some amazing photo opportunities. Also in the area we saw our first Alexander's (Common) Kestrels and Cape Verde Swifts, while nearby we enjoyed great views of a small flock of Cream-colored Coursers of the endemic subspecies. Given we still had a couple of hours of daylight left, we continued with our excursion to the interior of the island. We headed to the Barragem de Polião, which used to be one of the best birding sites in the Cape Verdes, where many exciting rarities had occurred in the past. However, the reservoir is almost dry now, and there were very few birds. Amongst the Cattle and Little Egrets we saw 4 Bourne's Herons, a distinctive –very pale and with a very peculiar ecology-, and critically endangered subspecies of Purple Heron. The only waders present were Common Greenshank and Common Sandpiper. We also saw our first Cape Warblers and Grey-headed Kingfishers in the vegetation along the lakeshore. As dusk fell, we waited for the resident pair of Cape Verde Barn Owls to appear, but sadly they didn't show.



Black Heron at Praia.(DLV)

The following day we started with an early morning seawatch, but things were quiet, noting some common waders and a Black-headed Gull in a nearby bay. After breakfast we headed towards the mountains near São Jorge dos Orgãos, in search for Cape Verde Buzzard, a hard-to-get endemic these days. We saw little of note on our first stop, except for some Brown-necked Ravens, but we got lucky on our second attempt. Some diligent scanning produced some Helmeted Guineafowls, a Vervet Monkey, and finally a buzzard, first found by Romain, which flew overhead giving good views. Excellent! Cape Verde Buzzard used to be a more numerous bird on Santiago but nowadays it is becoming increasingly rare and rushing towards extinction as each year passes. In the same area we saw our first Spectacled Warblers. Pleased with our success we returned back to Praia, and boarded our plane to São Nicolau, where Toi, our friendly agent in the island, greeted us. From the airport it was a one-hour journey to Tarrafal, our base for the next 2 nights. The best bird seen on the drive was Neglected (Common) Kestrel, which gave great views, as well as some Helmeted Guineafowls. Once we had settled in to our accommodation at Casa Alice the wheels were put in motion to get us over to Raso the following day. After speaking to the skipper of the boat and being informed that the forecast was supposed to be ok, it was agreed that we would make the trip in the morning. In the late afternoon we drove to Ponta do Barril for a seawatch. The lighthouse at the headland is the best, and most accessible, place for seawatching close to Tarrafal. Here, good numbers of Cape Verde Shearwaters were feeding close to shore, allowing for excellent views, and we enjoyed great scope views of 2 feeding Boyd's

Shearwaters, while nearby we also saw Brown Booby, Western Osprey and Bar-tailed Lark. Dinner at a local restaurant was truly excellent, with plenty of delicious local fish on offer.



Endemic Cape Verde Warbler and Iago Sparrow. (DLV)

Next day would be a very special one, as we would attempt the boat crossing to the remote island of Raso. The seas were rather smooth during the whole crossing, and nobody got seasick. As soon as we got into the deeper water then the birds started to appear. At first it was just a few Cape Verde Shearwaters but the great views obtained allowed us to see why these birds have been split from Cory's Shearwater. They are smaller with a slighter build, a thinner greyish bill and a darker cap and mantle. Boyd's Shearwaters were pleasantly common this year, with more than 15 birds seen at close range, and some Bulwer's Petrels flew around the boat, giving good views. 3 different (Cape Verde) Fea's Petrels appeared too, one very close, and we were able to observe the characteristic arcing flight, the open "w" on the upperwing, pale grey rump and tail and

the dark underwings contrasting with the white belly. As we approached Raso two other seabirds came close to our vessel, these were Red-billed Tropicbird and Brown Booby. Our skipper was able to manoeuvre the boat to within a few metres of the shore of the island but the lack of willingness of the Cape Verde government to issue a permit meant that we were unable to land on this small, 7km², uninhabited island and home to the endemic Raso Lark. Fortunately, after a while, a couple of large flocks, totalling more than 100 birds, came to drink to some puddles in the rocky shore, and we enjoyed good views from the boat. This surely must be one of the rarest larks, and one of the birds with the most limited distribution in the world, for sure. Numbers have recently been estimated at over 1000 birds, which is a major increase on the 250 at the end of the 80's, or, even worse, from the just 60 birds in 2004, after several consecutive years of drought. There is a record of a single male from Ponta do Barril on São Nicolau demonstrating that this species is capable of leaving the island. Last year, 2018, a groundbreaking reintroduction program took place in nearby Santa Luzia island, where 30 birds were released. On the seabird front, we saw good numbers of nesting tropicbirds and boobies with young at different stages of development. We stayed until the afternoon, when a cracking pale-morph subadult Red-footed Booby appeared, giving repeated close passes to the boat. This is a true WP mega rarity, with some records from Raso in the last 2 years, mostly from late summer, so everyone on board was very happy. The return trip back to Tarrafal was quite pleasant, seeing a Great Skua and more, close Boyd's Shearwaters, amongst other things, although there was no sign of Cape Verde Storm Petrel. We also saw some Portuguese Man o'War. Despite its outward appearance, they are not jellyfish but a siphonophore, which, unlike jellyfish, is a colonial organism made up of specialized individual animals called polyps.



White-faced Storm Petrel off Sao Nicolau. (DLV)

We decided to do another morning pelagic next day, this time to the south of the island. We did some chumming, and the major highlight was seeing more than 10 White-faced Storm Petrels bouncing around the boat, giving terrific views. This was a species we didn't expect to see, as we were not visiting its breeding colony at Ilheu dos Páxaros, so it was a major bonus for everyone. Some Arctic Terns were seen too, and two beaked whales that surfaced next to the boat were identified afterwards, thanks to the photos, as Blainville's Beaked Whale. We then returned to Tarrafal for lunch, and then drove to the airport for our flight to Sal, where we would spend the night.



Raso Lark and Cape Verde Shearwater. (DLV)

Next morning we took a flight back to Praia. Over the next 2 days we birded all around the island of Santiago. We visited Barragem de Figueira Gorda a couple of times. This is a recently built inland reservoir that still has water, and, as a result, has plenty of birds! Here, Richard found us an Intermediate Egret, a much-appreciated species for us WP birders. We also found a Lesser Yellowlegs, and 3 different Western Reef Herons, together with Eurasian Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis and Black-crowned Night Heron, as well as many Common Waxbills. Even better, we enjoyed brilliant views of a Cape Verde Barn Owl at dusk. A nearby reservoir gave us our only Squacco Heron of the trip. We also visited Tarrafal sewage works, where we were surprised to find 2 different Black Herons, another extreme WP rarity. On the same day, we saw yet another Black Heron at Praia, which Romain had already seen on his first day. Some coastal lagoons on the eastern side of the island held good numbers of shorebirds, including Kentish Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit and Dunlin, as well as a first-summer Little Tern. In the desert-like plains we came across a cracking Greater Hoopoe-Lark, which showed very well, together with good numbers of Black-crowned Sparrow Larks.



Glossy Ibis, Intermediate Egret and Western Reef Heron at Figueira Gorda, a rare trio in the WP. Brown Boobies at Raso. (DLV)

On our last day, we decided to go seawatching from the nearby lighthouse. This turned out to be a good move, as we instantly realized there was a feeding frenzy and an oil slick just near the headland, with plenty of seabirds in attendance. Amongst them, several Boyd's Shearwaters, Cape Verde Fea's, and, much to our surprise, at least 10 White-faced Storm Petrels, some extremely close. Even better, 2 different Cape Verde Storm Petrels were also present, feeding on the oil slick with the other tubenoses. We spent a couple of hours watching the seabirds, and even taking photos and videos of them from the headland. We went back

to the headland in the afternoon, and then had a sumptuous dinner before heading to the airport. All that was left was to catch our flight back to Lisbon. All in all, a highly successful and truly enjoyable tour to the Cape Verde Islands. Thanks everyone for making it possible!



Birdquesters seawatching from Praia lighthouse, and Cape Verde Feas Petrel off Raso.



Red-billed Tropicbirds and Western Reef Heron.(DLV)



SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

E = Endangered, **V** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened, **DD** = Data Deficient.

- Helmeted Guineafowl** *Numida meleagris* Seen on Santiago and Sao Nicolau.
- White-faced Storm Petrel** *Pelagodroma marina* 10+ off Sao Nicolau and 10+ from Praia lighthouse.
- Cape Verde Storm Petrel** *Oceanodroma jabejabe* 2 seen very close to the headland from Praia lighthouse.
- Fea's Petrel (Cape Verde F P)** ◊ *Pterodroma feae* (NT) Seen from Praia and off Sao Nicolau.
- Cape Verde Shearwater** ◊ *Calonectris edwardsii* (NT) First seen off Santiago, common off São Nicolau.
- Boyd's Shearwater (Cape Verde Little S)** ◊ *Puffinus boydi* Seen well off Sao Nicolau and from Praia.
- Bulwer's Petrel** *Bulweria bulwerii* Seen on the crossing to Raso.
- Red-billed Tropicbird** *Phaethon aethereus* Great views near Praia and on Raso.
- Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* Up to 4 at Figueira Gorda.
- Eurasian Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia* Seen at Figueira Gorda
- Little Bittern** *Ixobrychus minutus* Seen at Barragem de Políão .
- Black-crowned Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax* 2 at Figueira Gorda
- Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides* One sighting.
- Western Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* Common.
- Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* Seen in Santiag.
- Bourne's (Purple) Heron** ◊ *Ardea [purpurea] bournei* Seen well at Poilao and Figueira Gorda.
- Intermediate Egret** *Ardea intermedia* 1 at Figueira Gorda.
- Black Heron** *Egretta ardesiaca* 2 at Tarrafal sewage works and 1 at Praia. A mega rarity in the WP.
- Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta* A few seen.
- Western Reef Egret (W R Heron)** *Egretta gularis* 5 in Figueira Gorda and one on the coast.
- Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster* Many at sea and from land.
- Red-footed Booby** *Sula sula* Great views of a subadult on Raso.
- Western Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* Great views on Tarrafal.
- Cape Verde Buzzard** ◊ *Buteo bannermani* 1 seen well in the mountains of Santiago.
- Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* Good numbers seen in Santiago.
- Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* First on Sal. Good numbers at Figueira Gorda.
- Grey Plover (Black-bellied P)** *Pluvialis squatarola* A few seen.
- Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula* A few seen.
- Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus* Small numbers seen.
- Eurasian Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus* Seen on most dates during the tour but only small numbers.
- Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica* Seen on the coast of Santiago.
- Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* A few seen.
- Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres* Small numbers on all islands including Raso
- Sanderling** *Calidris alba* Seen in all islands.
- Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* One on Santiago.
- Cream-colored Courser** *Cursorius cursor* Great views on Santiago.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* A few noted.
Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* One at Figueira Gorda.



Lesser Yellowlegs. (DLV)

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* Excellent views of this rarity in Tarrafal and near Praia.
Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* 2 from Praia.
Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* 1 on Santiago.
Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* One 2cy at Praia.
Rock Dove *Columba livia* Both feral and wild types were recorded.
Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* A few seen on Santiago.
Cape Verde Barn Owl ◊ *Tyto (alba) detorta* Excellent views of a bird at Figueira Gorda.
Cape Verde Swift ◊ *Apus alexandri* Fairly common on Santiago and São Nicolau.
Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala* Very common on Santiago
Alexander's Kestrel ◊ *Falco (tinnunculus) alexandri* Seen daily on Santiago.
Neglected Kestrel ◊ *Falco (tinnunculus) neglectus* Seen on São Nicolau.
Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* Common and widespread on all main islands.
Greater Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* Seen well on Santiago.
Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cincturus* Seen well on Santiago and Sao Nicolau.
Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps* Recorded at Santiago.
Raso Lark ◊ *Alauda razae* (CR) Seen very well at Raso.
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Seen on Santiago.
Cape Verde Warbler ◊ *Acrocephalus brevipennis* (EN) Seen very well on Santiago.
Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* Common.
Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* Small numbers seen.
Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* Common on Santiago, rare on São Nicolau .
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Seen on Santiago.
Iago Sparrow ◊ *Passer iagoensis* Common and widespread endemic.
Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild* Common and widespread on Santiago.

MAMMALS

Vervet Monkey *Chlorocebus pygerythrus* Introduced on Santiago,
Common Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* Seen from Praia and off Sao Nicolau.
Blainville's Beaked Whale *Mesoplodon densirostris* 2 off Sao Nicolau.



Cape Verde Shearwater. (DLV)