



Numbers of the endangered Bourne's Heron- a distinctive Purple Heron endemic subspecies- seem to be increasing on Santiago (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.

Highlights this year included fantastic views of breeding Red-billed Tropicbirds, dozens of Cape Verde Shearwaters and several Cape Verde Fea's 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, while Raso Larks obliged too. Bourne's (Purple) Herons were seen several times, and in the rarity front the best bird was a Black Heron found by us in Tarrafal, as well as Intermediate Egret, Roseate Tern and a brief Black-capped Petrel. The two endemic forms of Common Kestrel – Neglected and Alexander's – proved easy to see, while more widespread birds as Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks and Cream-colored Courser performed.

The trip started in earnest with a very enthusiastic group, coming from all over the world, assembling at Praia airport, on the island of Santiago. After dropping off our bags in our rather luxurious seaside hotel, where we saw our first endemic Iago 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 40 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. 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, one of the best birding sites in the Cape Verdes, which has hosted many exciting rarities in the past. Amongst the many egrets we soon found an Intermediate Egret, one of the species that the Western Palearctic listers among us were very keen to see. At least 10 Bourne's Herons, a distinctive –very pale and with a very peculiar ecology-, and critically endangered subspecies of Purple Heron, were seen, together with several Glossy Ibis and Eurasian Spoonbills. A good assortment of waders included Black-winged Stilts, Common Ringed Plovers, Common Snipe, Common Greenshank and Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers. François also found a Spotted Crake, a rarity in the islands, while our first Cape Verde and Spectacled Warblers showed well in the vegetation along the lakeshore. As dusk fell, a pair of Cape Verde Barn Owls gave fantastic views. This endemic, very dark-looking form, is very uncommon, so we were very pleased with our sighting. Afterwards we returned to Praia for a well-deserved dinner.



Red-billed Tropicbird. The colony at Praia cliffs is definitely one of the most accessible ones in the world, and a delight to watch.

The following day we started with an early morning seawatch, but things were very quiet. Peter found a dark morph Western Reef Heron on the seashore, but it soon flew off. After breakfast we returned to Polião. This time, we went on a very pleasant walk along the lakeshore, and enjoyed great views of all the birds present. The Intermediate Egret was back in the same place, and we had frame-filling scope views of it. A female Little Bittern, found by Martine, was most welcome, and we greatly improved our views of the Spotted Crake. Amongst the shorebirds present was a Little Ringed Plover, while Grey-headed Kingfishers were common. After lunch we headed towards the mountains near São Jorge dos Orgãos, in search for Cape Verde Buzzard, nowadays a hard to get endemic. 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 eventually produced a distant buzzard, sitting on a rock, followed by much better views of a flying individual. Success! 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. The next port of call for the day was the nearby botanic gardens. We had a nice walk, and enjoyed point blank views of a pair of Cape Verde Warblers. This rather strange sounding *acrocephalus* put in a very good performance, giving us the chance to see the short wings from which its specific name, *brevipennis*, is derived. There was little else in the area apart from Eurasian

Blackcaps and Iago Sparrows. Retracing our steps took us back to the Barragem de Polião, where the pair of Cape Verde Barn Owls again put on a good show for everyone. Then it was time to head back to Praia, where after a 2 hour wait, we eventually got our dinner! Locals certainly take things slowly in the islands...



A smart male Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark. Male Iago Sparrow and Cape Verde Barn Owl (pic by John Fraser) below.

After a rather quiet seawatch and a good breakfast, we headed towards Pedro Badejo, where resident Austrian birder, Herbert Bödendorfer, would be our host for the morning. Here, we admired several Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks, both striking males and drab females, drinking at close quarters, much to the delight of the photographers. We walked around the two coastal lagoons, where small numbers of shorebirds were present, including a couple of Kentish Plovers. A very confiding immature Bourne's Heron gave great views too. However, the best bird here was undoubtedly a well-camouflaged Jack Snipe, a mega rarity in the islands that showed exceedingly well. After a very good lunch we visited Barragem de Figueira Gorda, a recently built inland reservoir. Here, we scoped at least 3 occupied Bourne's Heron nests. No doubt the creation of water bodies on the island has evidently been a huge lifeline for this endangered taxon. A single Intermediate Egret, 2 Eurasian Teals and 4 Black-crowned Night Herons, as well as a flock of Helmeted Guineafowl, were noted along with the expected species. Back at Praia we paid another visit to the tropicbird cliffs, where the birds again put on a fantastic show for us. Nearby, we saw our only Cream-colored Coursers of the trip, as well as some Bar-tailed Larks and two migrant Northern Wheatears. After an early dinner we went back to the airport, for our flight to Sal, where we would spend the night.





We enjoyed excellent views of Cape Verde Shearwaters off São Nicolau.

We took the morning flight to São Nicolau, and arrived there at 10:30, 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 3 nights. The best bird seen on the drive was a single Neglected (Common) Kestrel. 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. Bart also had a brief Boyd's Shearwater, while back in the harbour we found a Western Osprey and a flock of Ruddy Turnstones.

Next day would be a very special one, as we would attempt the boat crossing to the remote island of Raso. Once we went past Ponta do Barril, the seas got rough, but we all managed well. 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. For some reason, perhaps because we were a bit too early in the season, Boyd's Shearwaters were nearly absent, with only one seen briefly by some of us. On the other hand, a couple of Cape Verde Fea's Petrel appeared, very close to the boat, 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 that 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 we saw a couple of birds on the rocky coast, just by the water, which showed extremely well. 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 1,490 birds, which is a major increase on the 250 at the end of the 80's, also recently 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. The return trip back to Tarrafal was very similar to the outward crossing, but with even rougher seas. Once we got to calmer waters we did some chumming, which was a great success. Apart from many up-close Cape Verde Shearwaters, we managed to attract several Cape Verde Fea's Petrels, which stayed around the boat for a while, giving unbeatable views, as well as a single Cory's Shearwater. This species must surely occur more frequently within the Cape Verde Islands but a lack of observers at the correct times of year and the pelagic nature of the species must account for the paucity of records. We eventually made it

back to harbour in the afternoon, and had some free time. Dinner at a local restaurant was excellent, with plenty of delicious local fish on offer.



We found this Black Heron, a species with less than 10 records in the WP, from our hotel in Tarrafal!

We decided to do a couple more pelagics next day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. However, one of the best birds of the tour was actually seen from the hotel, before going to the harbour. Manuel found a distant "dark" egret mixed in with the Western Cattle Egrets, and when I put my bins on it I quickly identified it as a Black Heron, a mega rarity in the Western Palearctic, and a great addition to our list. Two long staying birds had been present in Polião until last year, but now they were gone, so this was an unexpected bonus. Later we obtained terrific views of the bird from our boat, as we went out for our pelagic trip. The seas were relatively calm, and we enjoyed the same birds as the previous day, including some close Cape Verde Fea's Petrels, although, again, Boyd's Shearwaters were notorious for their absence. In spite of using the best chum possible, Cape Verde Storm Petrels eluded us yet again and one must wonder where they all go to during the day because at night thousands of birds return to their breeding islands of Raso and the neighbouring Branco. Another marine species seen was Portuguese Man o' War *Physalia physalis*, which was reasonably common. Despite its outward appearance, the Portuguese man o' War is not a jellyfish but a siphonophore, which, unlike jellyfish, is a colonial organism made up of specialized individual animals called polyps. During lunchtime, François and Martine had found a distant tern sitting on a buoy, so once in the boat in the afternoon we went for a closer look. The bird turned out to be a Roseate Tern, possibly only the second documented record for the islands.

The next day was our last day of the tour. Dawn saw us at Ponta do Barril for a short seawatch, before leaving to the airport. Good numbers of Cape Verde Shearwaters were seen, as well as three Cape Verde Fea's Petrels, a couple of Red-billed Tropicbirds and a dozen Brown Boobies. I was watching one of the Fea's Petrels when, all of a sudden, a big petrel appeared in front of it. The bird was closer in size to the nearby Cape Verde Shearwaters, with a gleaming white and very striking white rump, mostly white underwing, a dark cap and a white neck. Black-capped Petrel! The bird made a couple of arcs, at mid range, but unfortunately when I alerted the others, who were on the other side of the lighthouse, the bird was gone. We waited for a while in case the bird would make another appearance, to no avail. And then it was time to pick our things at the hotel, and drive to the airport, noting a couple of Neglected Kestrels. Two flights later, we arrived to Praia, and went for a short walk around the bay. Apart from various waders, we found another Roseate Tern sitting on a buoy. We had a sumptuous dinner and then headed 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!



Above, keen Birdquesters at Pedro Badejo lagoons, watching sparrow-larks. A cracking adult Brown Booby at Raso, below.





Seawatching near Praia, and Alexander's Kestrel patrolling the cliffs.





Portuguese Man o' War



Red-billed Tropicbirds.





Cape Verde Fea's Petrel, above, and Cape Verde Shearwater, below.



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.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* A pair at Figuera Gorda reservoir.

Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris* Seen on Santiago.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* One seen near Praia.

Fea's Petrel (Cape Verde P) ◊ *Pterodroma feae* (NT) Great views of several on the pelagic off São Nicolau.



Two island rarities: Intermediate Egret and Jack Snipe.

Black-capped Petrel *Pterodroma hasitata* One scoped off Ponta do Barril.

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* At least one off São Nicolau.

Cape Verde Shearwater ◊ *Calonectris edwardsii* (NT) First seen off Santiago, common off São Nicolau.

Boyd's Shearwater (Cape Verde Little S) ◊ *Puffinus boydi* 1 briefly for some at Ponta do Barril.

Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* Great views near Praia and on Raso.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* Up to 5 at Poilao.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* Seen at Barragem de Polião .

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* Seen at Barragem de Polião .

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* Up to 4 at Poilao.

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* One sighting.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* Common.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Seen almost daily most numerous at Barragem de Polião.

Bourne's (Purple) Heron ♀ *Ardea [purpurea] bournei* Seen at three sites in Santiago. Recovering.

Intermediate Egret *Ardea intermedia* 1 Barragem de Polião and one at Figueira Gorda.



Roseate Tern, apparently only the second documented record for the Cape Verdes.

Black Heron *Egretta ardesiaca* We found one at Tarrafal. A mega rarity in the WP.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* A few seen.

Western Reef Egret (W R Heron) *Egretta gularis* 1 on the seashore by our hotel in Praia.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* Many on Raso.

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* Great views on Tarrafal.

Cape Verde Buzzard ♀ *Buteo bannermani* Two were seen well in the mountains of Santiago.

Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* One showed very well at Barragem de Polião, Santiago .

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* A few seen in Santiago.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* Good numbers at Barragem de Polião.

Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola* One seen.

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* Seen well on Santiago.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* A few seen.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* One seen.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* Small numbers seen.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* A few seen.

Jack Snipe *Lymnocryptes minimus* One seen very well at Pedro Badejo lagoons.

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* Seen on most dates during the tour but only small numbers

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A few seen.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* Small numbers noted.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* Small numbers noted.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* Small numbers on all islands including Raso

Sanderling *Calidris alba* Seen in all islands.

Cream-colored Courser *Cursorius cursor* Great views on Santiago.

Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* Excellent views of this rarity in Tarrafal and near 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 pair at Poilao.

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.



Two endemics: Cape Verde Warbler and Cape Verde Swift.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* Common and widespread on all main islands.
Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cincturus* Seen well on Santiago and São Nicolau.
Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps* Recorded at Santiago.
Raso Lark ♀ *Alauda razae* (CR) Seen very well at Raso.
Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum* Seen at São Nicolau
Cape Verde Warbler ♀ *Acrocephalus brevipennis* (EN) Seen very well on Santiago.
Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* Common.
Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* Small numbers seen.
Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Seen near Praia.
Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* Common on Santiago, rare on São Nicolau
Iago Sparrow ♀ *Passer iagoensis* Common and widespread endemic.
Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild* Common and widespread on Santiago.



Birdquesters at Polião. Brown Booby in flight below.





Cape Verde Fea's Petrel. This is undoubtedly one of the best trips in the WP for seabirds!