

SÃO TOMÉ & PRÍNCIPE TOUR REPORT 2024

9 - 16 February 2024

by Pete Morris

Well, this seemed like a bit of a whirlwind trip that flashed by in a moment! It was pretty hard work at times, but we were well looked after, had great local support and surprisingly good cuisine. And thankfully we had a very friendly and determined group that were prepared to put in the hard yards which were at times required! Ultimately, we were pretty successful, seeing all the endemics well, bar one. Disappointing to miss the one, but still our most successful visit to the islands to date. Read on for the gory details!!

Having all arrived on the same flight from Lisbon, via Accra, we made the short drive around the coast to São João dos Angalares. It was all a little disorganized when we arrived, but soon we were sat down to dinner, with a cold beer, and all was good.

Our first day in the field was to be a big one! We set off early, and headed for Monte Carmo, driving up through the extensive oil palm plantations. Literally the first bird of the tour was a bit of a surprise... a Western Barn Owl, of the distinctive São Tomé form, on the track! Sadly, this proved to be a somewhat incapacitated individual, but was still interesting to see, with its small size and dark plumage. We arrived at our breakfast spot, serenaded by Sao Tome Prinias, a common species on the island, with an amazing aerial display! Once ready, we grabbed all we needed and set off.

It was a long slow walk up through the forest, but with plenty to look at on the way. Very soon we were picking up the more common endemics which included the attractive Sao Tome Weaver, and the smart Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher. Subtle Principe Seedeaters (of the distinct São Tomé form) and the characterful and ubiquitous Black-capped Speirops were also noted, whilst on the forest floor, we frequently encountered the São Tomé form of Lemon Dove. As we gained altitude we started to hear and then see our first attractive Sao Tome Orioles, Sao Tome Thrush and Newton's Sunbird, and soon after found the first of the 'four Monte Carmo essentials', in the form of a very obliging Sao Tome Shorttail which paraded in front of us giving great looks, but not necessarily convincing us it was actually a wagtail in disguise!! A little higher, a loud whistled call alerted us to the presence of the second of the 'four Monte Carmo essentials', and soon, thanks to some excellent spotting by our local guide, we had some good looks at the chunky and often elusive Sao Tome Grosbeak. A little higher we clinched the third of the 'four Monte Carmo essentials' in the form of a fantastic Sao Tome Ibis which showed superbly well.

With three of the four in the bag, we decided to push on, and after a rest at the camp, we made our way to some higher forest, where we quickly found the smart Sao Tome Fiscal, the last of the 'four Monte Carmo essentials'!! It had been quite a tough walk, and by now, some of the group were flagging a bit, so we made our way back down to the camp area for a rest and lunch, adding

the unique endemic Giant Sunbird as we went. We then retraced our steps, adding another smart Sao Tome Ibis as we went, and arrived back at the vehicles mid-afternoon, tired, but happy with our success.

Heading out in our vehicles we added our first Striated Heron and made a stop at a local river where we soon found the local São Tomé form of Malachite Kingfisher, as well as plenty of Reed Cormorants, whilst overhead endemic Sao Tome Spinetails were hawking alongside African Palm and Little Swifts and plenty of Yellow-billed Kites, the only regular raptor on the islands, were to be seen. In the trees lining the river, we were pleased to get some good looks at the declining Sao Tome Green Pigeon, as well as our first Island Bronze-naped Pigeons, and the São Tomé form of Chestnut-winged Starlings. After seeing a vast majority of the endemics on the first day, we decided it was time to head for our base and relax with a cold beer!

The following day we had a much quieter day, birding various sites not too far from our hotel. Many of the more common and widespread endemics were seen well again, whilst one of our main targets, the impressive Giant Weaver, gave some excellent views, and we even watched a pair building their concealed nest. We also saw smart African Emerald Cuckoos and plenty more Island Bronze-naped Pigeons. Later, at dusk, we made a short excursion nearby, and we were delighted to get a more healthy-looking São Tomé form of Western Barn Owl in the spotlight, a really smart bird!

With few targets left, we were up early again the following day, this time heading for the central highlands. Things were fairly quiet, but after a while we found our first Sao Tome White-eye, and, after a little search, an incredibly endearing Sao Tome Scops Owl which peered at us from just a few metres away in broad daylight! We also saw our first introduced Red-necked Spurfowl, but the Sao Tome Olive Pigeon eluded all but one of the group and was now our last endemic target! That afternoon we birded nearer to our hotel and found plenty more Sao Tome White-eyes and many other familiar friends, but the pigeon was still hanging on! We also noted our first of many White-tailed Tropicbirds during the day.

On our final full day on the island, we headed back to Bom Sucesso and walked further into the forest. Many of the endemics were regularly encountered, but it took a concerted effort to finally track down the endemic Sao Tome Olive Pigeon (also known as Maroon Pigeon), and we eventually got some great looks. This species suffers from hunting pressure, and, along with the green pigeon, has become progressively harder to see well! After the success of the pigeon, we were less successful avoiding the rain, and on the walk back down we were hit by an absolutely torrential downpour, which rapidly converted the trail to a river, leading to an unpleasant walk down! Meanwhile, some of the group got some brilliant views of the Giant Sunbird, before the rain hit! Fortunately, with the rain continuing, we could afford to relax for the afternoon, watch birds from the restaurant veranda, and dry out!!

Our final morning on São Tomé saw us heading to the north of the island to explore the more open savanna habitats. Here, a variety of open country birds were present, and first thing numerous Harlequin Quails were singing, and a few seen flying. A singing Common Nightingale (heard only) was a surprise and a vagrant to the island. A good variety of seed-eating birds were also present, with pride of place going to smart male Golden-backed Bishops, though colourful Black-winged Red Bishop and White-winged Widowbirds were also impressive. Determining the origin of some of these species (native or introduced) seems somewhat complex, as it is with other common species on the island such as Southern Masked Weaver, Village Weaver, Bronze

Mannikin, Common Waxbill and Blue Waxbill. We also explored some wetland areas where we found several Western Reef Herons as well as common and widespread species such as Eurasian Whimbrel, Common Sandpiper, Common Greenshank and Common Moorhen, and we also noted our first Brown Booby offshore.

After lunch in the capital, we flew to the sleepy island of Príncipe, arriving late in the afternoon. We had time to check in to our hotel and organize before heading off on our next adventure. This entailed a short drive followed by a longish hike up a hill, arriving in the dark. This was ultimately well worthwhile when we saw the fabulous Príncipe Scops Owl fixed in our spotlight beam! What a great little bird! We also added a few of the daytime species that we were to see again.

The following morning, we headed down to the coast and found our fleet of small boats that were to transport us to the south of the island. While we organized, we saw our first Malachite Kingfisher (of the distinct Príncipe form), and then headed around the scenic west coast of the island, noting numerous Brown Boobies as we went. We finally arrived at our landing site, close to the dramatic Pico Mesa, and as soon as we were on shore, collected the easy Príncipe endemics including the vocal Dohrn's Warbler (formerly Thrush-Babbler!), the smart Príncipe Speirops, Príncipe Sunbird and the colourful Príncipe Weaver. As we headed into the forest, we found the distinct Príncipe form of Príncipe Seedeater and, after a bit of effort the scarce Príncipe White-eye. We also came across a few Lemon Doves, numerous African Green Pigeons, Olive Sunbirds and some confiding Blue-breasted Kingfishers, but try as we might, we could not find the endangered Príncipe Thrush, the one bird destined to elude us.

We made our way down to another beach and enjoyed lunch and more kingfishers, while some of the group swam, and we then headed back towards our hotel. We detoured to another patch of forest where we enjoyed numerous Grey Parrots and found several Príncipe Starlings with the somewhat similar Splendid Starlings and studied the local Príncipe form of Velvet-mantled Drongo.

Our final day of the tour was really used as a travel day. Some early morning birding on Príncipe yielded more views of the endemics, whilst back on São Tomé, we relaxed at a pleasant lodge, supped cold drinks and enjoyed a fine lunch. It had been a great trip to these characterful islands in the Gulf of Guinea, two islands with an incredible level of endemism! As the tour ended and we headed to the airport, we had time to reflect back on our excellent and successful visit.

BIRD OF THE TOUR

1st SAO TOME SCOPS OWL

2nd PRINCIPE SCOPS OWL

3rd SAO TOME IBIS

4th Sao Tome Shorttail

5th Black-capped Speirops

6th= Sao Tome Fiscal

6th= Giant Sunbird

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED

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).

The species names and taxonomy used in the bird list follows Gill, F., Donsker, D., & Rasmussen, P. (Eds). **2024. IOC World Bird List (v14.1)** (this was the current version when the checklist for the tour report was created).

Where the subspecies seen is/are known, these are often given in parentheses at the end of the species comment.

BIRDS

Harlequin Quail *Coturnix delegorguei* Heard between Bom Sucesso Botanical Gardens and the Macambrara radio towers. Three seen in flight in the northern savanna of Sao Tome, between Quilombo Guadalupe and Praia das Conchas. Many more heard in the north [*histrionica*].

Red-necked Spurfowl (introduced) *Pternistis afer* A few seen near the Macambrara radio towers and others heard in the Bom Sucesso area. Also seen briefly in the north.

Sao Tome Spinetail ◊ *Zoonavena thomensis* Fairly common, first seen as we were coming down from Monte Carmo.

African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus* Fairly common. First seen well at the bridge over the Io Grande [*brachypterus*].

Little Swift *Apus affinis* A few seen, first seen well at the bridge over the Io Grande [*bannermani*].

African Emerald Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx cupreus* Very common by voice and several seen well, the first along the track towards Boa Vista from the Pousada Sao Joao. A few heard on Principe.

Rock Dove (Feral) (introduced) *Columba livia 'feral'*

Sao Tome Olive Pigeon ◊ *Columba thomensis* Eventually, we got excellent views of one, and others seen briefly/heard, on the walk up to Lagoa Amelia from Bom Sucesso. A couple of others glimpsed earlier in the tour.

Island Bronze-naped Pigeon ◊ *Columba malherbii* Fairly common and easy to see, first seen at the bridge over the Io Grande. A few seen on Principe too.

Lemon Dove (Cinnamon D) *Columba [larvata] principalis* The form seen on Principe. Several seen, the first a roosting bird on the trek to Pico Papagaio. Many others flushed and a couple seen well.

Lemon Dove ◊ (Sao Tome D, Forest D) *Columba [larvata] simplex* Many seen well, the first on the walk up to Monte Carmo.

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis* A few seen, the first in the oil palms on the drive down from Monte Carmo. Also, on Principe [nominate].

African Green Pigeon *Treron calvus* Very common on Principe including a leucistic individual along the entrance road to the Bom Bom Resort [*virescens*].

Sao Tome Green Pigeon ◊ *Treron sanctithomae* Two seen well at the bridge over the Io Grande. Others heard and seen briefly, but generally elusive, presumably due to hunting.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Three seen on the pool at Fernao Dias, northern Sao Tome [*meridionalis*].

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* A few seen at coastal sites on both Sao Tome and Principe [nominate].

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* One seen at the bridge over the Io Grande. A few others seen at coastal sites on both Sao Tome and Principe.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A few seen at coastal sites on both Sao Tome and Principe.

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* A few seen flying around on both islands [*ascensionis*].

Brown Booby (Atlantic B B) *Sula [leucogaster] leucogaster* One seen off Fernao Dias, northern Sao Tome, then plenty on the boat trip to and from southern Principe.

Reed Cormorant *Microcarbo africanus* Common from the bridge over the Io Grande [nominate].

Sao Tome Ibis ◊ *Bostrychia bocagei* Excellent views of one on the walk into Monte Carmo, and another on the walk out.

Western Reef Heron (Western R E) *Egretta gularis* A good number of white, grey and black birds seen on northern Sao Tome and on the Principe coasts [nominate].

Striated Heron *Butorides striata* A few, the first seen on the drive out of Monte Carmo [*atricapilla*].

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* First seen on the drive into Monte Carmo.

Yellow-billed Kite *Milvus aegyptius parasitus* Common [*parasitus*].

Western Barn Owl (Sao Tome B O) *Tyto [alba] thomensis* A sick bird was seen at close range on the drive into Monte Carmo, then brilliant views of one in Sao Joao. Excellent small and dark race.

Principe Scops Owl ◊ *Otus bikegila* Brilliant views of a singing grey individual after a 4km trek on Pico Papagaio. Great bird!

Sao Tome Scops Owl ♦ *Otus hartlaubi* Brilliant close range daylight views of a grey morph bird by the Macambrara radio towers near the Bom Sucesso Botanical Gardens.

Blue-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon malimbica* Many seen well on Principe, the first on the trek to Pico Papagaio. A buff-breasted bird was presumably a juvenile [*dryas*].

Malachite Kingfisher ♦ (Principe M K) *Corythornis [cristatus] nais* Brilliant views of several on Principe, the first at Santo Antonio.

Malachite Kingfisher ♦ (Sao Tome M K) *Corythornis [cristatus] thomensis* Good views of at least two from the bridge over the Io Grande. Also, a juvenile at Morro Piexe in northern Sao Tome.

Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus* Very common on Principe. Once again, all birds appeared like Grey rather than Timneh!

Red-headed Lovebird *Agapornis pullarius* A few seen in flight on Sao Tome [nometate].

Sao Tome Oriole ♦ *Oriolus crassirostris* Best views were on the walk up to Monte Carmo, where several showed well.

Velvet-mantled Drongo ♦ (Principe D) *Dicrurus [modestus] modestus* A pair seen at Porto Real and another seen well along the entrance road to the Bom Bom Resort.

Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher ♦ *Terpsiphone atrochalybeia* Common on Sao tome, first seen well on the walk up to Monte Carmo.

Sao Tome Fiscal ♦ *Lanius newtoni* Excellent views of one at just over 500m on Monte Carmo.

Sao Tome Prinia ♦ *Prinia malleri* Common and widespread. Amazing display flights!

Dohrn's Warbler ♦ *Sylvia dohrni* Plenty seen well on Principe, the first at the landing site for the walk to La Mesa. Great song!

Principe White-eye ♦ *Zosterops ficedulinus* Excellent views of three groups on the lower slopes of La Mesa, southern Principe. Quite elusive and insipidly coloured!

Sao Tome White-eye ♦ *Zosterops feae* A few seen well, the first at the microwave towers near to Bom Sucesso.

Black-capped Speirops ♦ *Zosterops lugubris* A common and attractive endemic.

Principe Speirops ♦ *Zosterops leucophaeus* Plenty seen well on Principe, the first at the landing site for the walk to La Mesa.

Splendid Starling *Lamprotornis splendidus* Several seen well along the entrance road to the Bom Bom Resort.

Principe Starling ♦ *Lamprotornis ornatus* Plenty seen well along the entrance road to the Bom Bom Resort.

Chestnut-winged Starling ♦ (Sao Tome C-w S) *Onychognathus [fulgidus] fulgidus* Several seen on Sao Tome where first seen at the bridge over the Io Grande. Massive bill on this form!

Sao Tome Thrush ♦ *Turdus olivaceofuscus* Fairly common on Sao Tome. First seen on the walk up to Monte Carmo.

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* Heard only, a singing bird heard and sound-recorded in the northern savanna of Sao Tome, between Quilombo Guadalupe and Praia das Conchas.

Principe Sunbird ♦ *Anabathmis hartlaubii* Fairly common on Principe.

Newton's Sunbird ♦ *Anabathmis newtonii* Very common on Sao Tome. First seen on the walk up to Monte Carmo.

Giant Sunbird ♦ *Dreptes thomensis* A couple seen well on the walk up to Monte Carmo. Also seen well by some around Bom Successo.

Olive Sunbird *Cyanomitra olivacea* A few seen well on Principe [*obscura*].

Principe Weaver ♦ *Ploceus princeps* Several seen very well on Principe, including displaying males.

Southern Masked Weaver *Ploceus velatus* Common on Sao Tome.

Village Weaver *Ploceus cucullatus* A few seen in the northern savanna of Sao Tome [*nigriceps*].

Giant Weaver ♦ *Ploceus grandis* A few seen very well, including a nest-building male and a displaying male from the terrace of the restaurant at Monte Cafe.

Sao Tome Weaver ♦ *Ploceus sanctithomae* Common on Sao Tome, first seen on the walk up to Monte Carmo.

Red-headed Quelea *Quelea erythropis* A few seen in the northern savanna of Sao Tome, between Quilombo Guadalupe and Praia das Conchas.

Black-winged Red Bishop *Euplectes hordeaceus* Many displaying males seen well in the northern savanna of Sao Tome, between Quilombo Guadalupe and Praia das Conchas and also at Morro Piexe [*hordeaceus*].

Golden-backed Bishop ♦ *Euplectes aureus* Several cracking males seen well in the northern savanna of Sao Tome, between Quilombo Guadalupe and Praia das Conchas and also at Morro Piexe.

White-winged Widowbird *Euplectes albonotatus* Many breeding males, as well as females, seen well in the northern savanna of Sao Tome, between Quilombo Guadalupe and Praia das Conchas and also at Morro Piexe [*asymmetrurus*].

Bronze Mannikin *Spermestes cucullata* Plenty seen in Sao Tome and Principe [nominate].

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild* Common for much of the trip [*jagoensis*].

Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis* Several seen in northern Sao Tome [nominate].

Pin-tailed Whydah *Vidua macroura* Non leader.

Sao Tome Shorttail ◊ *Motacilla bocagii* A singing bird was seen superbly well on the walk up to Monte Carmo.

Principe Seedeater ◊ *Crithagra [rufobrunnea] rufobrunnea* Several seen well, the first on the walk up to Monte Carmo.

Principe Seedeater ◊ (Sao Tome S) *Crithagra [rufobrunnea] thomensis* Excellent views of a few on the walk up towards La Mesa in southern Principe.

Sao Tome Grosbeak ◊ *Crithagra concolor* Good views of a bird that had been calling, fairly high in the canopy, on the walk up to Monte Carmo. Chunky, slightly rufescent brown, with a huge pale bill. Another heard.

Yellow-fronted Canary *Crithagra mozambica* Several seen on Sao Tome [tando].

MAMMALS

Least Weasel (introduced) *Mustella nivalis* Although it seemed larger, I assume the weasel on the track at Bom Sucesso must have been this species as I can find no reference to any other species being introduced!

Atlantic Spotted Dolphin *Stenella frontalis* Non leader, seen from the beach on Principe.

Noack's Leaf-nosed Bat *Hipposideros ruber* The day flying bat on Sao Tome.

African Straw-coloured Fruit Bat *Eidolon helvum* I think at least some of the pale-looking fruit bats were this species.

Mona Monkey (introduced) *Cercopithecus mona* Heard a few times, but only seen briefly.

Black Rat *Rattus rattus* Non leader.