

The Canary Islands 2012, Fuerteventura & Tenerife.

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The Canary Islands, home to package tour holidays, all-inclusive hotels and budget airlines, a realm of the sun-seeker. Thanks to their geographical isolation however, and due to a number of recent taxonomic splits, the islands also boast a whole raft of endemic and near-endemic birds, including such notables as Fuerteventura Chat, Houbara Bustard, Blue Chaffinch and both Bolle's and Laurel Pigeons.

To stand a chance of seeing all the endemics, it is necessary to visit at least Tenerife and Fuerteventura, the former a relatively lush island harbouring the laurel forest specialists and such birds as Blue Chaffinch and Canary Islands Kinglet, the latter semi-desert and key for Houbara Bustard, Cream-coloured Courser and, most critically, Fuerteventura Chat. My basic plan was:

- three days on Fuerteventura, mostly in the north of the island.

- ferry to Gran Canaria, ferry to Tenerife.

- three days on Tenerife, exploration of the laurel and pine forests, plus coastal areas. Thereafter, taking a long stop-over in Barcelona on route home, I travelled up to the Pyrenees for a mini-break in the mountains, a winter fiesta of Lammergeiers and Wallcreepers in the mountains themselves and bustards, sandgrouses and larks in adjacent steppes. Daily Log. Airborne. 19 December. Blankets of snow, cars sliding all over the shop, temperatures already minus 12 ... off to the airport in Vilnius. As Lithuania headed towards a Christmas of snow and sub-zero temperatures, a late evening flight rolled down the runway, next stop the rather warmer airs of Barcelona, touchdown 1.00 a.m. local time. Fuerteventura. 20 December. After a three-hour flight from Barcelona, we arrived in Fuerteventura in the early afternoon. to sun and temperatures rising to 28 C, most pleasant. Arid and largely devoid of vegetation, Fuerteventura is a landscape of low hills and stony plains, jagged black volcanic rocks predominating and, at first glance, the whole island seemingly fairly devoid of birds too! Our drive across the island's interior from the airport to Los Molinos on the west coast produced a mere two birds, both Collared Doves! On arrival at Los Molinos however, this illusion of an island without birds was soon to be shattered. A couple of kilometres short of the Los Molinos reservoir, the birding kicked off in style - amongst flocks of Lesser Short-toed Larks, I encountered a Berthelot's Pipit feeding just a couple of metres from the roadside - my first of the Canary Island endemics. Just yonder, two Ruddy Shelducks sat in the shimmering haze of the semi-desert and, amongst the goats behind us, Rock Doves wandered about, with two Common Ravens flying over.

Onward to the reservoir itself, a small body of water and, if not dried out, one of the few freshwater localities on the island. Not even sure there would be any water at this time, let alone waterbirds, my reason for visiting was primarily for the chance of Fuerteventura Chat, a species often seen below the dam. On arrival however, I was pleasantly surprised - plenty of water and packed out with birds! Getting out of the car, I was immediately ambushed by two inquisitive Barbary Squirrels popping up onto a ruined building, my first mammal of the trip. On the water, Coot and Ruddy Shelduck were by far the two most numerous birds, numbering about 160 and 70 respectively, but seeing assorted other species, I decided to walk around the entire reservoir, thinking this strategy would also find me a Fuerteventura Chat. It didn't! However, I was not complaining - one of the first birds I did find was a splendid Ring-necked Duck sitting with a couple of Tufted Ducks and a Shoveler! Less than one hour into my trip and I had bumped into an American vagrant, that was a bit of luck! Also a few Common Teal and three Eurasian Wigeon too, plus waders including Black-winged Stilts, Little Ringed Plovers, Green Sandpiper, Greenshank, Spotted Redshanks and Snipe. As for passerines however, virtually zilch - one Southern Grey Shrike, three more Berthelot's Pipits and that was that, certainly no Fuerteventura Chat! The nearby barranca rising from Puerto de Los Molinos is another potential chat site, but my relatively brief exploration of this site also failed to locate one here, a pair of Spectacled Warblers the main compensation, along with overhead Common Kestrels, Berthelot's Pipits in the car park and my second mammal species of the trip, a Rabbit. By now fairly late in the day, I then headed up to El Cotillo, a small town in the north of the island. Surrounded by stony plains that harbour all the island's specialities, this would be home for the next three nights, the pleasant Yellow Door Hostel a very good base. With the sun setting, I made a quick rekkie onto the plains to the south, basically an orientation for the coming days. Only saw two species - but rather classy ones at that - the first was a Barbary Falcon powering over, the second was Houbara Bustard, four individual flying in to land some distance off. A good finale to my first afternoon on the island! Fuerteventura. 21 December. Far too enthusiastic, not to mention confused by not realising that the Canary Islands are in a different time zone to mainland Spain, I was up and ready for action two hours before even a twinkling of dawn hit the eastern skies! After driving the few minutes to the plains south of Cotillo, I then sat and waited in the darkness for over an hour to a backdrop of the eerie calls of a Stone Curlew and later, as the first streaks of red finally began to colour the skies, a chorus of Lesser Short-toed Larks in song from all angles. Slowly, slowly, shapes began to take form, dawn kicked in, two Common Ravens gronked from the remains of an old stone farmhouse, Spanish Sparrows chattered in scant vegetation adjacent, time to roll on. Fortunate indeed that there was no wind whatsoever, a factor that can mean many of the region's birds hunker down and become elusive, the next two or three hours were just bliss. First up, my first Houbara Bustard of the morning. And what a bird he was, a male in full display mode, neck puffed out and strutting in an exaggerated pose ... a white fluff ball mounted on a cryptic back and pair of legs! Common Ravens flew over, then a couple of kilometres further along, another Houbara Bustard. Nice, though this one not displaying, it was much closer to the road, thus allowing me my first photographs of this superb bird. Berthelot's Pipit's and Lesser Short-toed Larks active amongst the stunted vegetation, one Common Buzzard flying over. A few kilometres further south the track drops into narrow barranca, another potential locality for Fuerteventura Chat. I abandoned the car and took a walk, eyes peeled. One Hoopoe singing, two Spectacled Warblers, a bunch of Spanish Sparrows around a small farmstead sort of place, but no chat of

any description! Hmm, three top localities checked for them and still nothing! As a pair of Barbary Partridges scuttled off up the edge of the ravine, I decided to continue to the plains even further to the south. This was a good move - stopping a kilometre or so further, a scan resulted in not only three more Houbara Bustards, but also added extras! Impressed with the bustards, I sat myself on rocks to watch their actions, occasional bouts of display, rather longer periods of contented feeding. And then some fly-overs ... bubbling calls alerting me to six Black-bellied Sandgrouse, minutes later a small flock of Cream-coloured Coursers followed in their wake, the four birds landing in a gully some distance off. With the mid-morning sun already taking the temperatures to the very pleasant mid-twenties, I felt most chuffed with my haul, so much so that I decided to take a bit of a 'beach holiday' type of affair, exploring the sandy coves and rocky peninsulas north of El Cotillo. Sun-seekers in bikinis, surfers taking to the waves, oo er, not the standard habitat for me to go birding. That said, on an island starved of wetland habitats, the area did prove quite productive - my only Gannets of the trip, plus assorted waders including Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit and Kentish Plover. By early afternoon, I had reached the resort town of Corraleyo, ideal for a spot of lunch in a convenient cafe and for dumping my co-travellers for the rest of the day. They could wander the beach and town, I would head inland to La Oliva, another good birding area. At La Oliva, my prime target was to be Fuerteventura Chat, the last remaining goal on this island. Search high and low I did, meandering slowly eastwards on gravel roads over plains and into deep valleys and barrancas, the latter the favoured habitat of the bird I sought. Quickly found koenigi Southern Grey Shrike, as well as Corn Bunting and more Berthelot's Pipits, but the chats proved rather elusive! Eventually, parked atop a deep ravine, I spied a likely dot perched atop a small bush far below - seemed a pale, almost flycatcher-like bird, almost certainly a female Fuerteventura Chat. Down I clambered and there were my birds, not just the female, but a super stunning male too, certainly one of the best birds of the trip. Sat and basked in the sun with these birds for a good hour, the pair birds flitting from perches all around to snatch morsels from aside a remnant of a steam trickling past. Just for good measure, two Trumpeter Finches too, a couple of Spectacled Warblers and a pair of Ruddy Shelducks. Later, having retrieved my travel companions from Corraleyo, I quickly returned to the plains south of El Cotillo for the evening - no bustards, but a right corking flock of 12 Cream-coloured Coursers at close quarters on the ground, plus four Black-bellied Sandgrouse in the same area. Also flushed another pair of Barbary Partridge and found the Barbary Falcon of the evening before, this time sat on a rock. End of my first full day in the Canary Islands, all the Fuerteventura specialities seen, splendid. Fuerteventura. 22 December. Still rather too enthusiastic, again the day started in total darkness awaiting the sun to rise over the stony plains south of El Cotillo! My plan ahead was to a) try and get some photographs of the key birds and b) see if I could find gravel roads and tracks to take me all the way to Los Molinos, some 30 km to the south. Zigzagging southwards, I spent a while just wandering around the plains early on, a total of six Houbara Bustards seen, five Cream-coloured Coursers and two Black-bellied Sandgrouse, plus a couple of Spectacled Warblers and a Barbary Partridge. For chance of reasonable photographs however, I soon realised I would need another strategy - predict the birds route, sit and wait, let the birds wander in. After various birds simply wandering off in wrong directions, I eventually got some cracking views of both Houbara Bustard and Cream-coloured Courser, the patient stake-outs getting individuals of both strolling to within metres of my position. Camera satisfied, it was then time to try to find a route south, a meander along tracks mostly of good quality, though deteriorating rapidly for a few kilometres as I neared Los Molinos, the car not too amused to be navigating over boulders and deep ruts! Two Southern Grey Shrikes on route, plus other bits and bobs, most notably two Hoopoes in a barranca and a Common Buzzard overhead. Car unscathed, I rolled into the parking area at Los Molinos, not a wisp of cloud to spoil the day and the temperature again rising to a pleasant 28 C. On the reservoir, pretty much the same birds as a couple of days previous - Ring-necked Duck sitting proud, plenty of Ruddy Shelducks, an assorted mix of waders and other waterbirds. However, away from the water, things were far more productive - as well as the Barbary Squirrels and Berthelot's Pipits putting on fine performances, a total of five most resplendent Fuerteventura Chats - a pair flitting along a fence line, plus a male and two female-types on a stone wall. Real crackers all. Also of note, sitting on the ground a couple of hundred metres distant, one adult Egyptian Vulture. Just below the dam wall, a steep barranca winds off towards the sea - with a trickle of water visible in the valley's bottom, this seemed the natural direction in which to turn my attentions. And what a good move this was, a right flurry of birds attracted to the water, top of the bunch being Trumpeter Finches, a flock of at least 40 dropping in to drink. Also Lesser Short-toed Larks, White Wagtail, Spanish Sparrows, a Spectacled Warbler and a couple of Linnets. On the lip of the valley, a Common Buzzard sat on a rock ledge. An easy-going rest of the day, returning to El Cotillo, then walking up the coast to the lighthouse a half dozen kilometres to the north. Grey Plover and Sanderling added to the trip list, a bunch of other waders including Whimbrels and Turnstones. Fuerteventura. 23 December. Final day on Fuerteventura, and a fairly uneventful one. Having had splendid views of all the island's specialities in the previous days, I decided to forgo the plains and instead stop at some of Fuerteventura's other birding localities on route to the port of Morro Jablo in the far south. Not terribly impressive - Las Salinas salt pans turned out to be the size of a hockey field, the lagoon at Catalina Garcia was totally dry and the Costa Calma woodlands were mere strips of trees aside the road, none of the locations exactly buzzing with birds! Still, did add a handful of birds to the trip list - a Dunlin at the salt pans; Sparrowhawk, Blackbird, Blackcap and Goldfinch at the woodlands; and a Cattle Egret just north of Morro Jablo. Also assorted other waders on the rocky shore adjacent to the salt pans and a couple of Hoopoes at Catalina Garcia. Perhaps the day's highlights were at Morro Jablo and of non-avian in character. Amazing numbers of fish present in the port, great shoals of them swarming in to feast on offered food. Amongst the variety, two stand out sightings, first a small Barracuda arriving to snatch a smaller fish, then a really stunning arrival - a looming dark shape gliding in, easily a metre and a half across and similar in length, plus a long tail! Slow flaps of its 'wings', arcing right underneath, a stunning Sting Ray making loops of the harbour, not a fish I expected to see! Also added a Grey Heron to the trip list. The waters off the Canary Islands are teeming with seabirds in the summer months, tens of thousands of Cory's Shearwaters, exotics such as Bulwer's Petrel and Little Shearwater. In winter the waters are not teeming with birds! In a two-hour crossing

from Fuerteventura to Gran Canaria, I saw a grand total of zero birds! Not even a gull! Flying fish did compensate somewhat, impressive little things, many gliding tens of metres before returning to the sea. Arrived in Gran Canaria just after dark, a one-night stay on this island before catching another ferry to Tenerife. Tenerife. 23 December. Ferry number two, Gran Canaria to Tenerife, early morning. After the dud crossing of the evening before, my expectations were now rather lower, I would have been quite happy for even a single Cory's Shearwater. As it was, the trip was much better - not only was I now on a Naviera Armas ferry, much better suited to sea-watching, but the actual crossing was pretty productive too. Simply for the frequent presence of Yellow-legged Gulls, the crossing was more enjoyable, boosted a little by Sandwich Terns in the ports at both ends, but far better were the amazing numbers of cetaceans - first seen off the north coast of Gran Canaria, pods were thereafter encountered every ten minutes or so all the way to Tenerife, including some very close to the port in Santa Cruz. Most abundant were Short-finned Pilot Whales, pods of six to eight the most frequent, some cruising along, but many seeming to be sleeping at the surface, flippers flapping in the air. Also one group of Common Dolphins in the boat's wake and on at least two occasions, Bottle-nosed Dolphins a little further out. For the entire crossing, the sea was like a millpond and this made it very easy to pick up both the cetaceans and gulls regardless of distance, but as Tenerife began to loom, I guessed I had again drawn a blank on any pelagic birds. Not quite so, zigzagging in from the left, my heart jumped as a petrel suddenly appeared. It was meandering and swooping, brief glides then a change in direction, onward. As it gradually moved in, the full glory of the bird became apparent - a Madeiran Storm Petrel, what a stunner! This was immediate compensation for the total lack of any other seabirds and was presumably a bird from the winter-breeding population, a bonus indeed! On dry land, the immediate job in hand was to pick up another hire car and, in no time at all, we were on the road again, this time heading out of Santa Cruz and into the hills of the north of the island. After the arid sparsely-populated Fuerteventura, Tenerife could not have been a bigger contrast - roads quite busy, high mountains and lush green forests. And it was in these forests that I hoped to find the first of the Tenerife specialities, my destination being the dense laurel forests on the Anaga Peninsula. A few kilometres north-west of Les Mercedes, I arrived at the El Llano de los Viejos picnic area, tintillon race Chaffinches immediately present, Robins and Blackbirds seem soon after. My main target here was the endemic Bolle's Pigeon, but a quick perusal of the landscape suggested this might not be the easiest of ventures, the forest particularly thick and the slopes steep. After about 15 minutes of near breaking my neck trying to clamber up the slopes, the loose leaf litter sending me sliding countless times, I decided the far more civilised and sensible approach might be to use the hiking trails! Wandered for about an hour or two, plenty of African Blue Tits in small flocks, quite a few Canary Island Chiffchaffs too, plus a right corker of a Tenerife Kinglet pretending to be a Treecreeper on a trunk a couple of metres adjacent to me. Seeing no pigeons of any description, I then started to walk along the road, the views into the canopy rather better this way ... a clatter of wings and out flew a dark pigeon, staying within the canopy and landing a few dozen metres further. A bit of realignment and there was my Bolle's Pigeon, not amazing views and for a few seconds only, another clatter of wings and it was gone! I turned around and ... more wings crashing through the canopy, another Bolle's Pigeon launched into the canopy, the banded tail about all that I saw of it! By now late afternoon, Christmas Eve no less, we then headed off to the north of the island to find our accommodation, an okay place in the town of Orotina. After checking in and having a quick munch, I decided to quickly nip out to the La Grimonas viewpoint on the main coastal road a few kilometres further west. Renowned as the easiest location on the island for Laurel Pigeon, or quite probably the only reliable location, this is not a very scenic spot - cars zooming by as you crank your neck up to scan the slopes above. Only about half an hour of light left, so no big surprise that I did not see the Laurel Pigeons. What was surprising however was the thick dark bank of clouds moving in from the north! Saw Rock Doves, one Barbary Falcon, four Common Buzzards ... and then the rain started! And boy did it rain, arrived back at the accommodation to a downpour of biblical proportions. Quite unseasonal, and not very Christmassy, it then proceeded to rain all night! Tenerife. 25 December. Christmas Day ... a gloomy start to the morning, cloud hanging low, yuk! Fortunately the rain had let up, so back to the Las Grimonas viewpoint I went, hopefully a Laurel Pigeon left by Santa. Paced up and down the road for about half an hour, scanned every tree for my present, but all seemed in avail. Plenty of Rock Doves, a Canary Island Chiffchaff giving a half-decent attempt at Christmas carols, but as for my doves of desire, nothing. Some German birders arrived, took a two-minute look, then departed. Dampness oozed from the trees, slopes even higher were just murk. I began to wander back towards my car, a coffee back at the accommodation seeming a good idea. A final quick scan. Hmm, what's that? A partly concealed blob on a branch! A most pigeon-like blob. And then the blob shuffled along the branch into full view ... a pale tail emerged and there sat my Laurel Pigeon! I put the scope on the bird, quite a neat thing for a pigeon, yellow and pink bill, red eye, prominent whitish end to the tail. And as I studied the bird, in flew another and sat by it. Adjacent to the road, in a bank of vegetation including Prickly Pear, a Barbary Partridge flushed with a surprise. With that I departed, time for coffee. Being a bit of a wuss when it comes to rain, the obvious direction to travel for the remainder of the day was up, directly up. Towering behind Orotina, and vanishing into the thick cloud, were the slopes of Pico del Teide, the vast volcano that rises to 3700 metres. At the higher altitudes, the slopes bedecked in pine forest and then ultimately turning into a wild moonscape, it would almost certainly be above the cloud, a sunny day thus ensured. Not only that, but the forests are also home to the endemic Blue Chaffinch, the number one bird for me on Tenerife. Off we went, up a serpentine road into the cloud ... and as we went up, so went the temperature down! 16 C in Orotina, 10 C at the base of the cloud, a mere 2 C as we hit 2000 metres! And then like a miracle, we emerged above the cloud, bright blue skies above, a sea of cloud below. Splendid. After an amble through the stunning crater zone, the only birds noted being Berthelot's Pipits, we made for the Las Layas picnic area, a pleasantly attractive area in an area of open pine on the southern slopes. Almost immediately, flocks of Atlantic Canaries feeding around the picnic tables and the first Blue Chaffinches sitting in adjacent pines. New birds both, and what smart birds they are, especially the Blue Chaffinches. After wandering around for a while, adding the endemic race of Great Spotted Woodpecker and several African Blue Tits, I then settled down by one of the taps in the picnic site. Whilst provided for visiting tourists, they are also excellent for

getting good views of all the resident birds, a steady procession of Blue Chaffinches popping in to drink, occasional other species too. After another little walk, adding only Tenerife Kinglet, we then went back up to the crater for coffee in a small cafe, the stay slightly extended due to very photogenic Berthelot's Pipits just adjacent. From there, we headed towards the west, a stop in the Chio picnic area resulting in even higher numbers of Blue Chaffinches. Seeing that the clouds were clearing lower down, we then descended to have a quick look at the Erjos area, a region known for its laurel forests. Not very impressive on our visit however, the entire valley in the immediate vicinity of the pools had been burnt out in bush fires during the summer and essentially there were no trees visible! Had a quick look at the pools themselves, the grand sum of birds being three Teal, six Coots and two Moorhens, then decided to head back to Orotina, a mean chilly wind beginning to whip through the valleys. And so it was, Christmas Day over, Laural Pigeon, Blue Chaffinch and Atlantic Canary all new species for me, Santa had been kind this year, plus too superb views of Berthelot's Pipits. Tenerife. 26 December. Only really one thing left to do, try to get better views of the Bolle's Pigeons. So it was, early morning back to the forested slopes of Les Mercedes. I travelled via Tejne ponds, the detour merely adding a few Moorhens and Coots, plus a single Common Sandpiper, Ringed Plover and Snipe. At Les Mercedes, the first stop was again the El Llano de los Viejos picnic area, Chaffinches and African Blue Tits immediately found, plus a Tenerife Kinglet again working a mossy trunk in the fashion of a Treecreeper. A long walk resulted in exactly the same views of Bolle's Pigeon as on the first visit - a single flying up through the canopy, then sitting in deep foliage. Hmm, had to be an easier way, I thought. Returning to the car, I drove up to the viewpoint at Mirador Pico dos Ingles. This seemed a much better option, a vista over a vast area of canopy, dead trees protruding to give ample perching sites for wayward pigeons. And it took all of ten minutes to locate one, a Bolle's Pigeon sitting out in the morning sun midway down the slope. Fifteen minutes of watching and off it flew, across the canopy and into a valley beyond. Unseen till that moment, a second bird followed just behind. With success on Bolle's Pigeons, so I had seen all the birds that were on my target list for the Canary Islands. To celebrate, I popped into a McDonald's just outside Santa Cruz, then headed to the south of the island to see if I could find any of the established exotics that breed on Tenerife. Had a quick look round Amarillo and Del Sur golf courses, the highlights being six Spoonbills on a pool just north of the former, then popped into the busy resort town of Los Galletas. Just inland of the coast, the Ten Bel area is an unlikely looking destination for the birder - a fairly rundown playground behind a shopping complex! Its saving grace is the abundance of palms and other greenery ...and it is in these that various parrots can often be found. A lot of squawking emanating from the palms as I got out of the car! It did not take long the culprits - a whole flock of Monk Parakeets feeding on the dates, a few Ring-necked Parakeets zooming over for good measure. Both long-established in the Canaries, these species are very much to be expected in this area, but the next is rather harder to find - in an adjacent tree, a Senegal Parrot also peered down! This latter parrot also breeds, but the population is currently fairly low. With my fill of exotics and the south of the island, far less attractive than the north, we then headed back for Orotina, a 'short cut' taking right over the top of Teite for more stunning views of the volcano. Tenerife. 27 December. Final day on the canaries, and a most pleasant one at that. After a brief stop at the La Grimonas viewpoint, again spotting a Laurel Pigeon, my destination for this morning was Punta de Teno, a stunning rocky peninsula on the island's far north-west. Just beyond Buenavista, there are very prominent signs in several languages warning that the road is closed - massive signs in fact, situated every ten metres or so. The Tenerife authorities believe the risk of rock fall is large and the signs are effectively to deflect legal responsibility, but the road does remain open. And stunning it is, calved into precipitous rockface, complete with tunnels and magnificent views, plus a very nice Barbary Falcon soaring over the road just adjacent to the tunnel. At the road's end, a semi-arid plain extends couple of kilometres to a lighthouse, a world of prickly pear cactus, stony flats and small plots of low intensity agriculture. In this most picturesque of landscapes, not bad birding too - in an hour or so of wanderings, quite a few Barbary Partridge, numerous Corn Buntings, several Spectacled Warblers, a small flock of Rock Sparrows and six Lesser Short-toed Larks too. Also numerous Berthelot's Pipits, Atlantic Canaries, a Canary Island Chiffchaff and assorted other birds, such as Linnet and Blackbird. Time however was marching on, I had a late afternoon flight to catch from the south of Tenerife, so then took the small TF-436 road that winds over the Teno Mountains via the village of Masca. Surely one of the most dramatic roads on the Canaries, this was a most pleasant drive to finish the trip off, even though it added only a Sardinian Warbler to the trip list, plus a very approachable Common Raven. Final port of call was a return to Las Galletas, only found Ring-necked Parakeets on this visit, so instead we went down to the seafront for a coffee and ice-cream on the promenade to pass the last hour or so. At 4.30 p.m., we lifted off, farewell to the Canaries, a total of just 78 species seen, but ten new species in that total, including all the endemics and semi-endemics. Three hours later we landed in Barcelona, ready for the next leg of the trip. For full list of all birds seen on the Canary Islands, *** [CLICK HERE](#) ***