

Azores, Lands of Priolo

Contributed by Jos

Last Updated Wednesday, 23 March 2016

This short trip to the island of Sao Miguel in the Azores was very much aimed at seeking out one of Europe's rarest breeding species, namely the Azores Bullfinch, Priolo in Portuguese. With a world population barely exceeding 150 pairs, all restricted to the fragmented laurel forests on the slopes of mountains at the eastern end of Sao Miguel, the bird is not only the island's only endemic bird species, but the least common of the meagre 13 species of passerines that breed on Sao Miguel.

Requiring a certain degree of luck and relying on good weather, the plan for this three-day visit was to locate the sometimes elusive birds as quickly as possible, then spend the remainder of the time exploring the lush green island for stray American birds left over from the previous autumn. In the event, with superb weather, things worked out fairly well, with a total of 43 species seen, including (after considerable effort) two pairs of Azores Bullfinch and no less than twelve American birds of seven species. Logistics were simple, flying direct from the UK to Ponta Delgado on the outward leg, then via Lisbon on the way back, all flights with Ryan Air. On the island, I rented a car with Ilya Verde, an excellent local car rental company. On route back, I opted to take a ten-hour stop-over in Lisbon, providing me with ample time for exploration of the nearby Tagus Estuary, adding lots of birds from Black-winged Kites to Azure-winged Magpies, as well as a surprise Lesser Yellowlegs, yet another American bird for the trip. All in all, for a short break, everything was pretty good.

DAILY LOG

13 February.

Evening flight from the UK, four hours, arriving in Ponta Delgada at 9 pm. Picked up a rental car, drove into town and stayed at a cheap hotel. 14 February. Sierra da Tronqueira & Ponta Delgada. From Ponta Delgada, the slopes of the Sierra da Tronqueira mountains lie about an hour to the west, accessed by either a fairly direct northern route or a more windy southern route. Either way, there is a sixteen-kilometre dirt road that zigzags up and down the mountain between Povoação and Nordeste that offers the best possible options to find the Azores Bullfinch. Several reports do mention folk failing to find the birds, but generally the basic idea is to slowly travel along this road, stopping at areas of laurel to search for birds, productive areas often being the first few kilometres from the Povoação end and near the Tronqueira viewpoint midway along the track.

With not a breath of wind and glorious sunshine prevailing, I had high hopes on this first day, stacks of Island Canaries and Common Starlings being amongst the first birds seen as I arrived at the starting point for the track at about 8.00 a.m. Distinctive island-race Chaffinches abundant in the lower forests, Goldcrests, Blackbirds and Robins also proving common, plus occasional Grey Wagtails and Blackcaps too. Put in quite a bit of effort to find the Azores Bullfinch - walked all areas of reasonable looking habitat on the Povoação end, drove up to the summit and explored there too, sitting quite some at the viewpoint scanning the vast valley of laurel forest beneath. Drove slowly down to Nordeste, stopping here and there. No Azores Bullfinch. Turned round and repeated the drive, walking all areas again, listening and scanning. Yet again, no Azores Bullfinch. Hmm, a tricky bird, still I comforted myself with the thought that I had plenty of time. Slowly however, the time ticked by, I covered the entire length of the track again, also trying the narrow twisting road to Bartolomeu Peak, another locality reported to be good for the bird. No shortage of Robins and Chaffinches, several Common Buzzards overhead. No Azores Bullfinch! Arriving at the viewpoint for the third time, the likely difficulty of the task began to dawn upon me ...though the laurel forests were relatively limited in area, most of the best habitat was on slopes totally inaccessible across the valley. Hectares and hectares of the stuff that there was no way to get anywhere near, certainly enough territory to hide 150 pairs of birds with ease! Another couple of hours of unsuccessful search, basically covering the same areas as already checked, and I decided enough was enough. It was now late afternoon and I opted to return to Ponta Delgada to end the day at the city's harbour. This fortunately was rather more successful - on pontoons chock-a-block with Azores Yellow-legged Gulls, a careful scan through revealed not only a handful of Greater Black-backed Gulls, but also two first-year Ring-billed Gulls and one first-year Glaucous Gull, a stunningly pale individual. Day one was now over, I had seen a total of 26 species during the day, unfortunately not including the Azores Bullfinch! 15 February. Sierra da Tronqueira, Lagoa das Furnas & Lagoa Azul. Dawn on the Tronqueira track, scanning the stunted laurels a couple of kilometres up from the Povoação junction. Large flocks of mixed Island Canaries and Chaffinches, Blackcaps and Robins in song, several Wood Pigeons flying over. Given I was going to be checking exactly the same areas as the day before, I was now less than certain I would find the desired Azores Bullfinch.

Today however would be quite different - less than two minutes after arriving, two Azores Bullfinches flew directly overhead, appearing to land in shrubs just up the slope. Hiked up a small path in pursuit, lots of bird activity in the area, but try as I might, I could not find the birds again. Not entirely satisfied, I eventually continued along the track, taking a side road a few kilometres further. Via a series of steep slopes, this offers access to another area of open laurel forest - I walked the track through here for about half an hour, then began to drive back along the track again. Two hundred metres and I stopped, a sharp intake of breathe, two Azores Bullfinch feeding on the track!

Wow, what crackers ...typical chunky things, warm plumage, soft brown buff rumps. Onto red flowers they flitted,

feeding on the buds for a while. Then, the finale, up they flew to land in a bush just above my head, now nicely lit by the morning sunshine. Ah perfect, an entire day searching the day before and here, in less than an hour, I had bumped into two pairs, this latter two giving stunning views.

So with that, I continued up to the summit viewpoint, failed to find any more Azores Bullfinch, then decided to depart Tronqueira and explore the rest of the island. First stop the nearby Furnas area - steaming thermal springs, sulphur vents, hot bubbling mud, many signals of the island's volcanic origins. And in their midst, the large Lagoa das Furnas, one of the relatively few freshwater lakes on the island. Plenty of Chaffinches in the woodland edges, several Grey Wagtails trotting about the car park, but I was here to scan the lake - not actually many birds present, but always a chance of something good. Quickly found a long-staying Shelduck (tenth record for the Azores or something similar), carefully looked at the handful of Eurasian Coots for potential American cousins, then scanned the dabbling ducks. A grand total of fifteen birds present - six Mallards, seven Eurasian Wigeons and, the first Nearctic birds of the trip, a rather nice pair of American Wigeons. A nearby loop through farmland added a couple of Little Egrets and a vagrant Cattle Egret. Also saw a bat flying around near here, presumably an Azores Noctule, the only mammalian endemic on the island (quite a number of bat boxes were placed in trees at the eastern end of the lake in a project to assist this endangered species).

Now midday, I decided to travel to the opposite end of the island and visit Lagoa Azul, a large lake sitting inside an impressive volcanic crater. Harboured several long-staying rarities, including Pied-billed Grebe and American Coot, it was a very pleasant area to spend the afternoon. From a causeway that splits the lakes in the crater, I very quickly located the American Coot, the bird sitting just offshore with a half dozen Eurasian Coots, one Moorhen also present for good measure. I presumed the Pied-billed Grebe should be in this same area, but it did not seem to be around. Spent the next couple of hours exploring the shores of the lake, three Black-tailed Godwits occupying an area of flooded grassland, a flock of Common Waxbills nearby. Then spotted a small flock of ducks tucked up against a far shore - very distant, but Aythya ducks for sure. Perhaps the Pied-billed Grebes might be over there too, I thought, so I drove round, taking a very small track that flanked the northern shore. Got to the spot, no Pied-billed Grebe, but the ducks turned out to be three smart Ring-necked Ducks, two males and a female, and a female Greater Scaup. Nice, more American birds, presumably the Greater Scaup also of Nearctic origin. Then moved over to the adjacent Lagoa Verde to continue the search for Pied-billed Grebe. Not there either, just a few Grey Herons and a Little Egret. As the sun dipped beneath the rim of the volcanic crater, a demented Grey Wagtail appeared, fighting against its image in the car mirror. I then returned to Ponta Delgada, a very successful day under the belt.

16 February, Mosteiros & Ponta Delgada. An overcast start to the day, brightening later. Fancied a bit of seawatching this day, combining it with a search for two Nearctic vagrants that were lingering on the coast at Mosteiros. Jagged black volcanic rocks, offshore stacks and unforgiving seas, Mosteiros is one of the north-westerly points of Sao Miguel, supposedly also the best area for seawatching. Arrived and spend a few minutes orientating and deciding on the best area to watch from, soon selecting a spot overlooking a tiny pebble beach with massive rock stacks rising to the south. A flock of about 25 Turnstones danced from rock to rock, then a small wader flew out from a hidden cove ...skimming low over the waves and settling on rocks near the beach, it was a Spotted Sandpiper, target number one of the two Nearctic vagrants, that was easy! Once it disappeared however, I never managed to relocate it, so maybe I was just lucky. Set the scope up and peered out to sea, not massive movements but in an hour or so, several small flocks of Cory's Shearwater skimmed low the waves, plus a Great Skua buzzed flocks of Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls congregating around a couple of offshore fishing boats. Great Skuas are apparently rare visitors to the Azores, but perhaps it is simply due to a relative lack of observers in the winter season. Likewise, divers are supposed to be rare, but sitting a little offshore not only did I locate two Great Northern Divers, but also a single Black-throated Diver, the later careful checked for Pacific Diver! After a while, I walked a little further south to check a small bay. Bar a single Turnstone, no birds present. Then a cormorant flew in, circled round, then looped to the south and settled on a rock pinnacle just offshore. Double-crested Cormorant, Nearctic vagrant number two! Continued along the shoreline and clambered over the boulder to get a little closer to the rock pinnacle, the Double-crested Cormorant was now peering at me shouldered by two Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls.

Not much else seen along this section of the coast, two Black-headed Gulls just about the highlight, so decided to return to Ponta Delgada to spend my last afternoon on the island back at the harbour. Very pleasant, Whimbrel and Grey Plover added, the very pale Glaucous Gull present again. Couldn't find either of the Ring-billed Gulls this day, but I didn't stay till evening when many more birds arrive to roost.

In the early evening, I returned the rental car and then spent the rest of the evening in Ponta Delgada. The Azores leg was now basically over, I would fly out before daybreak next day. 17 February. Tagus Estuary.

6.30 a.m. flight from Ponta Delgado, arriving in Lisbon at 8.30 a.m. Paid a very nice 8.75 euro to rent a car for the day, departed the airport and a mere 15 minutes later was heading over the Vasco de Gama Bridge to access the Tagus Estuary, one of Iberia's premier winter birding localities. The weather forecast was far from promising, heavy rain and wind set to hit sometime during the day. For now however, it was still calm and sunny, perfect weather to wander out into the extensive Samouco salt pans. A couple of Hoopoes flopped over, a Black Redstart bobbed on an old outhouse, Greater Flamingoes and Spoonbills waded on several pools, Avocets and Black-winged Stilts mingling with roosting waders on others, Dunlins and Little Stints most abundant, mixed gatherings of Ringed Plovers and Kentish Plovers also commonplace. Picked up quite a few other common waders, but didn't stay too long, as I quite fancied bumping into some of the exotics breeding in nearby agricultural areas, namely Yellow-crowned Bishop and Village Weaver. Started the search in roadside meadows south-east of Alcochete. Quickly found a meadow packed with birds - loads of Lapwings and Snipes, one unexpected Ruddy Shelduck, plenty of dabbling ducks and, just beyond, both Marsh Harrier and Hen

Harrier winging over the meadow.

Spotted a couple of Green Sandpipers, then put by binoculars up on another wade on a pool just in front of me. Eh, thought I, surely not? But it was, paddling around on this pool, with the Green Sandpipers as immediate neighbours, was a dainty wader with bright yellow legs! It hardly needed to confirm its identification, but with a quick flit across the pool it revealed its rump and that was that, a Lesser Yellowlegs! I had expected a few American birds on the Azores, but certainly had not expected to find any of the mainland. It had now clouded over, but snapped off a few photographs and then continued with a smile. A little bit further along, in a rice paddy being churned by a couple of tractors, the good birding continued - a rather amazing sight, an estimated 1200 Glossy Ibises paddling in the shallows, I think the largest single flock I have ever seen of these. Adding to the spectacle, also hundreds of Black-tailed Godwits present, plus loads of White Storks and numerous gulls. Marsh Harriers swung across the rear.

I didn't however find either of the exotics that I was searching for, Common Waxbills being the only birds I saw in this category. Watching the skies as the clouds began to thicken, my next port of call on this mini day out was a long track that skirted open cork oak woodland on the one side and rough pasture on the other. Very nice selection of birds here too, Peregrine and Merlin both seen, lots of Marsh Harriers, three more Black-winged Kites and, stars of the woodland, a flock of about 12 Azure-winged Magpies. It was now about 2.30 p.m. and the first spits of rain were in the air. All three of the common hirundines hawked low over pools, while Serins flitted up from everywhere and Spotless Starlings congregated in flocks, lesser numbers of Common Starlings also present. As the weather took a decided turn for the worst, I entered a vast area of rice paddies, bare and empty for the winter, shallow water flooding most. Lots of dabbling ducks, Lapwings, Golden Plovers and Black-tailed Godwits too, but at a little after 4.00 p.m. the heavens opened, fairly torrential rain quickly developing.

About I turned, back to the airport, 81 species under the belt, an altogether enjoyable stop-over. At 8.30 p.m., still raining, my flight departed, trip over, back to the UK.