

Cape Verde

18 March – 1 April 2016



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Introduction

Words Josh Jones | **Images** © Josh Jones unless stated

Lying some 500 km off the Senegalese coast and a six-hour flight away from Britain, Cape Verde feels about as exotic as Western Palearctic (WP) destinations come. Indeed there is very much an African feel to both the archipelago and the birdlife it supports, though nonetheless maintains a noticeable Macaronesian flavour. The isles' isolation has resulted in significant levels of endemism among its avifauna, which makes it a popular destination for WP and world birders alike. As certain species can only be found on certain islands, a trip dedicated to 'cleaning up' on the archipelago's specialities requires visiting several of these and this is exactly what we planned for our fortnight-long March visit. Starting on Boa Vista, we moved on to Santiago and then São Nicolau before finishing back on Boa Vista for our flight back to London. Visiting these three islands gives adequate opportunity to see all the Cape Verde endemics as well as its speciality WP species.

Logistics

Though it is possible to fly to Cape Verde via Lisbon with TAP, direct international flights to Sal and Boa Vista are available from the UK. Flights to Boa Vista leave London, Birmingham and Manchester while the more popular tourist island of Sal can also be reached directly from Bristol. In the end we opted for the [Thomson Airways](#) departure from Gatwick to Boa Vista for £368 per person (this including a 20 kg bag each).

Internal flights are available via [TACV Cabo Verde Airlines](#). After deliberating over many options we eventually decided to fly to from Boa Vista to Santiago on 22nd, from there to São Nicolau on 27th and finally back to Boa Vista (via Sal) on 31st. The cost of these came to €185.72 (a snip under £150) each.

Our trip to Ilhéu dos Pássaros was organised via Pedrin Lopez of [Bios.cv](#), a local conservation NGO. This cost €130 per person, including food and transport to and from Sal Rei. We recommend that anyone wanting to visit the island does so with Bios.cv as the island is littered with seabird burrows and a lack of knowledge of the island's safe 'paths' is potentially very dangerous to the colony. The cost of the trip will also ensure money is re-invested in local conservation projects.

While on Boa Vista, a 4x4 (Toyota Hilux) was organised privately for us via Pedrin Lopez at a cost of €60 per day. On Santiago we hired a 4x4 with Atlântico Rent a Car for €50 per day. We did not rent a car on São Nicolau, instead using taxis to get around.

In terms of accommodation, we stayed at [Residencial Salinas B&B](#) while on Boa Vista at a cost of around £15 per person per night. We found it to be of excellent value – the breakfasts were great and we were made to feel extremely welcome. On Santiago we stayed at Hotel Escola da EHTCV – a clean, modern school for hoteliers that also offers extraordinarily good-value accommodation – our triple room came in at just £8 pppn, including a decent breakfast! On São Nicolau we stayed at Residencial Tocely, which was perfectly adequate albeit a little more expensive at €35 pppn, including breakfast.

The reason for staying at the latter B&B was because the proprietor was able to organise a boat to take us to Raso. This turned out to be a great success: using a twin-engine boat, we were dropped off on Branco late afternoon on 27 March and then picked up at 07:45 the following morning, the return trip including a stop on Raso. This cost us a total of €600 between three of us (€300 for the outward journey and €300 for the return). A Spanish team used the same captain the day previous, but decided only to visit Raso – this cost them just €200 for the single trip from Tarrafal. We would strongly recommend anyone wanting to visit either island to consider using these means; from what we gathered, previous journeys using wooden fishing boats have ranged from slightly precarious to downright treacherous (and invariably quite unpleasant!). In contrast, our trip was hugely enjoyable and assured a quick and safe crossing.

Resources & Acknowledgements

Despite now being over 11 years old, Chris Batty's [2005 trip report](#) remains both relevant and useful for any trip to Cape Verde and forms essential reading. Richard Bonser's [2011 trip report](#) for Santiago is also a useful reference for sites on that island.

Thanks must go to Pierre-André Crochet, Radosław Gwóźdź, Olof Jonsson, Rami Mizrahi, Daniele Occhiato and Steve Rogers for their help with information on both sites and species across the islands. Many thanks must also go to Peter Gluth for his up-to-date gen following his trip to the archipelago in early March and to Ferran López Sanz and team, who were in Cape Verde simultaneously, for keeping in touch with their sightings.

Daily Diary

18 March

After a fairly uncomfortable Thomson flight we arrived at Rabil Airport, Boa Vista, mid-afternoon and were greeted by our first Cape Verde endemic, Iago Sparrow – several were scrubbing around in the airport terminal. Samir Martins of Bios.cv was waiting for us and on hand to take us to our accommodation in Sal Rei – the friendly and comfortable Residencial Salinas. After dropping our bags in the room we decided to head out for our first taste of Cape Verde

birding. The near-dry salt lagoons north of the main town are at first uninspiring and rubbish-filled but nevertheless attract good numbers of birds. One of the first things seen was a male Black-crowned Sparrow-lark, this closely followed by expected waders such as Sanderling, Turnstone and Kentish Plover around the remaining water.

lago Sparrows were common (as they are just about everywhere with any sort of scrub/habitation on Boa Vista) while overhead our first Alexander's Kestrels were seen. Six swifts quickly transpired to be Cape Verde Swifts – another target bird in the bag, the identification quickly confirmed by their particularly harsh call. Spectacled Warblers were also fairly common in patches of scrub and several Bar-tailed Larks were feeding on the rocky, flat areas. Heading to the coast an Osprey was fishing offshore and a fly-by Caspian Tern proved a nice addition to the trip list. The weather was stunning – clear skies and warm sunshine – capping off a decent first few hours on the island. After sorting out our 'hire car' (we were essentially borrowing someone's Toyota Hilux) we headed in to town and enjoyed some grilled fish by the harbour, before retiring to bed for a dose of much-needed sleep.

19 March

Our planned early start didn't turn out as early as we'd hoped: though we'd been warned about the Hilux's temperamental battery (apparently it needed "some time to warm up in the morning"), we weren't expecting it not to start altogether! So after waking Pedrin up we eventually got hold of some jump leads and were on our way some time after 07:00, by which time it was already quite light.

It took a little under an hour (with birding stops) to reach Curral Velho, on the south side of the island. Soon after parking up by the lagoon east of the Riu Touareg hotel we were treated to our first Hoopoe Larks, including a singing bird, and Brown Boobies passing offshore. The lagoons held a handful of Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers, two Wood Sandpipers, Grey Plover, Whimbrel, Redshank and a Gull-billed Tern. Curral Velho is, however, synonymous with a particular species that just about clings on in the Western Palearctic and we were soon powering out across the dunes to view the famous islet and its Brown Booby colony, recording our first few Red-billed Tropicbirds in the process. We knew that seeing Magnificent Frigatebird here is very much a waiting game and so we came prepared to spend the entire day at the beach. We were kept enthused by the regular comings and goings of boobies and tropicbirds while an adult Pomarine Skua flying west was more of a surprise.

By late morning our patience was waning and Dan and I decided to take a dip in the ever-more appetising sea. We'd been in no more than a few minutes when we noticed a large, dark bird circling just inland of Neil, who was snoozing on the beach. Dan was immediately convinced by its identification and both of us legged it out of the sea, shouting and waving to the unsuspecting Neil who was evidently slightly bemused as to the reason for our sudden panic. Arriving back at the bags, we picked up our optics and Neil shouted: "that's the boy" – and so it was! The female Magnificent Frigatebird proceeded to come directly overhead at a range of less than 30 metres before continuing to (and landing on) the islet itself. This was the signal for loud whoops of joy and we celebrated by heading back in the sea for a prolonged swim.

Somewhat sun-kissed (in Dan's case, completely frazzled) we headed back over the dunes to the car. A stop at the sewage works west of Riu Touareg produced a good flock of Black-crowned Sparrow-larks as well as one each of Swallow, Sand Martin and House Martin. Singles of Wood and Common Sandpipers were also noted as well as the ubiquitous Black-winged Stilts and both Spanish and lagoon Sparrows. Driving back to Rabil produced large numbers of Brown-necked Ravens at the island's rubbish dump and, further on, three Spoonbills from the bridge at Rabil Lagoon.



Magnificent Frigatebird, Curral Velho, 19 March

After a couple of hours of rest it was time to head to Gata for our trip to Ilhéu dos Pássaros. Dan had started to realise the appalling extent of his sunburn and was already in considerable discomfort – his entire torso was a purplish-red, this the precursor to several days of excruciating pain intermixed with Aloe Vera application and latterly an almost complete peeling of his upper body. The drive itself produced the usual mix of resident species including Black-crowned Sparrow and Bar-tailed Larks as well as several Alexander's Kestrels, the best sighting being a couple of Cape Verde Swifts over a crag just south of Rabil. Closer to Gata we were treated to our first Helmeted Guineafowl of the trip – this introduced species is quite common across several islands in Cape Verde and we had great views of a group of 30 as they scarpered for cover.

The crossing to Pássaros was a little choppy but it was the landing that proved most problematic. With the tide up we had no choice but to wade for shore, the water level up to our waists when jumping off the boat. Though Dan and I managed to keep our optics and camera equipment largely dry, Neil was not so fortunate – bad timing saw him slip on a rock as a particularly sturdy wave swept him off his feet and up to his neck in water. Thankfully he wasn't carrying anything damageable and was able to half-swim, half-haul himself to shore. An Osprey looked nonplussed by the events unfolding below as it drifted over.

Dusk fell and shortly afterwards our first White-faced Storm-petrels began to arrive at the colony, despite the near-full moon often shining brightly in the sky. In truth the level activity was fairly low in the first half of the night and our repetition of the Cape Verde Storm-petrel tape failed to lure any of that species in to the island. With that, we decided to settle down for some sleep.

20 March

In the early hours storm-petrel activity began to increase with a noticeable peak from 03:00-04:00, when heavy cloud rolled in and the moon became completely hidden. At this point it was possible to watch several White-faced Storm-petrels fluttering around the island at the same time, looking rather like fairies as they passed through the torch light. We were also able to watch a number of individuals on the ground at point-blank range – the entire experience was truly fantastic and one each of us will savour for a long time.



White-faced Storm-petrel, Ilhéu dos Pássaros, 20 March

By 06:00 it was getting light and we waited for the boat to come and pick us up. Once again we had to wade up to our waists to get to the boat before hauling ourselves on board – the ungainly sight of Dan trying to pull himself aboard while dealing with debilitating pain from the second-degree sunburn on his stomach was enough to make anyone grimace.

The drive back to Sal Rei produced further views of Helmeted Guineafowl, each of the three lark species and, best of all, four Cream-coloured Coursers. Given it had been a night of little sleep we spent the middle of the day resting at the hotel before venturing out again mid-afternoon. Rabil Lagoon gave two Spoonbills, a handful of Grey Herons, six Grey Plover and the usual wader species while a drive up to Boafereira produced great views of the three lark species around the football pitch north of the village. Our final stop of the day was Ponta do Sol, which rewarded the challenging drive to reach the old lighthouse by producing absolutely nothing offshore! Compensation was provided by the most astonishingly tame family of Hoopoe Larks nearby: as I lay on the ground, the two fledged youngsters would come running up to within just a couple of metres of me (they were too close to focus on with my 400 mm lens), the adults following behind but remaining a little more wary. After this it was back in to Sal Rei for some food before a reasonably early night.



Lagoon Sparrow & Greater Hoopoe-lark, Boa Vista, 20 March

21 March

We started the day by retracing our steps along the road to Gata, where we hoped to see the Cream-coloured Coursers again. Unfortunately there were no coursers, though we did act as taxi for several locals along the way and enjoyed a group of 20 Helmeted Guineafowl just south of Rabil. In the green wadi north-east of Fundo de Figueiras we had over 100 guineafowl in several flocks, several singing Blackcaps and the usual larks and sparrows. The lagoon at the seaward end of this wadi looks very promising but produced only Sanderlings, Turnstone, Kentish Plover and Black-winged Stilts on our visit.

We returned to the hotel for a late breakfast before heading down to Curral Velho, this time cross country. Pedrin showed us to a fantastic freshwater lagoon where we had Green Sandpiper and Moorhen; its position on this dry island must render it a fantastic vagrant trap. The drive produced the usual larks, sparrows and Alexander's Kestrels and the line-up at Curral Velho was as on the previous day, Gull-billed Tern again the arguable highlight. The sewage works west of Riu Touareg had attracted a few more Swallows while waders included four Wood and two Common Sandpipers, and two Greenshanks.



Helmeted Guineafowl & Black-crowned Sparrow-lark, Boa Vista, 21 March

Povoação Velha produced a flyover Black Kite as well as a couple of Cape Verde Swifts and the usual species. After spending some time photographing Brown-necked Ravens and Helmeted Guineafowl at Rabil dump we headed back to the pool visited earlier. Additions to the earlier birds were three Spoonbills (no doubt those from Rabil Lagoon), two fluffy juvenile Moorhens, Greenshank and a drake Eurasian Teal. Our final stop of the day was Rabil Lagoon where undoubted highlight was a dark-morph Western Reef Egret, though presumably the same Caspian Tern as that seen at Sal Rei was at the seaward end and the usual waders added interest.

22 March

Our final morning on Boa Vista was spent relaxing around Sal Rei. While Neil and Dan opted to stay around the hotel I took a walk to the north of the town. Species were very much routine but it was nice to watch a pair of Ospreys and a family of Alexander's Kestrels at close quarters. After a late lunch we headed to the airport for our 16:00 flight to Santiago. Despite all the horror stories you hear about TACV our flight left on time and, thanks to a strong tailwind, arrived 15 minutes early.

First birds on Santiago were Cape Verde Swifts and Iago Sparrows around the airport terminal, closely followed by our first Grey-headed Kingfisher in bushes along the coast in Praia. With less than an hour of light left we decided to head down to the lighthouse at Ponta Temerosa for a seawatch. Soon we had logged our first Cape Verde Shearwaters (10) and a Red-billed Tropicbird flew past. However the obvious highlights were the three Humpback Whales breaching repeatedly offshore, almost at the horizon – a new species for me and spectacular to watch.

23 March

Our first morning on Santiago began with a seawatch at Ponta Temerosa. It didn't take long to establish that very little was moving – just two Cape Verde Shearwaters in the first half-hour saw us heading back to the hotel for an early breakfast.

Our post-breakfast plan was to head for Barragem de Poilão, a reservoir that has rapidly established itself as the premier birding location on Santiago (and probably the entirety of Cape Verde). A couple of stops along the road between the village of Sacramento and the reservoir produced our first Cape Verde Warblers of the trip, easily located by their rich, bulbul-like song. Good numbers of Cape Verde Swifts were feeding low over the valley and generally gave crippling views as they swooped around our heads. Common Waxbills were everywhere (as they seem to be across interior Santiago) while Grey-headed Kingfisher, Blackcap and Iago Sparrow were also commonplace.

We arrived at the inflow end of Barragem de Poilão mid-morning and immediately found our first target bird feeding in adjacent scrub: Intermediate Egret. Evidently rangier than the accompanying Cattle Egrets, it was perhaps just a trifle larger than Little Egret and also exhibited a gape line that did not extend past the rear of the eye. A good selection of waders included a Wood Sandpiper, multiples of both Common Sandpiper and Greenshank and, best of all, a stunning Solitary Sandpiper! Immediately identifiable by its diagnostic dark rump and high-pitched 'jink' call as it flew by, this transatlantic wanderer proceeded to afford us stunning views for the remainder of our visit. Remarkably Dan then identified an adult Spotted Sandpiper and we were able to watch both vagrants feeding side by side! Later we confirmed the presence of a second Spotted Sand among the many Commons.



Solitary Sandpiper, Barragem de Poilão, 23 March

Dan then picked up our other primary target – the long-staying Black Heron – along the reservoir's southern shore. Unfortunately it was spooked before we could even think about getting closer for views and went and sat on slopes above the northern shore, here joining 20 Spoonbills and three Squacco Herons (among others). Dan and Neil both clocked a juvenile Bourne's Heron flying over the reservoir late morning, but it didn't linger. Grey-headed Kingfishers were common at the reservoir and Cape Verde Swifts a near-permanent feature overhead. Other highlights included several Cape Verde Warblers, two Glossy Ibis and of course hundreds of Common Waxbills.

After having shown the Solitary to a group of German birders we decided to make our exit and head west to São Jorge dos Orgãos early afternoon. The village and its surroundings give expansive views over Santiago's highest point, Pico da Antónia. This area remains one of the few in which Cape Verde Buzzard hangs on and we soon locked on to a single buzzard high over the ridge to the west, being mobbed by a Brown-necked Raven.

Our next stop was Barragem de Faveta, one of the newer reservoirs created on the island and also seemingly the smallest. While this site has produced some fine vagrants for visiting birders during its short existence, today was not one of those days and the best birds were four Greenshank and a couple of Helmeted Guineafowl scrubbing around on the adjacent slopes. Further guineafowl (30+) were seen along the small cross-country track to Barragem de Figueira Gorda. Though even newer, the latter was far more 'birdy' and at least eight Bourne's Herons were logged, including four active nests. In terms of appearance, these smart birds are quite distinct from Purple Heron and it was great to see a mixture of ages, including two very fresh juveniles still around their nest. Also here were a couple of Intermediate Egrets, singles of Great White Egret and Black-crowned Night Heron, several further Helmeted Guineafowl plus all the expected species.

Returning to Barragem de Poilão late afternoon we noted a similar range of species to the morning visit with the addition of at least three Bourne's Herons arriving to roost and, at dusk, two Cape Verde Barn Owls hunting fields above the west end of the reservoir, including one flying high overhead with rodent prey. This subspecies is amazingly dark in appearance (completely different to Barn Owls as we know them in Britain) and was a great way to end a fantastic first day on Santiago.

24 March

Our morning seawatch at Ponta Temerosa kicked off the day in style when a Hudsonian Whimbrel passed close inshore, heading east, at 07:13! Being so close in, views were superb through the telescope and a full suite of features was noted, including the cinnamon underwings, strongly contrasted head pattern and of course completely dark upperparts. As such the three Fea's Petrels heading east were demoted to also-rans and the five Cape Verde Shearwaters seen barely got a look in, despite giving their best views to date.

After breakfast we headed to Ponta das Bicudas, just east of Praia, on a speculative mission to relocate the whimbrel (it was last seen flying towards the cliffs here). Unsurprisingly no sign, but many kilometres of suitable rocky coastline rendered any sort of re-sight a tall order. Our first Santiago Black-crowned Sparrow-lark and double-figures of Red-billed Tropicbirds offshore were some consolation while Dan and Neil recorded a passing Sooty Shearwater.

With that it was back to Barragem de Poilão where it was a similar story to the previous day: the Solitary Sandpiper was still present as were Black Heron, Intermediate Egret and one of the Spotted Sandpipers.



Intermediate Egret, Barragem de Poilão, 24 March



Bourne's Heron, Barragem de Figueira Gorda, 23 March

We decided to head down to the east coast: Pedra Badejo Lagoon was disappointing (just a Turnstone and two Sanderling here) but the coastal lagoon at Achada Fazenda was altogether more productive, even if it seemed that the wintering American Golden Plover had moved on. Here we had Green, two Wood and five Common Sandpipers, Greenshank and several Ringed and Kentish Plovers plus at least 15 Helmeted Guineafowl. A visit to Barragem de Figueira Gorda mid-afternoon revealed at least six occupied Bourne's Heron nests – the creation of waterbodies on the island has evidently been a huge lifeline for this endangered taxon. Singles of Great White and Intermediate Egret were also noted along with the expected species. Back at Barragem de Poilão late afternoon the Black Heron showed very well and the two Cape Verde Barn Owls once again performed well at dusk.



Black Heron, Barragem de Poilão, 24 March

25 March

The previous morning's excitement could not be replicated at Ponta Temerosa where a half-hour seawatch produced singles of Fea's Petrel and Brown Booby plus five Cape Verde Shearwaters. Highlight was a pod (20+) of pilot whales, presumably Short-finned, passing west at fairly close range.

Our plan for today was to explore the north end of the island and so we were soon on the road after an early breakfast. The only notable bird of the drive was a Bourne's Heron flying east over the main road near Sao Domingos. The drive to Tarrafal from Praia is only around 45 miles but the roads are slow and winding, and so it was already past mid-morning by the time we arrived. Tarrafal sewage works is cited as one of the prime locations for birding on the island and just a few days before our visit, a Spanish team had found a Spotted Sandpiper here. Alas there was no sign of the Spotted Sand, nor many other birds for that matter – a Bourne's Heron was the best of a meagre bunch that also included Common Snipe, three Wood and five Common Sandpipers as well as six of both Ruff and Greenshank. I therefore spent some time trying to photograph low-flying Cape Verde Swifts, albeit with mixed success.

Leaving the disappointment of Tarrafal behind, we headed back south. The main road intersects some impressive scenery in the Serra Malagueta National Park and so we decided to make the most of the vista in a vain hope of jamming in on a Cape Verde Peregrine. Unsurprisingly we saw no Peregrines but a distant Cape Verde Buzzard along one of the high ridges east of the road was decent enough and the totally bizarre sight of an Alexander's Kestrel lacking

all its tail feathers and the majority of its primaries (thus looking like a Bateleur-bat cross!) kept us entertained. After that it was time for the obligatory daily visit to Barragem de Poilão. The line-up was as on previous days with the Solitary Sandpiper and Black Heron again the highlights – the only ‘new’ bird for us here was a Great White Egret.

We continued south to Praia Cliffs where at least 10 Red-billed Tropicbirds showed well late afternoon. A male Black-crowned Sparrow-lark also flew by. Trying an alternative tropicbird site for photos proved a success; ‘Praia East Cliffs’ (as we called them) produced several further tropicbirds in better light than at the traditional location with the added bonus of five extremely confiding Cream-coloured Coursers (our first on Santiago), several Bar-tailed Larks and some acrobatic Cape Verde Swifts over the clifftop.



Cream-coloured Courser and Red-billed Tropicbird, Praia, 25 March

We decided to spend the last 45 minutes of light seawatching off Ponta das Bicudas, which proved a good decision: Dan and I enjoyed decent views (for several minutes) of a Boyd’s Shearwater at middle distance as it slowly moved north, keeping very low to the surface and regularly pitching down on the sea. A single Fea’s Petrel flew north at distance and at least 30 Cape Verde Shearwaters included some quite close in. On the land four more Cream-coloured Coursers were thoroughly enjoyed as they fed just a few metres from the car window!

26 March

Today was our final full day on Santiago and, having seen all of the island’s specialities, we opted for a relaxing day around Praia. After our success the previous evening we decided to try an early morning seawatch at Ponta das Biscudas, but it was deathly quiet offshore. Singles of Fea’s Petrel and Cape Verde Shearwater were the only birds of note aside the usual tropicbirds – perhaps this site is best in the evenings.

A leisurely morning drive along the coast road on the south-west side of the island as far as Porto Mosquito didn’t produce much out of the ordinary, but both Bar-tailed and Black-crowned Sparrow-larks were fairly common in the arid areas. More of a surprise was the presence of Grey-headed Kingfisher here, seemingly content to survive in the semi-desert habitat along much of this road. At least ten Red-billed Tropicbirds were feeding off Porto Mosquito, set to the backdrop of the imposing Fogo out to the west.

The heat of the day was spent relaxing at the hotel, catching up with notes and following the progress of the England cricket game, before we headed out to Praia Cliffs late afternoon. Here I was afforded further opportunities to photograph Red-billed Tropicbirds and at least five Cream-coloured Coursers again showed well. The day was ended on a mildly stressful note as we returned the hire car, only to find the office shut and none of the phone numbers given contactable. Thankfully it turned out to be a bad case of ‘Cape Verde timing’ (naming a time and turning up significantly later) as our representative showed up over half an hour after the agreed 17:00 return time.

27 March

An early start was in order for our mid-morning flight to São Nicolau. Once again TACV proved far more efficient than their reputation would suggest and the half-hour flight saw us landing ahead of schedule. Immediate impressions of São Nicolau as we came in to land were that it was much more mountainous and thus quite a bit more spectacular than both previous islands, this confirmed as we took a taxi from the airport to Tarrafal, our base for the coming few days. The journey produced three Neglected Kestrels high above the road as well as several Cape Verde Swifts and the usual Brown-necked Ravens.

Once settled in our accommodation, Residencial Tocely, the owner set about contacting a captain for a potential trip to Raso and Branco. The process was efficient and we soon had our preferred plan in place – overnight on Branco, then stopping on Raso on our way back the following morning. Given the calm day and positive forecast for that following, we organised the trip to leave within a few hours – weather on Cape Verde can be extremely windy and it's important to take advantage of any relatively calm spells if at all possible. After a plate of polvo (octopus; perhaps not the best choice before a potentially hairy sea crossing) in our captain's restaurant we boarded the boat and left Tarrafal behind.

The first 20 minutes of the journey was flat calm and afforded us superb views of Cape Verde Shearwaters as they came right by the boat. After we had left the wake of São Nicolau behind, sea conditions suddenly became much choppier, despite the relatively calm day. The crossing to Branco took a little under two hours, including a short stop in the wake of Raso to change the fuel canisters over. Undoubted highlight of the crossing were four Boyd's Shearwaters including one that flew past fewer than 20 metres from the boat. Cape Verde Shearwaters were ever-present throughout the journey while as we neared Raso, good numbers of both Red-billed Tropicbird and Brown Booby came in to view.

We arrived on Branco a short while after 15:30. After the nightmares of Pássaros, disembarking here proved delightfully easy – a white, sandy beach provides an easy gradient for even the most unstable. Soon our skipper was gone and we were alone on this stunning island. The most surprising here was a Swallow that spent the afternoon hawking up and down the south shore while we also recorded a couple of Neglected Kestrels, at least two Ospreys, Brown-necked Raven, Whimbrel, Turnstone and Little Egret. The water was crystal clear and I couldn't resist taking a swim. However Dan, no doubt haunted by the previous week's burn on Boa Vista, stayed well away and kept his t-shirt firmly on. A leisurely walk east along the shore to the flat area the southeast end of the island produced passing Brown Boobies and no shortage of seabird burrows on the slopes just above. We made camp on a flat, burrow-free area near the south-east shore, ate some food and waited for darkness to fall.



Ilhéu Branco, 27 March

As it transpired, it wasn't even dark before we noticed the first Cape Verde Shearwaters coming ashore. We sat on the slope just above our camp and watched the shapes whistle past us, some just feet away. There was still light in the sky to the west when we heard the first chattering calls of Cape Verde Storm-petrels, with several picked up in the torchlight almost straight away – immediately the pressure was off! Soon after we heard our first Boyd's Shearwaters overhead as the chorus of seabirds around us reached a cacophony – an unforgettable and once-in-a-lifetime experience.



Cape Verde Storm-petrel & Boyd's Shearwater, Branco, 27 March

For the next four hours activity remained high. Somehow we'd managed to time our visit with a late-rising moon, meaning that it was almost pitch black until after 23:00 (when the moon finally began to rise in the east) despite the clear skies. It's difficult to describe the experience sufficiently but the chattering of Cape Verde Storm-petrels was seemingly emanating from everywhere on the slopes and we estimated that hundreds were present. Cape Verde Shearwaters (100s) were also calling everywhere and Boyd's Shearwaters (50+) were more often heard than not. We also enjoyed viewed point-blank views of all three species on the ground and regularly watched each flying through the torchlight; several storm-petrels were sometimes seen in the same view! We checked the White-faced Storm-petrel colony on the beach at the east end on a couple of occasions but both times failed to see any. Overwhelmed by the experience and with the moon rising, we decided to quit while we were ahead and retired to our sleeping bags not long after 23:00.

28 March

I awoke a few times throughout the night and on each occasion seabirds were still vocal. Though Cape Verde Shearwaters seemed to quieten down quite early on, Cape Verde Storm-petrels continued until sometime after 03:30 and the occasional Boyd's Shearwater was heard until at least 05:00. By dawn the peace had returned and the island seemed just as deserted as when we had arrived the previous afternoon.

Shortly before 08:00 our boat arrived to take us across to Raso. The crossing took under 30 minutes on relatively calm seas and we were at the island by 08:30, where we soon located some 20+ Raso Larks. The birds gave great views alongside greater numbers of Iago Sparrows (the only other passerine here). Meanwhile good numbers of Red-billed Tropicbirds and Brown Boobies patrolled the coast.

After a couple of hours at the island we headed back to Tarrafal. By late morning the wind had picked up and the sea state had become quite 'lively' – though all three of us tend to feel fine at sea (and this crossing was no exception), it's easy to imagine some may struggle with seasickness here. Observing seabirds was a challenge due to the bumpiness, but we nevertheless recorded a single Sooty and up to five Boyd's among the numerous Cape Verde Shearwaters. A Portuguese Man-of-War was also quite impressive but clear highlight of the crossing came closer to São Nicolau: two brilliant Fea's Petrels together, that came to check out the boat and passed within a few metres of us! The rest of the

afternoon was spent relaxing at the hotel before enjoying a fantastic plate of fish and a few beers in a restaurant along the seafront in the evening – a fitting end to what had been the best 24 hours of the trip.



Raso Lark, Raso, 28 March

29 March

With all our target birds in the bag we decided to have a restful day around Tarrafal, spending most of it either eating or sleeping. At 15:30 we took a taxi the short distance north to Ponta do Barril for a seawatch. As suspected the light and heat haze was frankly terrible in the afternoon, though the latter improved as evening closed in. Best birds were a single Fea's Petrel and a couple of Boyd's Shearwaters among the hundreds of Cape Verde Shearwaters, though it was the presence of at least one Humpback Whale close inshore off the bay just north of the lighthouse that proved the overall highlight. We saw the animal at least twice in a 15-minute spell around sunset as it spouted on several occasions and fluked a couple of times. On the land a couple of Bar-tailed Larks were the only sightings of note.

30 March

We returned to Ponta do Barril at 09:00 (two hours later than we really should have done) and enjoyed a productive hour of seawatching before the heat haze became too strong. In that time we logged at least 15 Fea's Petrels, three Sooty Shearwaters and a dark-morph Arctic Skua among hundreds of Cape Verde Shearwaters and several tens of Brown Boobies. The rest of the day was spent relaxing around Tarrafal where best birds were Swallow, Cape Verde Swift and Osprey.

31 March

A morning taxi ride back across São Nicolau to the airport produced several Neglected Kestrels, but little else. Unfortunately our flight to Sal was delayed by over an hour, cutting the time we could spend looking for the male Sudan Golden Sparrow photographed at Santa Maria back on 23 March. Nevertheless we found the area with ease and were able to spend almost two hours scrutinising the large mixed flock of Iago and Spanish Sparrows present.

Given that there had been no sign of it on 24th and the flock was showing very well throughout our visit, we suspect the bird had unfortunately moved on. Some consolation was provided by our first Quail of the trip – a bird singing from cultivated fields – as well as single Sand and several House Martins, Swallow and a typical selection of common migrant waders. Arguably the best bird, though, was a Common Redstart glimpsed on a couple of occasions by Dan.

Our mid-afternoon flight to Boa Vista was short and we were back in Sal Rei by late afternoon. The rest of the day was spent swimming in the sea (Osprey overhead the best bird) followed by a delicious plate of swordfish in one of the local restaurants.

1 April

The final morning was once again spent relaxing (though a report of a Black-headed Heron at Curral Velho on 2 April suggested we perhaps should have made more of an effort to go birding!) before our afternoon flight back to London. Very much in the fashion of how it started, our trip ended with friendly groups of Iago Sparrows in the airport terminal. And with that it was time to leave Cape Verde – a fantastic (and unusually chilled out) fortnight came to a close.

SELECTED SPECIES NOTES

Endemics

Cape Verde Storm-petrel the distinct chattering call of this endemic storm-petrel seemingly emanated from just about everywhere after darkness fell on Branco on 27 March. We estimated that hundreds must have been present, with birds flying through the torchlight almost constantly until 23:30 – they responded extremely well when sound recordings were played and would fly around us, just inches away. Several were also examined and photographed at rest on the ground.

Cape Verde Shearwater on Santiago this species was seen in small numbers off both Ponta Temerosa (14.9003, -23.5092) and Ponta das Bicudas (14.9089, -23.4797), the latter site offering slightly better views. Good numbers were seen off Punta do Barril, São Nicolau, when seawatching there on 29 and 30 March. Seawatching is conducted looking west from the lighthouse (16.6051, -24.4184) and therefore mornings are by far the best in terms of light conditions. Large numbers came ashore on Branco overnight on 27/28 March and several tens were observed at close range on the crossing to and from there.

Boyd's Shearwater on Santiago one was seen off Ponta das Bicudas on the evening of 25 March. Several tens of birds were seen and heard on Branco overnight on 27/28 March with at least five seen on the ground. At least four were seen from the crossing to Branco, with a similar number on the return journey. Two were seen past Punta do Barril, São Nicolau, on 29 March.

Bourne's Heron evidently benefiting from the creation of at least three reservoirs on Santiago, this distinct taxon is now very easy to see. It is best seen at Barragem de Poilão either at dawn or dusk, as birds seem to roost here. Much more reliable, however, is a colony in trees on the east side of Barragem de Figueira Gorda (15.1329, -23.5934) – no fewer than six occupied nests were counted on 24 March. Other records involved an adult flying over the main road at Sao Domingos and a juvenile at Tarrafal sewage works, both on 25 March.

Cape Verde Buzzard we encountered this taxon at two traditional sites on Santiago. One was seen drifting high along the ridge south of Pico da Antónia on 23 March; this area can be viewed from the miradouro above São Jorge dos Orgãos (15.0505, -23.6100), which offers a fine vista. Another was noted in Serra Malagueta National Park on 25 March, seen distantly over the ridge east of the road viewed from 15.1903, -23.6909.

Alexander's Kestrel common and conspicuous on Boa Vista and Santiago throughout our visit, and also noted during our short stop on Sal on 31 March.

Neglected Kestrel seemingly fairly common on São Nicolau with several seen between on the journey between the airport and Tarrafal (and again on the return leg). A couple were also seen on Branco on 27-28 March.

Raso Lark surprisingly challenging to find but up to 20 (including a flock of 12) were eventually seen on 28 March, including at least three colour-ringed individuals. Our experience was shared by a Spanish team two days previous, who took over two hours to locate the species, and by an Austrian team which dipped the species altogether! Our suspicion is that the population must be quite low at present.

Cape Verde Warbler seemingly quite common in suitable habitat in interior Santiago e.g. many seen and heard in the cane stands along the river valley between the junction in Sacramento (15.0676, -23.5808) and Barragem de Poilão. Also common at the reservoir itself, the species tends to be quite elusive and is best located by its rich, distinct song.

Lago Sparrow very common and widespread across all islands.

Other notable species

White-faced Storm-petrel several were seen as they returned to their colony on Ilhéu dos Pássaros (16.1961, -22.6988) overnight on 19/20 March. Initially the waxing gibbous moon was very bright and storm-petrel activity remained low, despite the first individuals ghosting over less than an hour after darkness fell. By 03:00 the moon had become obscured by heavy cloud and activity was much higher, with several individuals seen flying around at once and multiple birds observed at point-blank range on the ground. We failed to encounter this species on Branco.

Magnificent Frigatebird a female, one of probably just two left in the Western Palearctic (as of March 2016), was seen at Curral Velho, Boa Vista, late morning on 19 March. Flying in from a westerly direction, the bird continued out overhead and to the islet, where it proceeded to land out of view. Details on how to see the last remaining frigatebirds can be found [here](#).

Red-billed Tropicbird small numbers were seen at Curral Velho, Boa Vista on 19 March. For views and photography, it is hard to surpass the Praia area of Santiago: at least 10 were noted at the traditional location at Praia Cliffs (14.91101, -23.4870; access south through the industrial estate) on 25-26 March. Smaller numbers of tropicbirds seemed to be nesting on the cliffs east of here, viewed from 14.9231, -23.4797. The light conditions were far superior here in the evening, making them better positioned for photography.

Black Heron the long-staying resident bird was noted at Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, on every visit from 23-25 March. It seemed to consistently favour a stretch of the south bank at 15.0735, -23.5555 for fishing, but was often roosting on the slopes on the north side of the reservoir.

Intermediate Egret one was seen at the inflow end of Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, daily from 23-25 March, often feeding in dense vegetation and thus quite elusive at times. Two were noted at Barragem de Figueira Gorda on 23 March with one still there the following day (up to three had been seen by others earlier in the month).

Helmeted Guineafowl seemingly quite common across several of the islands, this introduced species was seen in greatest numbers on Boa Vista where just about every significant area of scrub seemed to harbour sizeable flocks. The track from Fundo de Figueira to Gata proved most productive, though birds were also seen just south of Rabil (16.1185, -22.8890) and around the island's dump. Two were at Barragem de Faveta, Santiago, on 23 March with several small groups also seen along the track between here and Barragem de Figueira Gorda. At least 15 were by the coastal lagoon at Achada Fazenda (15.1275, -23.5212) on 24 March.

IMAGE GALLERY

For a full gallery of images taken by Josh on the March 2016 trip, see [this album on Flickr](#). Alternatively, several image-loaded posts will be published on [Josh's blog](#) in due course.

TRIP LIST

- Fea's Petrel
- Cape Verde Shearwater
- Sooty Shearwater
- Boyd's Shearwater
- Cape Verde Storm-petrel
- White-faced Storm-petrel
- Red-billed Tropicbird
- Brown Booby
- Magnificent Frigatebird
- Grey Heron
- Bourne's Heron
- Great White Egret
- Intermediate Egret
- Little Egret
- Western Reef Heron
- Black Heron
- Squacco Heron
- Cattle Egret
- Black-crowned Night Heron
- Glossy Ibis
- Spoonbill
- Eurasian Teal
- Osprey
- Black Kite
- Cape Verde Buzzard
- Eurasian Kestrel
- Quail
- Helmeted Guineafowl
- Moorhen
- Black-winged Stilt
- Cream-coloured Courser
- Grey Plover
- Ringed Plover
- Little Ringed Plover
- Kentish Plover
- Common Snipe
- Whimbrel
- Hudsonian Whimbrel
- Redshank
- Greenshank
- Green Sandpiper
- Solitary Sandpiper
- Wood Sandpiper
- Common Sandpiper
- Spotted Sandpiper
- Turnstone
- Sanderling
- Little Stint
- Curlew Sandpiper
- Dunlin
- Ruff
- Arctic Skua
- Pomarine Skua
- Gull-billed Tern
- Caspian Tern
- Feral Pigeon
- Collared Dove
- Cape Verde Barn Owl
- Cape Verde Swift
- Grey-headed Kingfisher
- Black-crowned Sparrow-lark
- Bar-tailed Lark
- Greater Hoopoe-lark
- Raso Lark
- Sand Martin
- Barn Swallow
- House Martin
- Cape Verde Warbler
- Blackcap
- Spectacled Warbler
- Common Redstart
- Brown-necked Raven
- Common Waxbill
- Spanish Sparrow
- Iago Sparrow

Total: 75 species