

WildWings West African Pelagic and Madeira Extension 2011

Voyage Report by John Brodie-Good (with assistance from Simon Cook and Angus Wilson)

A pioneering group of WildWings clients, along with leader Simon Cook, sailed on this inaugural voyage on the expedition ship *Plancius* from Praia, Cape Verde Islands to Madeira. We spent two days sailing along the continental shelf off Mauritania and Western Sahara before heading back west through the Canaries and then via the Salvage and Desertas Islands before disembarking in Funchal. Our main targets were the special seabirds of Macronesia, any and all cetaceans plus we hoped to encounter the northward migration of Arctic breeding seabirds off the west coast of Africa. Between us we saw most of our hoped for seabirds plus at least 13 species of cetacean. Surprisingly not a single beaked whale was seen but this was a reflection of the sea conditions throughout.

2nd May

Nine of us flew out from Heathrow to Lisbon on a sunny spring morning, with a few hours to kill at Lisbon Airport. Three other clients joining us we took off again at 1700 for the four hour flight out into the Atlantic touching down at Praia, Cape Verdes at 1900, as night took over from day. After a rather laborious hour or so processing our visas on arrival, we piled into the minibus for the short drive to our guesthouse in town. Our hosts cooked us the local speciality of Cachupa, a stew, whilst we sat and chatted on the rooftop terrace.

3rd May

Praia, Cape Verde and at sea.

Dawn broke at about 0600 and flock after flock of Spanish Sparrows flew low over the houses heading west and north, it seemed they were coming from their roost in some trees on the eastern end of town along the road behind us. A few endemic Cape Verde Swifts flew past on several occasions. A Grey-headed Kingfisher flying along the road behind the guesthouse seemed somewhat surprising but as the morning progressed it seemed to be a very common bird everywhere. The ship finally appeared in the harbour below us and I spoke to Simon on Graham Ekin's mobile. It seemed they were going to be delayed for another hour so we loaded up the minibus with our local guide and headed into the interior to the Botanical Gardens. The island has had a lot of investment and the roads were new and excellent. The interior valleys were intensively farmed with jagged dry peaks all around. We pulled up under the shade of some trees and immediately saw our two other endemic targets, the Cape Verde Cane Warbler and the rather smart Iago Sparrow. A few Blackcaps and Spectacled Warblers were also noted, along with more kingfishers. As time was short we drove the short distance to the island's only fresh water 'lake' a reservoir. We walked down to the dam end first and scanned. A roost of Grey Herons and Spoonbills could be seen on a cliff face, a few Greenshanks walked the shallows and a pair of Black-winged Stilts. More of the 'darkish' local race of Kestrel could be seen hunting (Alexander's). We drove to the other end and walked down

towards the water's edge. The previously reported Western Palearctic mega, a Black Heron was hunting using its 'umbrella' technique in the shallows, a very nice bonus. Cattle Egrets, a Little Egret and at least one Intermediate Egret were also noted. A few waxbills (introduced) plus more Spectacled Warblers and kingfishers. We drove back into town and dropped most of the group at the ship whilst Angus Angus, Brian and I went to collect the main luggage from the guesthouse. We enjoyed a buffet lunch and at 1400 we cast off and headed slowly west along the south of the island. People spread themselves out all over the many outdoor watching locations, our adventure had really begun. I headed out to the bows and began scanning. The first Cape Verde Shearwaters and Boyd's Shearwaters appeared, along with Cory's. I glanced back at the ship and noticed a tropicbird coming in high behind us. I shouted up to Simon on the bridge wing who alerted others. As it got closer I started to take a few shots. As I was shooting I realised it was not the expected Red-billed but a White-tailed which from the literature onboard may have been only the second record for the WP! Angus Angus (Angus Wilson) noticed a big seabird feeding frenzy to the south of us and I went up to the bridge and asked if we could go and have a look. We altered course and speeded up slightly as an announcement was made. The Captain and bridge officers seemed to really understand what this voyage was about and often-deviated course when asked, a great help in our overall views and sightings throughout the voyage and very much appreciated. The bows soon filled up as we closed in. Cory's, Cape Verde and a few more Boyd's were in the melee, plus a single Sooty Shearwater, and lots of Arctic Terns, on passage to their northern breeding grounds including presumably the British Isles. Oddly no dolphins though. At 1700 we had the mandatory lifeboat drill and just as it was finishing small groups of dolphins could be seen streaking in towards the bows. We enjoyed great views of them, Pantropical Spotted. A number of passengers, including Graham Ekins from our group were particularly fast on their camera shutters and pretty much nailed all the cetaceans we encountered. This enabled us to positively identify nearly all we saw, digital photography yet again proving a most useful tool for the ocean-going naturalist. As the afternoon turned into evening and the sun started to drop our first, and probably best Fea's Petrel came across the bows and down the starboard side. Not a bad start at all!

1600 14 54 N 023 40 W

May 4th

Raso and Branco Islands, Cape Verde and at sea.

The day broke as we arrived at Raso Island and in the lee of the southwest side the Zodiacs were launched for a short cruise close inshore. Brown Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds were present (a pre-dawn stream of Cape Verde Shearwaters had long ceased). No one on the ship had been here before. In addition to its fame for breeding seabirds it has an endemic lark. Ringed by cliffs we thought the chances of seeing it rather small but incredibly we did, some of Simon's Zodiac passengers even getting decent record shots. Many of us ended up with poor, silhouette views only sadly but lessons were learnt for future voyages. Lots of Iago Sparrows could be seen too. A few Ospreys were present, one seen bringing in a big fish and consuming it on the rocks. A dark and light Western Reef Egret flew in. All too soon back to the ship for breakfast as we slowly headed north to nearby Branco, another seabird nesting site. On a clear sunny

morning however not much sign of life and coupled with the ship's depth gauges showing much less water below us than the charts, we slowly cruised back down to Raso. As we turned east a cow/calf pair of Humpbacks were called. The calf breached several times, whilst it's mother lay on her side flipper waving. As we got closer it was apparent that mum wasn't interested in a close encounter with us so we soon turned and left them in peace. Our first Bulwer's Petrels were seen and then finally mid-afternoon our first storm-petrels, Madeiran (over a sea mount not shown on the charts). A few more Fea's Petrels, Boyd's and Cape Verde Shears were noted too. Ocean Sunfish, the odd shark and the first of many Portuguese Man-o-War floated past as well. We had already set course for the coast of Mauritania, over 500 miles away.

0700 16 36 N 24 35 W
1600 16 54 N 23 33 W

5th May

At sea towards Africa (Cape Verde Plateau).

Today was slow on the seabird front as we sailed east of north, a single Boyd's Shearwater, two Leach's and a few Madeiran Stormies, singles of Red-billed Tropicbird, Arctic and Pomarine Skua, a handful of Arctic Terns and our first Grey Phalaropes, still in winter plumage. Today's highlights were all mammalian with four Orcas stealing the show, initially showing no interest in the ship they suddenly turned back and came in very close to the stern and subsequently both sides of the ship giving great views. A male, two females and a calf, all well photographed. Later in the morning a small pod of Rissos' Dolphins were seen and in the afternoon a group of about 20 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins came into the bows, a new species for many onboard. Two Hawksbill Turtles were seen on the surface along with at least one shark, smaller flying fish than we had seen around Cape Verde and a few more Portuguese Man-O-Wars, looking like transparent, pink edged Cornish pasties floating on the ocean's surface.

0800 17 38 N 20 46 W
1600 18 05 N 19 32 W

May 6th

North along the coast of Mauritania.

Another sunny morning, with a still stiff northeast trade wind blowing, we turned north between the 200 and 1000m contour line for our two days of sailing along the continental shelf. We had hoped to find Arctic breeding seabirds returning north from their southern African and southern ocean wintering grounds. We hit the jackpot straight away and for nearly two hours enjoyed a spectacle similar to ones often encountered on the southern ocean. The ship was surrounded by a stream of birds heading north. Gannets circled us, mainly birds from last year, small groups of Arctic Terns, Pomarine Skuas (many with full spoons and the occasional dark phase bird), Long-tailed Skuas (mainly adults), Great Skuas in lower numbers, a few Lesser Crested and many more Royal Terns and best of all, hundreds of exquisite Sabine's Gulls, mostly adults in full summer plumage. In our wake hundreds of storm-petrels, mainly Wilson's but also some Europeans. A few Cape Verde Shearwaters amongst the now commoner Cory's all added to the spectacle.

Cameras clicked, big smiles all around. Our group totals include the far fewer birds seen for the rest of the day as we moved closer to the 200m contour:

Cape Verde Shearwater 7
Cory's Shearwater 60
Sooty Shearwater 5 (in very heavy wing moult)
European Storm-Petrel 75
Wilson's Storm Petrel 500+
Cormorant sp 1 (small and brownish?)
Grey Phalarope 35
Pomarine Skua c150
Long-tailed Skua c150
Great Skua c35
Sabine's Gull c700
Royal Tern 60
Lesser Crested Tern 3
Sandwich Tern 1
Common Tern 10
Arctic Tern c600
Black Tern 1
Gannet c90

With so few Sabine's Gulls actually breeding in the European Arctic presumably most of these birds would turn northwest at some point and head up to Canada through the central north Atlantic. They are rarely recorded around British coasts in spring, nor the east coast of the U.S.

Cetacean highlights today included a Sperm Whale which quickly sounded, throwing its flukes particularly high as it went down. Our first small pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales were also noted, and a blowing rorqual sp. In the afternoon we enjoyed excellent views of both about 40 Short-beaked Common Dolphin and a herd of about 200 Long-beaked Common Dolphins. Digital photography again proving it's worth in both groups I.D. We were also now seeing a lot of other ships including Russian and other trawlers with nets in the sea. Far too many of the Gannets had pieces of fishing line and net hanging out of their bills sadly.

0800 19 43 N 17 25 W
1600 20 59 N 17 39 W

May 7th

At sea heading off Western Sahara.

A much quieter day today, we didn't find the great northward stream of yesterday morning sadly. We were out over the 1000m contour for most of the day. Cory's Shearwater continued all day including a few feeding flocks but the much desired White-faced Storm-Petrel were seen throughout too, the day's log tallying 23. Only a few Wilson's today, a single Manx Shearwater, 43 Grey Phalaropes (mostly still in winter

plumage), the occasional Arctic Tern and just over 10 Gannets. Cetaceans kicked off with another small group of Short-finned Pilot Whales, at least one Bryde's Whale giving reasonable views from the top deck, its three head ridges clearly photographed by Graham Muir. The Captain yet again turned the ship to enable us to get better views. A handful of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins were eclipsed later in the day by a group of 25 or so Striped Dolphins with an animal looking more like a Fraser's Dolphin seen by Simon.

0800 23 26 N 17 08 W
1600 24 44 N 16 35 W

May 8th

Transiting the Canary Islands

We had come away from the African coast and in the morning the islands of La Gomera and Hierro could be seen in the distance. We would sail slowly through the deep water channel between the islands looking for cetaceans in particular. This was an itinerary amendment suggested by Tom Brereton, taken up by our always helpful Captain. A pair of Plain Swifts heading north, low over the ocean was an early morning surprise. A few migrating Swallows were also noted. Cory's were the predominant tubenose with a steady trickle of Bulwer's Petrels throughout the day (approx 30) whilst White-faced Stormies totalled close to 15 by dusk. Later in the day we sailed east between Tenerife and Las Palmas, the volcano of Teide visible on several occasions. The last hour of daylight produced our first Barolo's Shearwater, the bird being seen by the 'late watchers' only. A third Plain Swift was also seen, catching us up then overtaking us. A flock of 30 or so Whimbrel were also seen flying past earlier in the day. Marine mammal sightings could have been better but the trade winds continued making the sea far from calm sadly. Two Sperm Whales were seen however, a group of approx 15 Short-finned Pilot Whale gave great views as we went off course to enjoy them, a tiny calf being noted several times. A few groups of dolphins were seen, one party being Rough-toothed ID'ed from photos taken.

0800 27 20 N 17 14 W
1600 28 24 N 17 31 W

May 9th

Salvage Islands and at sea towards the Desertas.

Pre-dawn light revealed a fair ocean swell as we arrived at the small southern island, thwarting our planned Zodiac cruise. Breakers could be seen over the various lethal reefs. A Little Egret could be seen flying around us, at one point almost landing on the sea by two dolphins. The first of many Cory's Shearwaters could be seen milling around. We sailed north towards Isla Grande, eating breakfast on the way. The trade winds were still generating swells and we cruised slowly by, a somewhat pale-looking Collared Dove trying to land briefly on the railing before flying back over to the island. Hundreds if not thousands of Cory's milled about offshore. A few Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls hung around our stern as some of the Philippino crew tried a quick bout of fishing. We couldn't stay here all day as we wanted to be at the Desertas before dawn on our last day so the decision was taken to sail away north and hopefully encounter more seabirds along

the way. *Plancius* starting pitching gently as the swells rolled across us in the bright blue sky. Two different House Martins heading north were unexpected. Otherwise Cory's and a steady trickle of Bulwer's and White-faced Storm-Petrels all day.

0800 30 04 N 15 57 W
1600 31 03 N 16 05W

May 10th

Desertas Islands and Madeira.

Dawn found us holding off the islands and the PA announced a Zodiac cruise for those that wished. Most of us went, with a chance of Mediterranean Monk Seal on the small beaches or wave cut platforms but no joy. We later learnt they occasionally are seen in Funchal harbour. We were somewhat gripped by the few back on ship however, who saw a few Desertas Petrels, Manx and Barolo's Shearwaters. Another lesson for future voyages! We had to set sail for Funchal and the voyage's conclusion. As we crossed the 20 miles or so of sea another Desertas Petrel, Barolo's Shearwater and several Bulwer's Petrel were seen. As we finally maneuvered into the dockside, a Roseate Tern was noticed amongst the Commons fishing in the harbour. Simon managed a Plain Swift from the upper deck for his 'birds seen from ships' list. Farewells were said and soon we were on our way to our very comfortable hotel for check-in and lunch.

0800 32 29 N 16 30 W

After lunch we headed west with our local bird guide, Hugo. We visited a native Laurel forest in a high-sided valley and got good views of the endemic Madeiran Firecrest and reasonable views of a number of Trocaz Pigeons in flight. A migrant Whimbrel fed in a nearby farm's paddock. We returned to the hotel via a tiny pond on the south coast, a major local vagrant spot with only a few Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls and Coots (an apparent local rarity) for dinner. At 2100 the 'brave' headed off with Hugo again to try and see one of the rarest seabirds in the world, Zino's Petrel. On the way we stopped at the Marina in Funchal to look for another WP mega, a Yellow-crowned Night Heron which Angus Wilson quickly spotted sitting on a boat called *Cash A Lot*, which Hugo told us was one of the vessels Hadoram Shirihai had used for some of his early Zino's expeditions! We got back in the vehicles as darkness fell and headed on up. We arrived at the car park by the radar dome, under a partial starry sky with an almost half moon overhead. We walked the path by torchlight to the wooden fence, the entrance to their breeding colony. We then sat down on the cobbled path and waited nearly an hour for the wardens to finish their nightly rounds. We could hear the distant calls of the birds as we waited. We began to get fairly cold quickly and Hugo produced a welcome flask of tea. My vertigo got the better of me and when it was time to go in, I just could not do it and so sat and waited as most of the party went on through the fence and down. Angus Wilson takes over the story.....

'As the sun set below the western horizon we departed from the hotel, heading inland to the fabled *Pico do Arieiro*, which at 5,965 feet (1,818 m) is the third highest spot on Madeira. This is the only known breeding site for Zino's Petrel ('Freira'), and was

imperiled by an extensive brush fire in the summer of 2010, but happily we had learned in April that the petrels had returned and our hopes were high. Under the twinkling stars and ably guided by Hugo, we worked our way along a narrow path that snakes across the jagged crest of the mountain top. A chilly wind whistled up from the inky black abyss below and we were keenly aware of the huge drops on either side of the crumbling walkway. With sufficient light from the half moon, most of us kept our torches off and let our eyes adapt to the darkness over a prolonged period so as to increase our chances of glimpsing the petrels. About half way along the ridge we heard the first Zino's calls, a mournful wail, oddly reminiscent of Tawny Owl. The locals once believed these sounds were the torment souls of nuns ('Freira') driven into the high valleys by seafaring marauders. As we pressed ahead, the calling became louder and more frequent. Eventually we reached an especially narrow arete with steep walls plunging thousands of feet on either side. Now Zino's Petrels were calling every few seconds, sometimes only a few yards away. Ghostly shapes flashed before us, silhouetted against the moonlight canyon walls, and occasionally we could make out a flash of white, presumably the pale breast or belly of a bird as it turned. Oh, for a pair of night visions goggles! It seemed that several Zino's Petrels were displaying right in front of us, sometimes cavorting together on the wing or landing on narrow ledges, presumably close to nesting burrows. We speculated on whether the birds could see each other in the darkness and from their antics guessed they could see quite well, not bad for a bird also endures the daytime glare of the open ocean. Every few minutes a Manx Shearwater, which also breed in the area, would chime in from further below. Sated and chilled by the wind, we began the march back to the road head. With the adrenaline ebbing, the rugged contours of the return journey seemed decidedly steeper than before but after much huffing and puffing we were back at the vans. This was a remarkable and moving experience: David Attenborough-esque adventure in a dramatic setting straight from the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*. Quite unforgettable.'

We returned to the hotel at 0130 and hit the bliss of our beds, another great day.

May 11th
Madeira

The lush hotel gardens held a few birds, Blackbirds, Canaries and a few Blackcap including at least one bird of the 'melanistic' form. After a huge breakfast buffet we headed out with Hugo again in the vans. We started up at the Radar dome again and this time the setting of the previous night's adventure could really be appreciated in daylight. I realized I wouldn't have even left the car park if I'd known the sheer drops along the path we had walked along! A pair of Madeiran Berthelot's Pipits were seen, along with various endemic plants, the local lizards and some butterflies. We left this daytime tourist pit and headed on down and to the north coast, driving through Madeira's quite stunning scenery. We stopped for lunch at a hotel perched high overlooking the ocean. Onwards to another small area of Laurel forest right by the ocean. The local frog, a Grey Wagtail and lots of distant Cory's Shearwaters off shore. We drove back inland to a bigger valley, again with Laurel forest and had a few very brief views of more pigeons. Finally we headed to a marina in the far south east and donned our waterproofs. Our last time out on the water courtesy of a 400HP RIB. Hugo went into Captain mode and soon we were out

on the waters of the bay, looking for seabirds again. Sadly none of our main targets were seen but we enjoyed the few hours with a close encounters with small groups of Cory's, at one point with a group of feeding common dolphins sp. And then it was all over. As we returned to the little harbour, Gill greeted us having seen one of nesting Rock Sparrows in the cliffs above whilst we were out.

NB: We are in discussion with the ship's operator to run a second such voyage in 2013, but with an amended itinerary. Please check our website from time to time for details when finalized if you are interested in joining us or send us your e-mail address for full details when finalised.

Species Lists

Birds

(CV – Praia)

(M – Madeira extension)

Fea's Petrel

Desertas Petrel

Zino's Petrel M

Bulwer's Petrel

Cape Verde Shearwater

Cory's Shearwater

Sooty Shearwater

Manx Shearwater

Boyd's Shearwater

Barolo's Shearwater

White-faced Storm-Petrel

European Storm-Petrel

Leach's Storm-Petrel

Madeiran Storm-Petrel

Wilson's Storm-Petrel

White-tailed Tropicbird (2nd for WP?)

Red-billed Tropicbird

Brown Booby

Gannet

Cattle Egret CV

Little Egret CV & M

Western Reef Egret

Grey Heron CV

Intermediate Egret CV

Black Heron CV

Yellow-crowned Night Heron M

Spoonbill CV

Sparrowhawk M

Buzzard M
(Alexander's) Kestrel CV
Kestrel M
Osprey
Cormorant sp
Moorhen CV
Coot M
Grey Phalarope
Black-winged Stilt CV
Greenshank CV
Whimbrel
Turnstone M
Arctic Skua
Long-tailed Skua
Pomarine Skua
Great Skua
Sabine's Gull
(Atlantic) Yellow-legged Gull
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Sandwich Tern
Roseate Tern M
Royal Tern
Lesser-crested Tern
Black Tern
Trocaz Pigeon M
Collared Dove
Cape Verde Swift CV
Plain Swift
Grey-headed Kingfisher CV
Raso Lark
House Martin
Swallow
Madeiran Bertholot's Pipit M
Grey Wagtail M
Robin M
Blackbird M
Cape Verde Warbler CV
Spectacled Warbler CV
Blackcap CV & M
(Melanistic) Blackcap M
Madeiran Firecrest M
Spanish Sparrow CV
Iago Sparrow
Rock Sparrow M
Common Waxbill (introduced) CV

(Madeiran) Chaffinch M
Canary M
Greenfinch M

Cetaceans

Humpback
Sperm Whale
Bryde's Whale
Killer Whale/Orca
Short-finned Pilot Whale
Risso's Dolphin
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin
Pantropical Spotted Dolphin
Long-beaked Common Dolphin
Short-beaked Common Dolphin
Striped Dolphin
Bottlenose Dolphin
Rough-toothed Dolphin
Rorqual sp

Hawksbill Turtle

Hammerhead Shark sp
Mako Shark sp
Flying Fish sp
Ocean Sunfish
Portuguese Man-of-War

Butterflies on Madeira included Clouded Yellow, Madeiran Brimstone, Monarch, Canary Red Admiral and Painted Lady.

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