

# Madeira 8<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> December 2008

## by Howard Vaughan

Madeira is rightly famous for its summer seabirds and is almost certainly underwatched in the winter months. However as a winter week in the sun some where completely different it lived up to all our hopes.

We flew in on time (about 2.75hrs) and got our first view of this amazing lump of volcanic rock jutting up impressively from the middle of the Atlantic. For those of a nervous disposition it is probably best not to tell them about the banking manoeuvre the plane has to make to turn into the approach for the newly extended, award winning, elevated runway over the sea .....!

We were efficiently transferred to our hotel on the north west side of the bowl that makes up Funchal. The Residencial Vila Camacho Hotel was to our liking and we were well looked after during our stay. The rooms were clean and bed comfy. What more do you need really? Downstairs was the Flame Tree restaurant and we ate there most evenings as the cuisine was excellent and well priced. The hotel offered a Free Lady Day every other evening which is not quite what you think guys! It was however a most excellent BOGOFF deal!



Haven chosen not to hire a car when booked onto three coach outings during our stay. These were booked through the hotel but there are many more kiosks down on the harbour front in Funchal and slightly more site specific or walking tours are available.



Funchal: Not a bad view for a footie stadium!

However as new comers we opted for the Eastern and Western Day Tours and a half day up to the gardens at Monte and the stunning Nun's Valley. Excellent, full three course meals were included in the first two and all three excursions cost us about £160 for the two of us.

The itinerary for both the long days took in many of the key birding sites and would give me some opportunity to collect the Madeiran specials!

Anyway, some birding basics around Funchal:

Canaries are very common and can be found almost anywhere. Any holding pool off of the Levada that runs across the higher areas of the north west side of town will attract these plus Madeiran Grey Wagtails and Blackbirds. The local form of Blackcap is almost as common as Canary and includes one or two of the completely black headed variants. They also spend much of their time making the squelchy contact call that younger birds make in the late summer rather than the tacking.



Plain Swifts careen about town and despite what I read about there being only a small resident population (most go to Africa). I saw 100's here and at Ribeira Brava another coastal town to the west and smaller numbers in many of the coastal valleys across the island.



Trying to get Trocaz Pigeon without going for a good walk in the Laurisilva forests or at least a high viewpoint on a clear day is asking for trouble and I had to be content with one perched and one flying from the coach. Apparently they are a crop pest in the farmland below the forest in some areas in the mid-north area around Boaventura and Sao Vicente.



Pigeon Country

However the coach did stop at Riberio de Frio where I was the only 'idiot' to go for a walk along the Levada in the teeming rain and mist but my fifteen minutes got me three striking Madeiran Chaffinches and at least six stunning Madeiran Firecrests.



For some reason they reminded me more of Kinglets, appearing slightly bigger than our crests and with a bigger bill and more pushy character. They called frequently and are quite unlike our crests and the Madeiran name of Bisbis is a good way to remember the call. I saw them even better in the gardens at Monte where they seem to favour the very low growing privet hedges. More Chaffinches here as well.



Madeiran Buzzards and dapper Kestrels are common but I only saw one Sparrowhawk. Up at Porto Moniz you get to look out over the raging Atlantic from above the volcanic swimming pools and although I saw nothing out there it is apparently the best land based seawatching site on the island. Miles of new tunnels have opened the north half of the island up in the last few years so access from Funchal by hire car is now easy if so desired.



The other main quarry was Bethelot's Pipit and the coach duly went to the windswept far eastern end of the island to Ponta de Sao Lourenco. A popular tourist stop to watch the sea and a unique place to be able to see up both sides of the island; the south in sun, the north in rolling cloud. The Pipit's were duly bagged, by Andrea in the car park and showed down to a few feet. Funny proportions compared to anything I have seen before. A huge female Peregrine flew over.





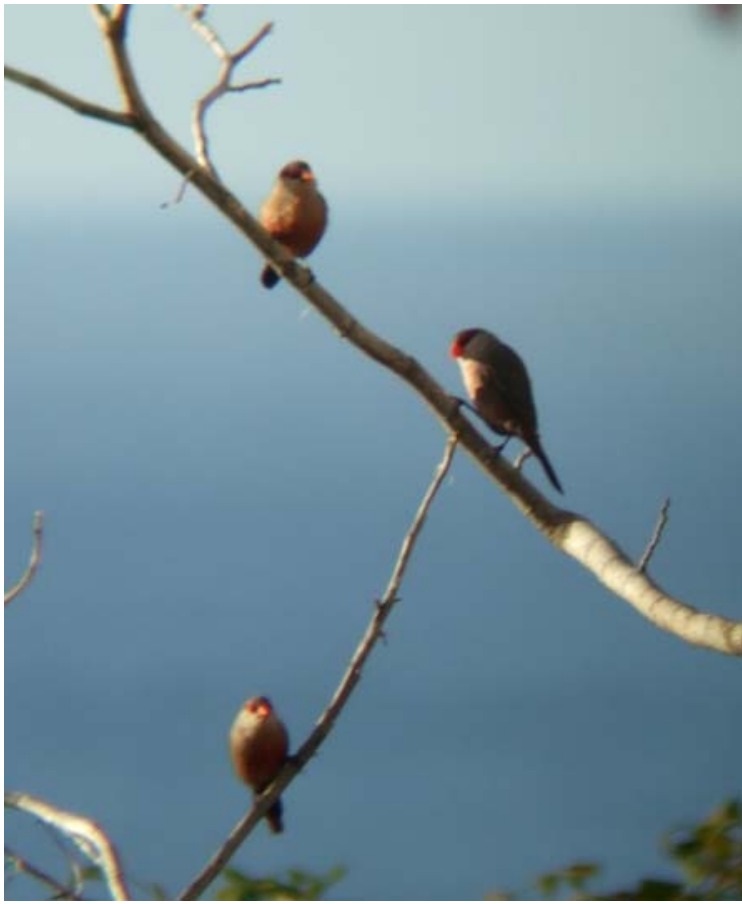
So all in all an excellent week in the winter sun with simply amazing plants, wonderful flowers, birds, scenery, butterflies, lizards and fruit and great Portuguese hospitality An ideal break away from the madness of home and work and I even managed to see all the key resident endemics and nearly every local subspecies. Certainly worthy of another visit to look for the seabirds and perhaps I will have the nerve to drive a car on the hairy little mountain roads, in and out of the tourist coaches!





And a parting gift I got one more tick, albeit an introduced species with a flock of over 20 Waxbills beeping away as they fed like a massive flock of grey and red Penduline Tits in the stands of elephant grass alongside the Levada des Piomais below our hotel. Wonderful!





During our week I managed a huge list of 32 species

Atlantis Yellow-legged Gull	Muscovy Duck (most Valleys held them)
Black-headed Gull	Mute Swan
Mediterranean Gull	Grey Wagtail
Gannet	White Wagtail
Greenshank	Black Redstart
Turnstone	Blackbird
Trocaz Pigeon	Madeiran Firecrest
Rock Dove	Canary
Cattle Egret	Linnet
Little Egret	Waxbill
Kestrel	Goldfinch
Sparrowhawk	Greenfinch
Buzzard	Bethelot's Pipit
Peregrine	Starling
Plain Swift	Robin
Coot	Blackcap

Red = island subspecies

Blue = new to me