

MYTHICAL SEABIRDS OF SELVAGENS, DESERTAS, AND MADEIRA

Celtic Bird Tours, 1-11 July 2008

Leader Bob Flood

July 1 At last the day had arrived for the Celtic Bird Tour venture to Selvagens, Desertas and Madeira. Awaiting us was the promise of just about every mythical seabird of the northeast Atlantic, those that we dream about on our pelagic trips in British coastal waters. By 6.00 am myself and John Boulcott, Peter Lewis, Granville Potter, Wayne Strong and Roger Whittlesey had gathered by the Easy-Jet check-in counter with bags up to and just over 20 kgs, the said maximum weight of the airline. Luckily, nobody was pulled up for overweight baggage and so we progressed on through Passport Control and then on for breakfast. The service was diabolical barely delivering food in time for us to eat it and then catch the flight. Service in flight, however, was much better.

As we approached Madeira we passed over Porto Santo and could see the Desertas Islands to the south of Madeira. There were vast stretches of open ocean and we began to fantasise over the seabirds now below us. We landed on time before mid-day, quickly passed through Passport Control, and were met by the friendly smiling face of Catarina from our host organisation Ventura do Mar. The daytime temperature was a glorious 22°C (and on land varied little from this throughout the trip). We transferred to Hotel Residencial Gordon and after settling into our rooms decided to walk to the harbour to look for gulls and terns and search any park areas for passerines.

As we set off a Common Kestrel flew overhead. Nearby we found a park with bar and enjoyed a beer whilst logging our first Plain Swifts, Blackcaps, Blackbird, and several Monarch butterflies. We then took an amble to Funchal Harbour where there were 100s of Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls of various ages and about 10 Common Terns. A Grey Wagtail flew past. We then walked on to Santa Catarina Park where Canaries were evident, a European Goldfinch was seen, and a Pallid Swift was found amongst Plain Swifts. Looking down into the harbour we noted two Little Egrets and a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls were amongst the Atlantic Gulls. We then drifted slowly back to our hotel where Luis Dias the skipper of Ventura do Mar briefed us on the forthcoming trip to Selvagens. It sounded mouth-watering. That evening we found a rather pleasant restaurant near to the hotel that we adopted as our feeding and watering house whilst in Madeira.

July 2 The Big Day! The north-easterly trade winds were blowing fairly strong that was ideal for our southwards sail to Selvagens; however, predictions were for winds to drop by the time of the return leg July 5 & 6 and this was ideal. Following breakfast, Bob showed participants video footage of key species we hoped to observe at sea and played sounds of calls we would hear at the colonies on Selvagens at night. We then made our way to the quay and met up with Luis and his crew Eduardo and George (the cook). We boarded and explored the yacht Ventura do Mar choosing bunks and looking for good vantage points on the yacht for birding during the journey ahead.



The crew (from left) George, Luis and Eduardo (©Peter Lewis)

After a few further preparations at about 11.00 am we set sail into the calm protected waters out of Funchal Harbour. It was not long before the first Cory's Shearwaters were seen rafting just off the island. We passed through several rafts where the Cory's seemingly reluctantly lazily lifted off the water to land only 50 metres out of our way. A pod of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins was enjoyed by all. Then huge excitement! The first Bulwer's Petrel flew by the yacht at about 100 metres. This outrageous all-dark petrel with exceptionally long wings and wedge-shaped tail, and with the lowest wing loading of all petrels, flew steadily with great buoyancy over the glassy waters; a far cry from the dynamic wheeling, twisting and turning we would witness with this species as we entered open ocean and force 6 winds later in the day. Numbers of Bulwer's steadily picked up as did Cory's and by the end of the day we had tallied about 150 of each. Stunning views were attained with both species almost oblivious of our small vessel flying to within five metres across the bow.



Atlantic Spotted Dolphins off Funchal (©Wayne Strong)

Then a Desertas/Zino's Petrel was spotted several hundred metres away. We all prayed for closer views. Over the next few hours as we sailed fairly near to Bugio (Desertas Islands) where Fea's Petrel (the local taxon called Desertas Petrel, as is from here on) breeds we saw three more Desertas/Zino's with one passing close enough to the yacht for positive identification as Desertas Petrel. Everyone on board was thrilled with these sightings, views attained, and the supreme flight behaviour of the Desertas Petrel as it repeatedly wheeled up high above the waves, then jetted back down and so on, passing very close by the yacht. We grilled these *Pterodroma* petrels for a Zino's Petrel but with no luck.

As we progressed south lunch was served and there were two more notable observations. The first was a very rare sighting off Madeira of two Northern

Bottlenose Whales. This was the first time our skipper and marine biologist Luis had seen the species in Madeiran waters, though he had seen the species commonly off the Azores. Perhaps a greater thrill for us birders was Madeiran Storm-petrels. However, they did not give themselves up easily. Just four were seen as the day progressed and it seemed that every time one of us went to the loo, to the kitchen for a drink/beer, or to our bunk for a power nap, a Madeiran sensed this and flew past. By the end of the day, however, everyone had seen at least one Madeiran. Bob also saw a Wilson's Storm-petrel. As dusk fell the temperatures dropped enough to warrant putting on a fleece. This was a most satisfying start to our mini-expedition to the Selvagens.

July 3 At day break we were still about five hours from Selvagens Pequena, our first island stop, and the winds remained brisk. There were plenty of Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters in the area. It wasn't long before a speciality of Selvagens was encountered, the White-faced Storm-petrel. What an amazing creature, appearing to pogo-dance its way across the sea surface as we sailed on by. The distant volcanic peak of Selvagens Pequena grew in size as we approached and eventually low lying sandy areas were seen spreading out from the rocks. This sandy habitat is riddled with White-faced Storm-petrel burrows. As we approached the island Common Terns joined us and after much grilling Granville found a single Roseate Tern. All were somewhat relieved as we turned the corner into the lee of the island where we weighed anchor and enjoyed lunch.



White-faced Storm-petrel on approach to the Selvagens (©Peter Lewis)

Due to the swell and surf we were not able to anchor up adjacent to our landing bay, but were just one bay further round. At about 2.00 pm the wardens from the islands were spotted in their dinghy heading our way to greet us and assist in our landing. With the yacht rolling quite considerably none of us looked forward to disembarking down the ladder onto the dinghy, but when it came to it the task was fairly easy and the wardens and crew were there to help.

After a wet though dinghy ride, though warm water, and a surf landing, we arrived safely on the sandy beach of Selvagens Pequena where we quickly dried out. We had been given permission by the wardens to sleep on the island and so we took sleeping bags. The beach was our communal bedroom and there was no toilet, but who cared with the promise of thousands of White-faced Storm-petrels visiting their colonies after dark? Not us! Indeed, within a few minutes of landing Paulo the warden showed us a White-faced Storm-petrel in the hand, one that had taken up residence for the day in the oil store.



Bulwer's Petrel on nest at Selvagens Pequena ((©Wayne Strong)

Shortly after this we were watching a Bulwer's Petrel on its nest in a crevice in volcanic rocks. It was hard to believe that over the last 24 hours we had seen flocks of Bulwer's on the water, individuals cutting across the bow at point blank range, and now one just metres away one on the nest and not bothered at all by our presence. Could things get any better? Yes, with four Sooty Terns amongst the Common Terns, a species not guaranteed in these waters.



Sooty Tern at Selvagens Pequena (©Peter Lewis)

Luis then took us on a spectacular walk around the island utilising the few and narrow trails. We saw several Cory's on the nest that again seemed to have no fear of humans. There were dead carcasses of the shearwaters, petrels and storm-petrels, expected in large colonies, and these facilitated close inspection of the underwing of Cory's, the bill structure of Bulwer's, and the yellow webbings of White-faced. Two Whimbrels and a few Ruddy Turnstones were seen. In addition, the scenery was stunning and the sound of the surf entrancing. Could this be heaven?

After a few hours we returned to the wardens' hut where cold beer was served. Most welcome. The wardens prepared a first-class barbeque and we filled our bellies and washed down the food with more beer and wine awaiting dark and the transformation of the islands as the seabirds returned to their nests *en masse*. Excitement was palpable.



Bob Flood on Selvagens Pequena (©Wayne Strong)

After dark we ventured a short way from the hut. A few Cory's flew over making their manic 'sooty and sweep' calls. With our low level torches we were able to see hundreds and later thousands of White-faced Storm-petrels flying around like moths, for as far as could be seen. It was an incredible sight with very little sound. White-faced Storm-petrels are remarkably quiet compared to other storm-petrel species and this made the island atmosphere quite eerie. Birds were seen scurrying into their burrows, or sat above them on the lightly vegetated sandy habitat. Some even landed by our feet. When we turned off the torches birds soon flew into us so we kept them on to avoid collisions. As the evening passed into night a few participants retired to the beach, whilst others could not resist staying up until 1.00 am or 2.00 am.



White-faced Storm-petrel at midnight at burrows on Selvagens Pequena (©Peter Lewis)

At the end of this unforgettable experience came bed on the beach; but it was hard to close ones eyes with a sky heavy in stars, clouded in part by the milky way, animated by shooting stars, and with the tiny dark shadows of more and more White-faced Storm-petrels overhead ...

July 4 One by one we surfaced from our sleeping bags. There were no shearwaters, petrels or storm-petrels to see, save a few Cory's offshore and a chick White-faced Storm-petrel by a burrow entrance. The busy events of the night had passed by leaving us in a lazy island paradise. A little searching and the Sooty Terns were still present in the Common Tern colony, the Bulwer's or its mate was still on its nest, and a Ruddy Turnstone from the day before patrolled the beach.



White-faced Storm-petrel chick at burrow and example of burrow (©Wayne Strong)

The wardens provided us with coffee and a light breakfast before assisting us back to the yacht. The sea surface had calmed and so the return trip was drier and embarkation very easy. Shortly after, the anchor was lifted and we set sail for Selvagens Grandes. *En route* there were plenty of Cory's, a few Bulwer's, but no White-faced Storm-petrels. This was a bit worrying since we were planning to make our first major chumming stop off Selvagens Grandes hoping to get extended close-up views of these storm-petrels around the yacht.

After several hours we approached Selvagens Grandes where rafts of Cory's were encountered. The calm of the morning soon turned to enthrallment once again when a Little Shearwater (now variously called Macaronesian or Barolo's Shearwater) was found amongst the Cory's. It flushed off the surface and flew several hundred metres landing once again. Over the next half-hour we saw this bird several times and very well. We truly were lucky indeed with the cooperation of this individual.

It was then time to chum, but with no storm-petrel sightings optimism was low. Bob's techniques developed off Scilly were employed. Amazingly, after only 20 minutes White-faced Storm-petrels started to turn-up and gave a fabulous display of their feeding methods that has earned them the nickname 'Jesus bird' (walks on water). Such close views were breathtaking. At the same time we drifted through rafts of Cory's and a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins stayed close to the yacht for a while. We enjoyed another delicious lunch with more beer in our front row seats to this latest seabird extravaganza. This was a most satisfying chumming result.

Later in the afternoon we sailed into the bay by the wardens' hut and took a short dinghy ride to shore. It was a rock-based landing made easy with a jetty. Yet again the wardens were extremely friendly and helpful. Near to the wardens' hut was the house of the Zino family and the balcony was our bedroom for the night. There were plenty of Berthelot's Pipits at this location.

Luis then took us up to the famous top-plateau via an interesting cliff face 'walk', which we all managed reasonably well. On the way we saw many Cory's on the nest, a wall home to numerous pairs of Bulwer's Petrels, and enjoyed an interesting account of the history of the island, with its conservation highs and culling lows from the seabirds' perspective. We stood for 15 minutes or so over 'Cory's Bay' watching Cory's wheeling overhead and below whilst calling. On the plateau we found the endemic Selvagens Gecko and were shown the unique flora. In the far distance we could see the volcanic atoll of Selvagens Pequena.

There was evidence of human habitation with several dry stone walls. We went to the area where Swinhoe's Storm-petrels had been recorded at night. We imagined there may well be a Swinhoe's nearby in the wall on the nest. Who knows? For sure there were Madeiran Storm-petrels nesting in the crevices. In addition, we found a Cory's that had killed a Bulwer's at its nest and built its own nest on top of the corpse of the Bulwer's. There were several corpses of Bulwer's scattered across the plateau, but no Madeirans.

We then took an 'easier' route down to the wardens' hut where we enjoyed cold beer and wine. Granville and Peter took a swim as a substitute for a shower. To be honest, this was the first time any of us had cleaned up since leaving Funchal. The wardens made a delicious dinner that we ate as dusk fell. But if anyone was expecting a quiet night's asleep on the Zino's balcony, then they were soon to be shocked.



Cory's Shearwater 'on barbeque' Zino family's house, Selvagens Grandes (©Bob Flood)

Cory's are the neighbour from hell! They made raucous deafening weird 'sooty and sweep' calls throughout the night *en masse*, ceasing about 4.30 am. Several joined us by our sleeping bags with one snuggling up to Wayne and John. We all stayed up listening to this racket for a while, purposefully and successfully picking out calls of whinnying Little Shearwater, barking Bulwer's Petrel, and puppet squeaking Madeiran. However, we also knew that below the Zino's balcony was the sight of the famous Swinhoe's Storm-petrel that had been trapped there. Having learnt the call we awaited its arrival, but it did not come in that night, or at least not until we finally had to give-in with fatigue and went to bed in the early hours of the morning.

July 5 Almost as soon as peace and quiet had fallen over Selvagens Grandes at 4.30 am, and restful sleep was beckoning, it was time to get up. Some strong coffee was welcomed at the Wardens' hut with a light breakfast. We then sailed off a few kilometres for a chumming session, but on this occasion with little success. Then it was time to set sail for Funchal. The wind had eased somewhat as predicted so the return journey was relatively comfortable. We had yet more cracking views of Bulwer's Petrel, White-faced Storm-petrel and Cory's, and came across two Little Shearwaters and an individual Madeiran Storm-petrel. Dinner was served with beer and wine and shortly after we all went to our bunks, exhausted but thrilled with our experiences.

July 6 After a quite reasonable night on the sea we awoke to a similar mix of birds, except that by now we had left behind the White-faced Storm-petrels. This was easily

compensated for by the best views yet of Madeiran Storm-petrel at sea close-up and for several minutes. As we approached Madeira the waters calmed and it was easy to pick-out groups of rafting Bulwer's Petrels. We sailed straight through several groups attaining superb close-up views on the sea surface and then in flight as the flocks burst-off and split-up in numerous directions. We saw several Loggerhead Turtles and then encountered one that swim so close to the yacht that it was almost too close for those with cameras and big lenses to be able to focus. Cetaceans were much easier to pick out in these conditions and we were lucky enough to encounter a small group of Rough-toothed Dolphins.



Loggerhead Turtle on approach to Funchal (©Peter Lewis)

As we sailed into Funchal Harbour it became apparent that the weather on the mountain top had deteriorated, indeed had turned to wind and rain. This meant we had to defer the planned trip for that night to listen to the Zino's Petrels returning to their burrows at 1800 metres at Pico de Areirio. We were disappointed but not unduly with the trip rescheduled for July 8 and the prospect of the first good night's sleep in nearly a week.

July 7 After five days and four nights 'at sea' a night's sleep on July 6 followed by a day's birding in Madeira was welcomed. Nevertheless, we began the day with an early breakfast and departure at 8.00 am to ensure arrival at Ribeiro Frio up in the mountainous Laurel forests, before tourists arrived at this scenic point, to maximise our chances of finding the two endemic species in Madeira, the Trocaz Pigeon and Madeira Firecrest. A minivan and driver had been hired for the day. As we disembarked the minivan at Ribeiro Frio, Roger spotted a Madeira Firecrest that popped out at eye-level. We watched this little gem until it finally was lost to view in the tree canopy. Quickly thereafter we marched for 20 minutes to the watch point where the pigeon was promised. It took perhaps five minutes to locate one sat on dead branches some way off. Then two were seen in flight. Over the next half-hour at least 11 more were seen, mainly directly below us in tree tops. With 'scopes all attained good views. Meanwhile, an African Chaffinch foraged around our feet.

We walked at a friendlier pace back to the minivan spotting more Madeira Firecrests on the way as well as Robins and Blackcaps. A clatter in the trees overhead suggested more pigeons were nearby. As we approached the minivan the first tourist coaches arrived with noisy tourists and we were glad to have finished our business at this spot.

The previous evening we had all agreed to make the day leisurely rather than chase round to grow the trip list. So, we chose to visit Prazeres towards the southwest end of

Madeira. Apparently, 10 years ago this trip would have taken four to five hours, but with EEC money a network of tunnels had been built reducing our journey to 100 minutes. Unfortunately, it also made the area more accessible and many of the habitats we hoped to find were built upon or for sale. Nevertheless, we managed to find one Spectacled Warbler in remnant scrub, a couple of Common Buzzards, Plain and Common Swifts, Greenfinch, and plenty of Canaries. We took a leisurely lunch at a nearby restaurant where John introduced us to his favourite tippie, coffee and a glass of brandy, and then headed for home and a rather special evening.

Before the trip Bob had been in touch with Frank Zino regarding photographs of Swinhoe's Storm-petrel from Selvagens. In the process Bob mentioned the Celtic Bird Tours trip to Frank and invited Frank and his wife Buffy to join us for dinner. Tonight was the night. We were invited to Frank and Buffy's house for drinks with most choosing Gin and tonic. We sat chatting with Buffy on their veranda whilst Frank returned from visiting a patient (in his other guise Frank is a General Practitioner). Soon after 7.30 pm Frank arrived home and began recounting gripping stories of his and his father's rediscovery of the thought to be extinct Zino's Petrel. We all moved on to a restaurant in the foothills of the mountains where stories, wine and beer flowed. It was a truly wonderful evening and we all felt very privileged indeed to have met this marvellous man and his delectable wife.



From left, Granville Potter, Roger Whittlesey, Wayne Strong, Frank Zino, Bob Flood, Peter Lewis and John Boulcott; under the Banana trees at the Zino family home in Madeira (©Peter Lewis)

During the course of the evening Frank also mentioned that he was researching on the colonies at Pico de Areirio on July 10 and we were invited to watch! This posed something of a logistical challenge to Bob since we were scheduled to be in the Desertas for much of that day. However, with the willingness of all participants and the cooperation of the Ventura do Mar team, we decided to try and make this unique opportunity happen ... more on that later.

July 8 Another early start today with a ferry trip to Porto Santo departing at 8.00 am from Funchal Harbour. There was no time for breakfast as we scurried to board by 7.30 am. Luckily, several coffee shops were open on board and by departure we were slugging coffee and washing away the last of the wine from the night before.

Our first position was on the stern that afforded good views, but was subject to excessive vibration. Eventually we transferred to a position near the bow behind first

class. Birding was much easier here although we did not have a panoramic view. A friend of Bob's had told him that once the ferry 'went round the corner' at the south-east end of Madeira there was turbulent water and normally quite a few *Pterodroma* petrels. This turned out to be the case with at least five Desertas/Zino's seen, but none positively identified. There were many Bulwer's and Cory's in the stretch to Porto Santo.

The day on Porto Santo was a big disappointment. In the last few years it seems the whole southern end with all the well-known sites for birding has been developed. There was no habitat left! The place was like a building site. There were no birds except Spanish Sparrows, Canaries, and many Blackcaps. We walked to Tanque Ponds that is now surrounded by development and that was more akin to a waste dump. A single Grey Heron stood guard. Two Hoopoes were flushed and both Collared Dove and Common Moorhen had been seen on the walk up. Common Buzzard and about six Common Kestrels also were seen.

We decided to head towards the Golf Course and on the way found a tiny area of remnant arable land with a few European Goldfinches and a couple of Berthelot's Pipits. What could have been the bird of the day was a small lark flushed from this area, but it did not call and flew off into oblivion. There were no Quail, Red-legged Partridge, Spectacled Warbler, Linnet, or Rock Sparrow. The Golf Course was too far, so we stopped for a drink, were served by a 'girl with attitude', and less than impressed headed back to the ferry where there was a restaurant for dinner. Later, we learnt of some reasonable habitat remaining in the northern part of the islands, but a real hike from the ferry terminal.

For the trip back we upgraded to first class and took our positions on the bow. There were a few surprised faces in first class as six sweaty dishevelled birders burst into their refined normally private grounds. Birding on the return trip was good with many extended views of Bulwer's and Cory's. We hoped for *Pterodromas* again as we approached Madeira and fantasised over identifying one as Zino's, feeding off shore just before visiting its burrow at Pico de Areirio. Alas, we did not see any *Pterodromas*. It seemed the show was over as we approached the entrance to Funchal Harbour, but then Peter spotted a Little Shearwater sat amongst Cory's. It flushed up and gave excellent views. Another birder on board had just gone in and saw our excitement through the windows, but could not make the dash back out in time to see the bird. His rather dull day on Porto Santo ended with frustration as witnessed by the harsh expression on his face. Not so for the Celtic Bird Tour team!

To boot, the deferred night visit to the Zino's Petrel colony at Pico de Areirio had been rescheduled for tonight. We disembarked the ferry at 9.30 pm and jumped straight into a minivan for the trip up the mountain. By 10.30 pm we had arrived and to our delight clouds had dispersed and there was a reasonable amount of moonlight, so there was even a chance of glimpsing a bird in display flight over their cliff face nesting grounds. With headlamps on, we fast hoofed it to the location of the colony following a narrow and slightly demanding mountain track, although the track in the main was in good condition and the very narrow parts roped in. We arrived, turned off our headlamps, and waited in anticipation and excitement.

The wind gusted every now and then and the air temperature had plummeted. Good job we were all wearing thick clothes and wind-proofs. Silence ensued and then a warden whispered, "I've just seen one." Shortly after, we heard the sad-sounding moaning calls of the first returning bird. Then another was heard and this one much closer. Over the next half-hour several were heard with some calls from just overhead. It was spine-chilling and the goose pimples over our skins were surely the result of the thrill of the encounter rather than the cold night air, the latter far from our minds. We were able to see the Zino's ghostly shadows and the moonlight lit-up their pale underparts. As the birds flew overhead it was possible to see clear-cut silhouettes. The human experience of an eerie atmosphere filled with the sad-sounding moaning calls of perhaps four to six Zino's was special, very special.

Reluctantly, with the cold finally penetrating and the mountain fog descending, we were forced to return to our minivan. The trek back was full of thoughts ...For how long will these mountain peaks resound to the sad-sounding call of the Zino's? Will the summer nights in years to come be silent save for the noise of the wind? Is the sorrowful moaning quality of the Zino's call the species lamenting recognition of its own pending demise? Thankfully, due in large part to the Zino family, there is hope for this petrel.

We arrived back at Hotel Residencial Gordon in the early hours of the morning and retired immediately with the Zino's buzz still in our systems.

July 9 For once it seemed we were able to enjoy a regular breakfast at a reasonable hour. We had enough time too for preparations for one more overnigher, this time on the Desertas. Our main aim here was to get to grips close-up with the Desertas Petrel. We wandered to Funchal Harbour via the supermarket where we bought some extra provisions for the trip. Luis and Eduardo were awaiting us at the quay and the Ventura do Mar was ready to sail. By 10.30 am we were leaving Funchal Harbour *en route* to the Desertas, a three hour sail.

The expected Cory's and several Bulwer's were a joy to watch, again at very close range. We passed half-way before spotting the first Desertas/Zino's, which arced up high, wheeled down to the surface, and then quickly arced up high again and so on until it was out of sight ... the classic *Pterodroma* travelling flight behaviour. As we approached Desertas Grandes we began to encounter small rafts of Cory's with a few Bulwer's sat on the surface too.

Then we had a huge stroke of good fortune. We were sailing directly towards a *Pterodroma* sat on the water. Luis quickly slowed speed and changed direction, and positioned us to get the best views possible. As we drifted closer, it was apparent we were watching a Desertas Petrel, with its massive *Pterodroma* bill, bull-head, and thick neck. The bird then took flight and lazily (for a *Pterodroma*) flew away 100 metres before landing again. We slowly approached it and enjoyed yet more awesome views as it remained on the sea surface. Again, the petrel lazily relocated. We decided to take one more close-up look at the bird and then leave it. Everyone had the chance in this experience to see for themselves the unique bulky structure of this member of the Desertas/Fea's/Zino's complex.



Desertas Petrel off Desertas Grandes (©Peter Lewis)

As we cruised down the west side of Desertas Grandes towards Bugio (the only known nesting location of Desertas Petrel) we encountered more *Pterodromas* and all those within 100 metres were easily identified as Desertas Petrel. About 4.00 pm Bob got a drift-and-chum session underway and soon the slick was occupied by 10s of Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls. Up four Lesser Black-backed Gulls joined them. The sight of feeding gulls soon attracted Cory's and more spectacular views of this gorgeous *Calonectris* shearwater were attained as they inspected the chum slick.

The real purpose of this chumming session, however, was to attract to point blank range one or more Desertas Petrels. After about 40 minutes the first Desertas appeared, flying swiftly around the yacht at very close range. It was possible to see every important structural and plumage detail of this enigmatic creature. Sighs, ooohs and aaahs could be heard around the yacht as everyone filled their boots. A little later another Desertas made a repeat performance. We changed technique to steam-and-chum. Gulls followed pulling in more Cory's and several more Desertas Petrels. Wholly unexpected was a Sooty Shearwater that followed the yacht, every-now-and-then dropping into the water and diving after chum scraps.



Desertas Petrel off Desertas Grandes (©Peter Lewis)

Time was ticking away and we had to be at anchor by 8.30 pm in a bay near to the wardens' hut. We made it in time. Dinner was served and yet more beer and wine constituted a mini-celebration of a thoroughly entertaining and educational afternoon/evening. Everyone retired shortly after dark with the aim of a dawn rise and a scan for Monk Seals.

July 10 This was our last birding day on this trip. By now all participants were thoroughly satisfied, if not rather tired. The original plan was for a gentle cruise around the waters and a walk on Desertas Grandes, ending with the short sail back to Funchal Harbour. This offered a nice, easy, and relaxed way of winding up the tour; but not so for this intrepid Celtic Bird Tour team!

Bob had made arrangements with Frank Zino to join him at the Zino's Petrel colony at Pico de Areirio at 2.00 pm to observe him at work with the petrels in the hand. This required us sailing by 8.00 am, arriving at Funchal at 12.00 pm; dashing to the hotel, changing, and being ready for the taxi ride up by 1.00 pm.

That morning, all were up early scanning for Monk Seal, but with no luck. Breakfast was served and shortly after we set sail for Funchal. Although enjoying more Cory's and a few Bulwer's, we were all thinking about the trip to the Zino's colony. About quarter-way back we enjoyed excellent views of another Desertas Petrel at close range for several minutes. We checked through all the identification features and then simply enjoyed the supreme flight behaviour believing this probably to be our last one of the trip. We settled back thereafter watching Cory's and Bulwer's against the back drop of the ever-enlarging Madeira.

After half-way another *Pterodroma* petrel came into view. We enjoyed watching it at distance, but as the bird came closer to the yacht alarm bells started to ring. The flight behaviour appeared 'lighter', but more eye-catching was the different look to the bill, head, neck and body compared to the Desertas we had been watching at close range, as recently as 40 minutes earlier and in the same light and wind conditions. The bird swept past the boat at about 70 metres. Ned Brinkley's analogy of Desertas-pigeon vs. Zino's-dove immediately sprang to mind. We were watching a bird so much more like a dove in its bill, head, neck, and body structure. Surely this was a Zino's Petrel!? The bird flew away ahead of the yacht and we presumed it was gone.

Bob said he was 90% certain this was a Zino's Petrel, but not 100% certain. It was so, so painful ... so close, yet so far. Everyone was gutted since we had lost our one and only opportunity to clinch Zino's in the field. Or had we ...?

The probable Zino's curved-round well ahead of the yacht and approached the yacht again from port side. It flew low over the water directly towards us. It kept coming and coming. Bob yelled to everyone to get on the petrel. It approached to 50 metres. The body was no fat cigar, it was a slim cylinder. The bird then swooped upwards and turned showing a side-on profile. The bill was not pigeon-like, deep and notched, it was slim and without a clear notch. The head was relatively small and rounded. The neck was relatively slender. The panda eye-patch and darkish crown of the Desertas, seen in the same light conditions, in this bird were replaced by evidently paler plumage. The concerted effort to get to grips with Desertas over the last 24 hours made it possible to see these differences clearly. There could be no doubt that this *Pterodroma* was indeed a Zino's Petrel!!!

As we sailed on to Funchal all participants were full of joy. We had seen every one of the mythical seabirds of Selvagens, Desertas and Madeira, and all exceptionally well. Job done! Could it get any better? Read on ...

After a quick turn around in Funchal we arrived at Pico de Areirio at about 1.40 pm, in time for a quick sandwich and coffee. At about 2.15 pm Frank Zino and his mountaineering accomplice 'Savo' arrived. Soon after we were all trekking again to the Zino's colony, but in the daylight and completely aware at certain points of the sheer 1,000 metre drop either side of the narrow path. By now, who cared? We reached the point where Frank Zino and colleague went 'over the top' and we carried on round a loop, down the track, and through a tunnel to a watch point only 200 metres from the colony. As we arrived we saw the duo abseiling down the facing cliff face. They took up position and then ... the fog came in. Complete and utter disaster! We waited hoping it would clear. There was a slight break for a minute where we could vaguely see the duo at work, then dense fog again. What made things worse is that we could hear Frank and 'Savo' in discussion!



The trek to Pico de Areirio (©Wayne Strong)

We waited and waited. We 'prayed' and 'prayed'. We even tried to blow away the fog (sic). Time passed and our deadline for the taxi approached. Eventually a few participants accepted our fate and started to make their way back leaving behind Bob, Wayne and Peter. This trio too soon had to admit defeat and packed up tripods, 'scope, and cameras. Bob set off and rounded the first corner, at which point incredibly the fog lifted. There were Frank and 'Savo' at near eye-level working with Zino's Petrels just 150 metres away. Bob Screamed to Wayne and Peter. Over about half-an-hour three Zino's Petrels were extracted and worked on. Excellent views were attained through the 'scope. Simply fantastic. If there had been any doubt about the identification of the Zino's at sea, these were now dispelled with reconfirmation of the smaller (in particular) bill, head and neck of Zino's Petrel compared to the all-round bulky Bugio breeding Desertas Petrel. Whilst the at-sea sighting was the real jewel in the crown, witnessing Zino's in the hand and studying these structural features was a bonus.

The Zino's experience was complete for all!



Frank Zino and 'Savo' handling a Zino's Petrel at Pico de Areirio (©Peter Lewis)

We returned to the hotel with enough time to pack and enjoy a final celebratory meal with plenty of alcohol to make merry. Luis visited us to say goodbye and deliver several gifts each, including Madeiran wine. All retired before the midnight hour.

July 11 It was time to say goodbye to Madeira. The flight was just after noon, making for an easy morning. Catarina and George from Ventura do Mar escorted us to the airport. As the plane took off the scene below was nothing but open ocean. How well we now knew the mythical seabirds that frequent this part of the ocean and the remote islands of Selvagens, Desertas and Madeira that support their colonies. Fresh memories of the trip became our dreams as we all slipped into a shallow sleep as the plane cruised back to England.



Bob Flood (left) and the intrepid five (from left) Roger Whittlesey, Wayne Strong, John Boulcott, Granville Potter, and (front) Peter Lewis (©Wayne Strong)

Systematic List

- DESERTAS PETREL** Jul 2 (1), Jul 9 (5), Jul 10 (1)
ZINO'S PETREL Jul 8 (4-6 heard), Jul 10 (1 + 3 in hand)
DESERTAS/ZINO'S PETREL Jul 2 (3), Jul 8 (5), Jul 9 (13), Jul 10 (1)
BULWER'S PETREL Jul 2 (150), Jul 3 (20), Jul 4 (12), Jul 5 (25), Jul 6 (130), Jul 8 (35), Jul 9 (3), Jul 10 (4)
CORY'S S'WATER Jul 2 (250), Jul 3 (200), Jul 4 (1000), Jul 5 (50), Jul 6 (50), Jul 8 (100+), Jul 9 (200+), Jul 10 (100+)
SOOTY SHEARWATER Jul 9 (1)
LITTLE SHEARWATER Jul 4 (1 + several heard), Jul 5 (2), Jul 8 (1)
WHITE-FACED STORM-PETREL Jul 3 (1000s), Jul 4 (2)
MADEIRAN STORM-PETREL Jul 2 (4), Jul 3 (1 + heard), Jul 4 (20 heard), Jul 5 (1), Jul 6 (4)
WILSON'S STORM-PETREL Jul 2 (1)
GREY HERON Jul 8 (1)
LITTLE EGRET Jul 1 (2)
COMMON BUZZARD Jul 7 (2), Jul 8 (2)
COMMON KESTREL Jul 1 (1), Jul 2 (1), Jul 7 (6), Jul 8 (6)
COMMON MOORHEN Jul 8 (2)
WHIMBREL Jul 3 (2)
RUDDY TURNSTONE Jul 3 (4), Jul 4 (1)
ATLANTIC GULL Up to (1000) daily Funhal; other sites Jul 3 (30), Jul 4 (10), Jul 5 (6), Jul 6 (6), Jul 9 (50), Jul 10 (20)
LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL Jul 1 (2), Jul 9 (4)
SOOTY TERN Jul 3 (4), Jul 4 (2)
COMMON TERN Jul 1 (10+), Jul 2 (2), Jul 3 (100+), Jul 4 (6), Jul 5 (2), Jul 6 (3), Jul 8 (10), Jul 9 (30+), Jul 10 (10+)
ROSEATE TERN Jul 3 (1), Jul 8 (1)
ROCK DOVE Up to 30 seen most days
TROCAZ PIGEON Jul 7 (14)
COLLARED DOVE Jul 8 (5)
COMMON SWIFT Jul 1 (2), Jul 7 (2), Jul 8 (2), Jul 10 (10)
PALLID SWIFT Jul 1 (1+)
PLAIN SWIFT Jul 1 (20), Jul 2 (10), Jul 6 (1), Jul 7 (15), Jul 8 (20), Jul 10 (20+)
HOOPOE Jul 8 (2)
SMALL LARK SP. Jul 8 (1)
BERTHELOT'S PIPIT Jul 3 (6), Jul 4 (8), Jul 5 (6), Jul 7 (1), Jul 8 (2), Jul 10 (2)
GREY WAGTAIL Jul 1 (1)
EUROPEAN ROBIN Jul 7 (1 + numerous heard)
BLACKBIRD Jul 1 (2), Jul 7 (20), Jul 8 (8)
BLACKCAP Jul 1 (4), Jul 2 (4), Jul 7 (12), Jul 8 (30+), Jul 9 (2), Jul 10 (2)
SPECTACLED WARBLER Jul 7 (1)
MADEIRA FIRECREST Jul 7 (5)
SPANISH SPARROW Jul 8 (100+)
GREENFINCH Jul 7 (5)
AFRICAN CHAFFINCH Jul 7 (12), Jul 10 (3)
EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH Jul 1 (1), Jul 8 (5)
CANARY Jul 1 (4), Jul 2 (2), Jul 7 (20), Jul 8 (30+), Jul 9 (2),
- NORTHERN BOTTLENOSE WHALE** Jul 2 (2)
BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN Jul 4 (20+)
ROUGH-TOOTHED DOLPHIN Jul 6 (3), Jul 8 (2)
ATLANTIC SPOTTED DOLPHIN Jul 2 (20), Jul 6 (25), Jul 9 (35)
- LOGGERHEAD TURTLE** Jul 6 (5)

Notes on Local Taxa and Possible Splits

DESERTAS PETREL *Pterodroma faea desertas*

Differs in 'moan' call from Fea's *P. f. faea* of Cape Verde Islands that breeds 2000 km away. The Madeiran *desertas* lays eggs July-August about five months before *faea*. It is larger in several dimensions and its average bill depth is greater than in *faea*, almost to the same extent as *faea* differs from Zino's Petrel *P. madeira*. DNA testing underway; maybe *desertas* will be most divergent of *faea/desertas/madeira*.

CORY'S SHEARWATER *Calonectris diomedea borealis*

Nominate breeds in Mediterranean with small colony off western France. Taxon *borealis* averages a little larger than *diomedea* but sizes overlap. Males of both taxa have heavier bills than females so male *borealis* contrasts in size comparison with female *diomedea*. Main plumage distinguishing feature of *diomedea* is on underwing with extensive white fingers on inner webs of outer primaries of a classic bird. Also, *diomedea* usually has one distinct dark spot on outermost primary coverts, whereas *borealis* usually has two.

WHITE-FACED STORM-PETREL *Pelagodroma marina hypoleuca*

This Selvagens form differs slightly from the Cape Verde form *P. m. eadesi* by having a whiter forehead with good contrast with crown, paler grey back, more white on sides of neck sometimes forming complete white collar, and a longer bill.

MADEIRAN STORM-PETREL COMPLEX *Oceanodroma castro*

It has become increasingly clear that the Madeiran Storm-petrel in the North Atlantic in fact comprises a number of distinct cryptic taxa, with four probably warranting full species status. See below for known field characteristics. These taxa also have distinct calls. Further research is needed. Two occur in Madeira, Grant's and Madeiran Storm-petrel and it is the latter summer breeder that is expected in July.

	GRANT'S	MADEIRAN	MONTEIRO'S	CAPE VERDE
Season	Cold season	Hot season	Hot Season	Poss. two seasons
Breeds	Azores, Madeira, Selvagens, Canaries, Berlengas	Madeira, Selvagens, Canaries (rare)	Azores	Cape Verde
Pairs	3-5,000	2-4,000	300	Low 1,000s?
Breeding dates	Aug-Mar	Late-Mar-Oct, month later Selvagens	Late-Marc-Oct	Oct-June, pos. two seasons changeover Mar
Tail	Little or no tail fork	Short tail fork sometimes visible	Tail longer than Grant's, fork twice as deep	Prob. little or no tail fork
Wing	Narrower than Cape Verde			Broader than Grant's
Wing covert bars	Ends well short of carpal joint	Indistinct ends short of carpal bar	Extends to carpal joint, relatively pronounced	Indistinct ends short of carpal bar
Uppertail-covert band	Narrow	Narrow but variable	More prominent than Madeiran	Broad
Bill		Rather heavy		Proportionately long
Biometrics	Large, shorter wing & tail than Monteiro's	Smaller in wing, tail, & tarsus than Grant's	Large, longer wing & tail than Grant's	Smaller than Grant's & Monteiro's
Primary moult ad	Feb-early Aug	Pres. Aug/Sep-Feb	Aug-Feb	Pres. Mar-Dec

COMMON KESTREL *Falco tinnunculus canariensis*

Smaller and darker than nominate. Crown of adult ♂ darker grey, more heavily streaked; rest of upperparts deeper chestnut with larger black spots; underparts deeper cream. Adult ♀ more heavily barred above, upper tail-coverts tending to grey-blue.

ATLANTIC GULL *Larus michaellis atlantis*

Smaller and more compact than Yellow-legged Gull. Head squarer, forehead flat, and bill stockier with generally longer gonys-angle. Wings and legs relatively short. Adult upperparts vary from as *michahellis* to dark slate as in Azores. P9-10 black, P10 white mirror covering one or both webs to form white tip, and on P9 in 10% of Madeiran birds. Primary black subterminal bar to P5; P4 75% with dark subterminal spot; P3 10% with dark markings. [Winter head markings stronger patterned than *michahellis*.] Sometimes considered sedentary form of Lesser Black-backed *graellsii*. Juvenile and immature plumages more like *graellsii* than *michahellis*.

PALLID SWIFT *Apus pallidus brehmorum*

Nothing in BWPI.

GREY WAGTAIL *Motacilla cinerea schmitzi*

Slightly smaller than nominate *cinerea*, but bill long in *schmitzi*. Distinctly darker slate-grey on upperparts and ear-coverts than nominate *cinerea*; white supercilium reduced to narrow stripe behind eye, white stripe on lower cheeks narrow and indistinct; black of throat deeper; underparts often deep yellow, tail has dark streak along inner web of t4 and partly dark shaft to t6.

BERTHELOT'S PIPIT *Anthus berthelotti madeirensis*

Slight differences. Bill and middle toe with claw of *madeirensis* from Madeira group of islands longer than in nominate *berthelotti* from Canary Islands and Selvagens. Two specimens from Deserta Grande (Madeira group) have pale wedge of t5 sullied grey, but wedge pure white in other populations of *madeirensis* examined, including other birds from Deserta Grande & Chão. In *madeirensis*, populations from mountains of Madeira are the same in colour and size as coastal birds from Porto Santo and Desertas. In nominate *berthelotti*, birds from Selvagens are smaller than those from Canary Islands. Some birds (both races) are purer grey on upperparts, others slightly sandy; no apparent relation to locality, age, sex, or wear, and variation apparently individual.

MADEIRAN FIRECREST *Regulus ignicapillus madeirensis*

Duller orange crown (in ♂), short eyestripe and supercilium, long bill, large black patches on wings, and a call like Yellow-browed Warbler.

COMMON BLACKBIRD *Turdus merula cabreræ*

♂♂ of *cabreræ* are dark and glossy, deeper black than in nominate *merula*; ♀♀ are darker black-brown.

BLACKCAP *Sylvia atricapilla heineken*

Markedly darker and smaller than nominate *atricapilla*, upperparts (including hindneck) deeper olive-brown, less grey; underparts deeper and more extensively grey, flank and chest dark ash-grey with olive-brown suffusion, under tail-coverts dark grey with white fringes.

EUROPEAN ROBIN *Erithacus rubecula microrhynchus*

Nothing in *BWPi*.

ROCK SPARROW *Petronia petronia madeirensis*

Within nominate *petronia*, some variation in both colour and size in several races, but too slight to warrant recognition of *madeirensis*. Birds from Canary Islands, Portugal, western Spain, Balearic Islands, Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, and southern Italy on average smaller than those from Morocco, Madeira, eastern Spain, Pyrénées, Alps, and central Europe to Greece and western Turkey; bill relatively shortest on islands in west Mediterranean; ground-colour of upperparts relatively darker and browner and streaks blacker in birds from Sardinia, Corsica, and (to lesser extent) Canary Islands, Madeira, Portugal, and western Spain (east to Málaga and north to Salamanca), paler and greyer with streaks more black-brown in birds from Balearic Islands and (to lesser extent) Sicily and southern mainland Italy, intermediate in colour in remainder of range. Remaining races of Western Palearctic larger than nominate *petronia* (except *kirhizica*) and have bill distinctly longer and markedly thick and swollen at base.

AFRICAN CHAFFINCH *Fringilla coelebs madeirensis*

Overview dainty with a thin bill; male has peachy face and chest, green back and blue-grey flanks, with its own song. Detailed like *canariensis*, but nape and top of head of ♂ dark blue-grey, less deep plumbeous than in races of Canary Islands, black band on forehead contrasting more sharply; lower mantle, scapulars, back, and rump bright green, outer scapulars and upper tail-coverts blue-grey with green wash; face and chin to throat ochre or warm buff, as in *canariensis* or slightly paler, merging into pale vinous-pink of upper belly and side of belly; side of breast and flank rather more extensively grey; size as in *canariensis* but bill slightly longer, more slender at base; tail and wing as *canariensis*. ♀ *maderensis* like ♀ *canariensis*, but cap and nape sometimes with more distinct sepia stripes and mantle and scapulars greener if fresh.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH *Carduelis carduelis parva*

C. c. parva from Mediterranean France, Pyrénées, Iberia, Balearic Islands, North Africa, and Atlantic islands more distinctly demarcated from nominate *carduelis*, mainly due to small size, in particular wing and tail; colour and bill size within geographical range as delimited here not entirely uniform, birds from Atlantic islands slightly paler cinnamon-brown.