

La Palma, Canaries, 7-14 Dec. 2007

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In December 2007 I spent a week on La Palma with my girlfriend and baby daughter. Because it was a family holiday, birding was not the main priority. However, it is not difficult to find all the specialties of the island by planning several day trips.

As we had been to the very different island of Lanzarote in January of the same year, I had a good opportunity to compare the east to the west of the archipelago, which is why in this report some comparisons with Lanzarote will be made.

For preparations I used two field guides: Mullaney, Svensson et al. (Dutch translation 2002) and the indispensable *Birds of the Atlantic Islands* by Tony Clarke. I also read several reports on the internet, although there were very few concerning La Palma and most of them were rather dated, which is the main reason why I decided to write this one.

We flew from Amsterdam with Transavia; we had a mid-price package deal with Globe/Oad which included car rental, and we ended up in a wonderful Casita near Todoque, not far from El Paso and Los Llanos, with a stunning view of the Aridane Valley and the Atlantic. La Palma is a beautiful and at times spectacular island. One day I would like to return to see more of it, even though on the bird front I have seen practically everything there is to see on the island.

7-12

The first specialties can be heard immediately, even near the airport: (Atlantic) **Canary** and **Canary Islands Chiffchaff**. They are literally everywhere on the island. As soon as you realise that the sparrows you hear are not sparrows but chiffchaffs, and that both species seem to have several song types and a wide range of calls, you get an idea of how common they are. The Canaries often sing from the tops of bushes and trees, or they can be found foraging loudly on the vineyards, sometimes in groups of more than a hundred, sometimes mixed with **Linnet**.

Along the winding road across the island from the airport to El Paso I heard a singing **European Robin**. There would be more, but only up in the mountain areas. A single **Blue Heron** flew over Santa Cruz.

Common birds near our casita and elsewhere were **Yellow-legged Gull** (subsp. *atlantis*), **Kestrel** (the dark subsp. *canariensis*), **Feral Pigeon** (I have not seen any wild Rock Doves, as I have on Lanzarote), **Blackbird** (the small subsp. *cabrerae*), **Blackcap** and **Sardinian Warbler**. **Grey Wagtails** regularly fly past, as well as the resident pair of **Red-billed Chough** (as far as the Atlantic islands go, this species is unique to La Palma). Each morning a few **Rose-ringed Parakeets** were present (not mentioned in Clarke as resident on La Palma), and sometimes I could hear far-away calls of **Stone-Curlew**, a species that seems much rarer and harder to find here than on Lanzarote. A **Little Egret** was sometimes seen in the distance as it flew from reservoir to reservoir.

8-12

On our first morning, before breakfast, I witnessed an unexpected spectacle overhead. A pale morph **Booted Eagle** that came flying in from the ocean was mobbed by two Kestrels and an adult **Barbary Falcon**. Despite the falcons' attacks, the eagle showed no sign of - well, of anything really, as it calmly floated further east.

The rest of the day was spent shopping and sitting on a terrace in sleepy beach town Puerto Naos, where the **Collared Doves** were Eurasian as far as I could see. A **Lesser Black-backed Gull** flying past was the only non-Yellow Legged of the week.

9-12

In the morning, four **Buzzards** (subsp. *insularum*) were seen hovering in the distance and a Barbary Falcon sat on a pole. In the late afternoon we noticed five or six **Plain Swifts** (I had seen a few on Lanzarote). Soon our casita was surrounded by them: some 40 velvety dark Plain Swifts foraging above our garden....they disappeared as suddenly as they had come and I did not see any since.

10-12

Our goal for today was the Los Tilos nature reserve in the northeast of the island. Driving the winding road up north, soon we found ourselves in montane pine forests right below a large grey cloud. A brief stop near Las Tricias yielded the first (African/Afrocanarian) **Blue Tits** and **Tenerife Goldcrests**. Both species are quite common in the pine and laurel forests. The taxonomic status of the La Palma form of Blue Tit is as yet unclear. Most authors seem to agree that they belong to the African or Afro-canarian Blue Tit complex *Cyanistes* (or *Parus*) *ultramarinus* or *teneriffae*. Others regard *palmensis* as a separate species.

(Note: a recent (2007) study in *Journal of Ornithology* undertaken by Spanish and German biologists Christian Dietzen, Eduardo Garcia-del-Rey, Guillermo Delgado Castro and Michael Wink, recommend that *ultramarinus*, *ombriosus*, *teneriffae*, *palmensis* and *hedwigii* are all treated as subspecies of the Afro-canarian *Parus teneriffae* based on both mitochondrial DNA sequence data and morphometrics.)

Above Las Tricias we entered a thick grey cloud and for a while that was all we saw. Thankfully the road dropped again to arrive in the colourful village of Barlovento. One unmistakable **White-tailed Laurel Pigeon** flew overhead. We visited the Barlovento Laguna, but it looked completely birdless. Finally we reached Los Tilos, where recently a new ultra-modern bridge was built to connect both sides of the stunning ravine. The road to Los Tilos ends at a restaurant and a visitors centre, but the best walk starts 500 metres before, near a small parking lot on your left. The laurel forest is quiet and stunning. **Blackbird** calls and **Robin** song are ubiquitous, as are the gentle cooing sounds of both laurel pigeon species. It took me a while to figure out which was which, until we stopped at the parking lot I mentioned. Watching the mountain wall from here, you can't miss the **White-tailed Laurel Pigeons** and **Bolle's Pigeons** flying from tree to tree. However, as most of them are pretty high up, many remained unidentified. During the two hours I was at Los Tilos I have seen at least 10 White-tailed, 12 Bolle's, and some 15 unidentified laurel pigeons. The nice blue-grey *palmae* subspecies of **Chaffinch** are also quite unmissable at Los Tilos.

In the afternoon I found five **White Wagtails** atop the roof of the San Martin supermarket in El Paso, uttering a descending "pzzrrr" call that was completely unfamiliar to me.

11-12

The "Fancy II" is a ship that is used to organise whaling trips on the Atlantic from the harbour of Tazacorte. I'll start with the cons: it is not cheap (43 euros per person in 2007), the female captain - though friendly and certainly knowledgeable - does not readily share her knowledge about which animals are seen, and they cater not only for people who want to *watch* the dolphins and whales, but also for those who want to chase them on a big plastic banana in order to try to swim with them. On the upside: a pretty good lunch (soup, bread, fruit) and drinks are included in the prize, the staff is very helpful and able to communicate in Spanish, German and English, and last but not least, we did find two mixed and confiding groups of **Bottlenose Dolphins** and **Short-finned Pilot Whales**. One could watch them from up-close and from afar, from the low deck, from the high deck, and from the glass bottom below. This alone was worth the price.

I had hoped for some sea birds as well, but I haven't seen a single one (except for the Yellow-legged Gulls), and the captain did not seem very interested.

In Tazacorte I saw a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**.

12-12

An afternoon walk through San Nicolas took me to the edge of the pine forest of Montaña del Gallo. The most conspicuous insect here is the tropically pretty **Monarch Butterfly** (*Danaus plexippus*), an introduced species from North America. Except the many Canaries and Canary Islands Chiffchaffs, the only birds worth mentioning were two **Barbary Partridges**, also an introduced species.

13-12

A trip to the Fuencaliente lighthouse and salinas (salt mines) on the southernmost tip of the island is recommendable. Apparently, visitors are allowed to walk inbetween the salinas. Four or five **Berthelot's Pipits** rummaged inbetween the volcanic stones. On La Palma they are not nearly as common and confiding as on Lanzarote. We also caught a glimpse of an exciting looking little songbird with reddish-brown back, but I was unable to retrace it.

In the farthest salinas four **Turnstones**, a **Sanderling**, a **Little Stint** and a **Grey Plover** were found foraging.

To conclude: a few days on La Palma should be enough to see the endemics and other island specialities. I did miss a few though, most notably Cory's Shearwater, which is mentioned in all other reports I read. I guess december is not a good time here for sea birds. Also I haven't seen a single Spanish Sparrow or Lesser Short-toed Lark. But hey, I had seen so many of them on Lanzarote a year before.....

<u>Bird species seen on la Palma</u>	<u>number</u>	<u>location</u>
Little Egret (<i>Egretta garzetta</i>)	2	Near Todoque/El Paso
Blue Heron (<i>Ardea cinerea</i>)	1	Santa Cruz
Eurasian Sparrowhawk (<i>Accipiter nisus granti</i>)	1	Tazacorte
Buzzard (<i>Buteo buteo insularum</i>)	4	Over Todoque
Booted Eagle (<i>Aquila pennata</i>)	1	Near Todoque
Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus canariensis</i>)	common	everywhere
Barbary Falcon (<i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>)	min. 2	Near Todoque
* Barbary Partridge (<i>Alectoris barbara</i>)	2	East of San Nicolas
Stone-Curlew (<i>Burhinus oediconemus distinctus</i>)	1 (min.)	Near Todoque/El Paso
Grey Plover (<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>)	1	Salinas de Fuencaliente
Sanderling (<i>Calidris alba</i>)	1	Salinas de Fuencaliente
Little Stint (<i>Calidris minuta</i>)	1	Salinas de Fuencaliente
Turnstone (<i>Arenaria interpres</i>)	4	Salinas de Fuencaliente
Lesser Black-backed Gull (<i>Larus fuscus</i>)	1	Puerto Naos
Yellow-legged Gull (<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>)	common	everywhere
Eurasian Collared Dove (<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>)	ca. 10	Puerto Naos, Todoque, Sta. Cruz
Bolle's Pigeon (<i>Columba bollii</i>)	12	Los Tilos
White-tailed Laurel Pigeon (<i>Columba junoniae</i>)	10	Los Tilos, northern road
* Feral Pigeon (<i>Columba livia</i>)	common	everywhere
* Rose-ringed Parakeet (<i>Psittacula krameri</i>)	min. 2	Near Todoque
Plain Swift (<i>Apus unicolor</i>)	ca. 40?	Near Todoque
Berthelot's Pipit (<i>Anthus berthelotii</i>)	4/5	Salinas de Fuencaliente
White Wagtail (<i>Motacilla alba</i>)	5	El Paso
Grey Wagtail (<i>Motacilla cinerea canariensis</i>)	ca. 5	several places
European Robin (<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>)	common	montane forests
Blackbird (<i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i>)	common	everywhere
Sardinian Warbler (<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>)	common	everywhere
Blackcap (<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>)	common	everywhere
Canary Islands Chiffchaff (<i>Phylloscopus canariensis</i>)	common	everywhere
Tenerife Goldcrest (<i>Regulus teneriffae</i>)	ca. 5	several places, in pine trees
(Palma/African) Blue Tit (<i>Cyanistes ultramarinus palmensis</i>)	ca. 5	several places
Red-billed Chough (<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>)	4	Todoque, El Remo
(Atlantic) Canary (<i>Serinus canaria</i>)	common	everywhere
Linnet (<i>Carduelis cannabina meadewaldoi</i>)	common	rural areas
Chaffinch (<i>Fringilla coerebs palmae</i>)	ca. 10	Los Tilos

(* = introduced species)