

Whales & Dolphins of Madeira

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 5 June 2017



Common Dolphins

Report compiled by Martin Beaton
Images courtesy of Paul Bunting



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Tour participants: Martin Beaton (leader) and Filipe Silva (local guide) with nine Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 1st June

After an early start from Gatwick, we arrived on time at 11.40am to a warm sunny Funchal, where we were met by Filipe and conducted to our hotel, the Alto Ledo. The half hour trip to the hotel provided views of the south coast and of Funchal, which gained its name from the Fennel which once grew in this area.

A number of the group opted for an additional pelagic trip that afternoon with Filipe and, heading west out of the harbour, were fortunate to see two Sperm Whales. Others joined Martin to explore the centre of Funchal and discover the wide range of trees from around the world that are planted here:

Jacaranda (Argentina), Queensland Kwri (Australia), Flame of the Forest (Africa) and Pride of Bolivia (Bolivia); which testifies to Madeira's location at the hub of the Atlantic trade routes.

That evening we ate in the local restaurant 'Summertime', trying some of the local dishes including grilled limpets and Scabbard Fish, a deep-water species that can be simply grilled, or topped with banana or various sauces.

Day 2

Friday 2nd June

We meet at 9.30am to travel down to the marina for our pelagic, accompanied by Filipe, Marco the skipper and Vanessa a marine biologist. The weather was a little overcast with cloud over Funchal, but it was still warm and calm.

Setting out from the harbour, we soon came across our first small pod of around 20 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. These dolphins are found in the warm tropical waters of the Atlantic. The young of Spotted Dolphin are born dark and become spotted as they mature, with mature adult males reaching up to two metres. We enjoyed the company of these dolphins with good views of numbers of individuals surfing the bow wave of our boat.

Leaving this group to itself we headed further out, looking at Cory's Shearwaters gliding effortlessly past and occasionally congregating and feeding with Yellow-legged Gulls, a potential sign of feeding dolphins or whales.

We shortly found a small pod of what we initially identified as Common Dolphin, but quickly realised, as the pod began to bow wave, that these were Striped Dolphin, identified by the contrasting flanks dark above white below, but with the dividing line and stripe running eye to anus and with strips running back from the eye along the flank. This species occurs worldwide in tropical and temperate waters. They are shyer than many dolphin species and do not often mix with other species or follow the bow wave, so we were lucky with this close encounter.

Following this we also had brief views of Common Dolphin, again around thirty individuals. These are a similar size to Spotted Dolphin and difficult to separate at a distance, but closer they are readily identified by their more triangular fin, which often has a paler or white centre, and by the yellow or pale buff panel on the thorax bordered by the whiter lower flanks and dark upper head. These features were clearly observed as the dolphins rode our bow wave.

Late morning, we came across about 10 Bottle-nosed Dolphins, thought to be a resident group. These are large dolphins are identified at a distance from Spotted and Common Dolphins by their size, as adults reach up to four metres and their larger dorsal fin which has a broad base. After spending some time observing this group, we returned to the harbour for lunch, which we had in a small restaurant in the old port area of Funchal.

We returned to Ventura de Mar around 3pm for our afternoon trip. Heading further east, we saw a blow and searched for a whale, which we found and followed for some time. With a view and photographs of the head we were able to confirm that it was a Bryde's Whale, in fact a mother and calf. Bryde's Whales are very similar to Sei Whales and only definitively separated by the presence of three rostrum ridges on the upper head, which are only visible in close views.

After leaving the Bryde's Whale, we saw increasing evidence of birds congregating and a feeding frenzy of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins of which we estimated there were some 200+ individuals. There group also contained numbers of Common Spotted Dolphins.

We returned to the harbour at 6pm having enjoyed a spectacular day. That evening we ate at the restaurant Ilha.

Day 3

Saturday 3rd June

Today we met at 9am to begin our exploration of the north and west of the island, travelling initially to the viewpoint at Cabo Girao, the second highest cape in the world. Unfortunately, there was a considerable amount of cloud and visibility out to sea was poor, but we were able to look down the 580-metre cliff to the sea below.

From Cabo Girao we descended to Ribeira Brava and then north to Sao Vencente, which lies on the north coast of Madeira. Here we stopped briefly for coffee and looked at the magnificent cliff vegetation that clings to the sides of the steep cliffs along the north-west coast, including the splendid Pride of Madeira (*Echium nervosum*). There was also a fleeting glimpse of Laurel Pigeon, which occurs along the more vegetated parts of the north coast cliffs as well as in the Laurel Forest.

After coffee, we continued to Seixal and turned up into the valley of Chao de Ribeira. Here we walked for a short distance up the valley, which is dominated by steep volcanic cliffs clothed with pristine Laurel Forest: principle Canary Laurel and Madeiran Mahogany. We had good views of Laurel Pigeon, Madeiran Firecrest and Chaffinch. Returning along the track, we had a glimpse of a Long-tailed Blue butterfly and a lone Buzzard flying high in a connecting valley.

We continued our drive along the coast to Ribeira da Janela and took the road up to the flat mountain plateau of Paul da Serra. En route we stopped to look at a number of magnificent specimens of Fetid Laurel, which occupy the upper levels of the Laurel forest along with Tree Heathers. In the mist (the defining element of these cloud forests) that surrounded us, the vegetation was literally combing the moisture out of the cloud and the laurels were covered by a range of epiphytic plants. Continuing on to the top of Paul Da Serra, the cloud cleared revealing the flat plateau, and along the roadside we saw the other Pride of Madeira species, *Echium candicans*.

We stopped at Urze for coffee and had our picnic lunch. Here we saw Clouded Yellow butterflies, and Perez Frog in the stream of an adjacent small valley. After lunch, we travelled back to Funchal via Encumeada, stopping briefly to photograph the dramatic gorge of Serra de Agua, Madeira's Grand Canyon.

At 4pm we were back aboard the Ventura de Mar for another sea trip. This afternoon proved to be very quiet with little bird activity. We did however see a small Loggerhead Turtle, but it was some time until we identified a small pod of dolphin someway inshore. From the fin shape and overall size, they were a pod of about 10 Bottle-nosed Dolphins. This proved to be our only sighting for the afternoon and we finally returned to Harbour at 7pm.

That evening, we ate at the local restaurant Chancellor

Day 4

Sunday 4th June

Today we left the harbour around 9am for a long boat trip. After leaving the harbour we headed west and after a short search, encountered a small pod of Atlantic Spotted Dolphin. After following the pod and observing adults and young, we turned east. However, as we headed out, the wind had picked up and increasing white foam on distant swells made looking for cetations difficult, but we were accompanied by Cory's Sherwater and the occasional Bulwers Petrel. Finally we return to the harbour for lunch.

The afternoon proved quiet and it was some time until we observed a pod of 15 Bottle-nosed Dolphins, probably the same pod from the previous day. After some further time scanning, we headed inshore towards Faja des Padres, where we anchored and a few member of the group took the opportunity to swim. From here we headed west, along the coast and magnificent cliffs back to the harbour, arriving at 4.30pm.

We agreed to meet for an early meal at O Meiro Preto, as a number of members of the group had opted for an additional tour to look for Zino's Petrel in Madeira's mountains. The group set off at 8.30pm in a minibus, climbing up through the cloud to the peak of Pico Arieiro where we watched the sun set in a magnificent mountainous landscape which rises about the cloud base. When the sun had finally set, we set off along the mountain track for about 20 minutes to a point close to and above the Zino's Petrel breeding site. The birds only arrive after dark to nest on these precipitous mountains, so we sat and waited for the ghostly calls (local people thought the call was from departed shepherds lost on the mountain) and silhouettes of birds crossing the moonlit sky. Calls were heard and some birds were seen but the wind and cold colluded from providing a long display, and after an hour we made the return journey, glad of the comfort of the bus for our return to Funchal.

Day 5

Monday 5th June

With most of the group staying on for a few more days or joining the Naturetrek botanical tour, only a small group were collected at 9.30am for the return journey to the airport and on to Gatwick.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			1	2	3	4	5
1	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓		✓	
2	Common (or Saddleback) Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
3	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>	✓	✓		✓	
4	Bryde's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>		✓			
5	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	✓				
6	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalaba</i>		✓			

Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Desertas Petrel	<i>Pterodroma deserta</i>		✓	✓	✓	
3	Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>				✓	
4	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
5	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓		
7	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓				
10	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>		✓	✓	✓	
12	Ferel Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓			
13	Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>			✓		
14	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>	✓				
16	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabreræ</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Madeiran Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus maderensis</i>			✓		
19	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs madeirensis</i>			✓		
20	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓			
21	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Reptiles

1	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta dugesii dugesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>		✓		✓	

Amphibians

1	Perez's Frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>			✓		
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Fish

1	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>				✓	
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Butterflies

1	Madeiran Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphia</i>			✓		
2	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓		
3	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓		
4	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>			✓		
5	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>		✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			1	2	3	4	5
6	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	

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