

Whales and DOLPHINS of the AZORES

September 2010

Steve Morgan

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1 Introduction

This report describes the results of a four day trip to The Azores in September 2010 to see cetaceans and other wildlife. The trip was arranged through Naturetrek in conjunction with the ground agents CWAzores based in Madalena, Pico Island.

2 Target Species

Cetaceans were the main focus of the trip with Sperm Whale top of the list of targets. However, many different cetacean species are recorded regularly in The Azores and we harboured hopes of seeing at least one of: Sowerby's, Blainville's or Cuvier's Beaked Whale, False Killer Whale, Bryde's Whale or Sei Whale as well as any or all of the more common dolphins: Striped, Short-beaked Common, Risso's, Atlantic Spotted and Bottlenose.

The principal non-cetacean mammalian target was the Azores Noctule Bat (the world's only diurnal insectivorous bat). Other indigenous mammals on the target list were Greater Mouse-eared Bat and Common Pipstrelle. (Other terrestrial mammals are present in The Azores, such as Red Fox, Weasel, Brown Hare and European Rabbit, but these have been introduced and were not therefore of special interest).

Birds were not an important focus on this trip though obviously a significant amount of time spent spent at sea led us to expect to see one or more of the various less commonly seen shearwaters, petrels and skuas.

3 Geography

The base of operations was to be the village of Madalena on Pico Island, giving relatively close access to deep water around Pico and Faial.

4 Operations

We planned at least six half-day trips out to sea, using RIBs (Rigid Inflatable Boats) skippered by CWAzores. Finding cetaceans would be assisted by the information and direction from "vigias" – spotters with binoculars sited on hillside vantage points. These vigias were active from early morning through to late afternoon and in were in continuous radio contact with the RIBs. Thus they could not only find cetaceans but also direct RIBs to the right areas to come into close contact with them.

5 The Team

The group was as follows:

Toby Abrehart (Naturetrek tour leader)

Enrico Villa (CWAzores cetacean guide)

Justin Hart (CWAzores bird guide)

Guy Wilkerson

Rodney Veazey

Tony Mainwood

Helen Mainwood

Steve Morgan.

6 Day-by-day Activities and Results

We managed to get out to sea on no fewer than seven occasions, the weather being generally very kind to us. The following is a day-by-day account of how we fared.

Tuesday September 14th

A very smooth and uneventful outward journey saw us reach Horta on the island of Faial in mid-afternoon. The weather looked favourable with pleasantly warm sunshine, a light breeze and a more or less calm sea. The forecast predicted a front moving southwards later in the week but nothing worse than overcast skies and the odd shower was expected. We were optimistic that our full quota of six half-day excursions would be realised.

The harbour at Horta produced a few common birds: Yellow-legged Gull (Azorean race), Common Tern, House Sparrow and Starling. And on the short ferry crossing to Madalena on Pico Island we added Cory's Shearwater, a species that proved subsequently to be both common and abundant.

Our hotel on Pico, the Hotel Caravelas, was conveniently situated on the seafront opposite the small harbour and a few minutes' walk away was the office of CWAzores, our boat operator for the trip. Dania, of CWAzores was on the quayside to meet us and drive our bags the hundred metres to the hotel. Later, having settled in, we strolled along the seafront to seek refreshment and whilst lounging under the shade of a convenient tree with our beers we added European Wall Lizard and Ruddy Turnstone to our list of fauna.

Eventually we stirred ourselves sufficiently to spruce ourselves up back at the hotel and meet Tony and Helen Mainwood, who had already been birding in the Azores for a few days. A very relaxed alfresco dinner was taken at the convivial Simpatria Cafe in the town square – accompanied by dozens of Starlings coming in to roost.

Wednesday September 15th

After breakfast we gathered at CWAzores' premises for a briefing on the cetaceans of the Azores given by Enrico Villa, the proprietor of the operation and the husband of Dania, whom we had met the afternoon before. Thus informed, we donned life jackets and waterproofs and headed for the RIB (rigid inflatable boat) moored a short distance away in the harbour.

The RIB is a Zodiac-style inflatable dinghy with a capacity for about sixteen passengers sitting astride two longitudinal benches. Powered by an outboard motor it is quick and manoeuvrable and small enough to get "up close and personal" with cetaceans once they have been located. And it has to be acknowledged that used in conjunction with our land-based "vigias" (spotters), who keep in radio contact with the RIBs, they can be extremely effective at getting close to cetaceans. However, the

RIB offers an excruciatingly uncomfortable ride in heavy seas, as we soon to discover. Guy, (accurately), described a RIB excursion into the wind as like “riding a bicycle down a flight of stairs”.

It transpired that the vigias had seen Sperm Whales to the north of the harbour and thus we (and other boats) lost no time in getting going. A rather stiff breeze had got up overnight and in the exposed waters to the north, into which we ploughed, conditions were not ideal. We assessed the sea state at about 4.0, with white-caps quite frequent. And, with the RIB battling directly into a north wind, we got our first taste of the bone-jarring rodeo ride that is the hallmark of this type of boat.

But before too long we had reached what Enrico promisingly called the “Sperm Whale Zone” and slowed down to scan for signs of the Sperm whale’s curious forward and leftward blow. We hadn’t long to wait and soon we were once more crunching into the swell heading toward two distant blows. They belonged to a mother and calf who treated us to quite close views at forty metres or so, the latter several times “peduncle diving” to feed on the mother’s milk. We also found several males, identifiable by their more bulbous melons and more prominent “knuckles” – one male actually breaching, much to the delight of those lucky enough to see it. In all we saw at least five animals – possibly seven – all performing well with a nice repertoire of shallow dives, turns and deep dives. Of course the last of these is the most spectacular, the whale bending its back to reveal its dorsal fin, tailstock and knuckles before finally bringing its mighty flukes up to the vertical before sliding downwards into the abyssal depths below. All of these manoeuvres are conducted in a peculiarly deliberate and stately fashion, which Toby (unkindly!) describes as “lugubrious”. Eventually, having had our fill of Sperm Whale, we left these fantastic creatures in peace and headed back to Madalena for an early lunch. We had made a terrific start!

Our afternoon ride saw us turning south into slightly less choppy waters and, with the wind now at our backs, we skipped along at a good rate. Our somewhat purposeful progress led me to think the vigias must have seen something, though the crew were tight-lipped and cryptically told us to keep our fingers crossed. About a mile or so offshore we found a Loggerhead Turtle but, after a short stop to take pictures, we were soon zipping along again in pursuit of whatever had been spotted. We were heading well offshore and, at the distance we had soon covered, we surmised that our target must be either more Sperm Whales or perhaps baleen whales (since only a large blow would be visible at very long range). Toby suggested Blue but my money was on Sei as Sei Whales are known to return to the Azores in small numbers early in the winter season and I expected other baleens to be unlikely in September.

It turned out that we were both wrong. Two large vertical bushy blows ahead revealed that we were indeed destined to find baleens. But which species? We got to within around a hundred metres and cut the motor. Ahead of us a large snorting blow heralded the slow rise and fall of a long black back and, at the last, a smallish, fairly vertically positioned and falcate dorsal fin. I was still “thinking Sei” but another blow and surfacing sequence revealed that these were in fact Fin Whales, despite the slightly misleading shape of the dorsal on one of the two animals. We watched the pair for about half an hour, eventually getting a broadside view of one animal at only about twenty metres. I had seen a fair number of Fin Whales before in Biscay – but never at this range and never this well!

On our return we found a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins which we had been told previously were uncharacteristically large in the Azores. They weren’t wrong! One or two of the group were

positively huge and we treated to a display of breaching, rolling and bow-riding, some of the animals being visible at only a few metres from the bow of the RIB. Quite a sight in these crystal clear waters! Interestingly, one animal (a well-known female apparently) seemed extraordinarily thin and its ribs were clearly visible as it porpoised along beside us.

It had been a really productive and enjoyable day with three cetacean species very well seen. The weather seemed to be easing and we returned to Madalena in warm sunshine. That evening we dined at the "Parisiana" where, for a princely Euro 8.50 one can fill one's plate to overflowing from the self-service buffet.

Thursday September 16th

We set out, southwards once more, in calm warm and sunny conditions and a sea state of around 2.0 to 2.5. Not far out, Enrico brought us to an unexpected stop and, to our surprise, pointed out a large shoal of Dolphinfish, clearly visible in the limpid waters around us. These are quite stunning fish – ultramarine blue along the back and bright yellow below and on the fins. Some were half a metre long. There were certainly over a hundred fish in the shoal and Enrico admitted that he had never seen so many together before.

But it turned out that our main target for the morning was to be the Fin Whales, which the vigia had spotted well out to sea again. So we set off again, only to be interrupted by some dolphins gently porpoising along ahead of us. They were moving fairly slowly and we soon caught up. The large erect dorsals, the blunt, bulbous melons and the white scarring on many of the animals revealed that these were Risso's Dolphins. We soon realised that there were dolphins in all directions and that the pod contained possibly two hundred animals. A fantastic sight! But with the Fins waiting for us and the location of the Risso pod now known we decided to head for the Fins and return to the Rissos later.

And soon we found several other boats on the horizon, drifting with their engines cut. This could only mean that the Fins were close and sure enough we quickly found two large blows to the right of the little flotilla. The two whales kept their distance and indulged in continuous shallow diving – a behaviour which continued until all but one other boat eventually departed.

As the scene became quieter the whales seemed to visibly relax and drifted closer to us giving us superb broadside views at twenty, fifteen then a mere ten metres. We quietly manouevred ourselves to the right of one whale allowing us a great view of its white lower right-sided jaw (the left lower jaw is dark). And just when we thought it couldn't get much better one animal turned and headed directly towards our lower starboard side. At the last moment it made a shallow dive and, still visible below the surface, passed serenely under our stern and away amidships on our port side. We gaped at each other with open mouths – did that really happen? To peer down and see a Fin Whale only a few metres away practically beneath one's feet is a remarkable experience indeed.

Having now "done" Fin Whale we decided to head back to the pod of Risso's Dolphins where another boat was already on the scene. As before, the Rissos seemed to be everywhere – but this time we had a pleasant addition to the programme – a group of Short-finned Pilot Whales had joined the action and we had good, though sadly brief, views of the newcomers.

We returned to Madalena in a state of mild euphoria and celebrated with a beer at the Simpatria in the shade of our favourite tree in the square.

The afternoon, not surprisingly, was a little anti-climactic. We found Sperm Whales quite some way out to the south and enjoyed leisurely views in warm sunshine and on a gently rolling sea. The crew had brought the hydrophone equipment and we took turns at listening to the clicks and trills of Sperm Whales communicating with each other. The photographers among us took countless shots of the whales and of Pico Mountain (quite a backdrop!) – and all was at peace in the world.

That evening saw us back at the now familiar Simpatria after which Toby was energetic enough to take a walk along the seafront and was rewarded with two species of bat – Common Pipistrelle and (probably) Greater Mouse-eared Bat.

Friday September 17th

Our luck seemed to be holding with the weather and a gentle sea state of 2.0 awaited us. Again the crew were secretive about what the vigias had seen but after turning southwards we surmised that Sperm Whale was once more on the menu.

Making brisk progress into open sea we soon spotted activity ahead and were delighted to see a pod of Striped Dolphins in typically vigorous mood. Whereas other species might be content to porpoise their way sinuously across the ocean, Striped Dolphins exuberantly catapult themselves along, like children on a bouncy castle. Time after time animals will fling themselves high into the air, their tails thrashing manically to maintain momentum for as long as gravity allows them before, reluctantly and inevitably, they come crashing down and one or more of their fellows takes up the charge. No doubt science will attribute this behaviour to some hard-headed evolutionary advantage – but to the untrained eye it seems that the animals are simply having the time of their lives!

Our expectation of imminent Sperm Whales was correct and shortly thereafter we encountered at least six animals logging peacefully in a gently rolling swell. These included a female and calf, the latter engaging from time to time in a little peduncle diving. We stayed with this group for a while, the photographers amassing yet more shots of Sperm Whale before heading back in leisurely style via the lava caves east of Madalena.

Here, the sea has worn deep and impressive gaps in the rocky lava cliffs and we meandered in and out of several to see what might be at home. The first two contained only Feral Pigeons but the third delivered a much wanted prize – the Azores Noctule Bat – the only insectivorous bat in the world to hunt in broad daylight. The Azorean species, now separated by genetic analysis from the crepuscular and nocturnal European Noctule Bat, has evolved to operate diurnally because of the absence of hawks or falcons on the islands. The Azores does have one bird of prey, the Common Buzzard, but that species is too slow and cumbersome to trouble the fast and nimble bats. And to prove the point, a Common Buzzard did indeed pass over the cliff tops at that very moment. The cameo was completed nicely when, turning back to sea, a Spotted Sandpiper zipped past.

Our return to Madalena brought a temporary pause to our whale-watching and we spent the afternoon birding a few likely spots around the island.

Our first port of call was a nesting site for Corys Shearwaters and our bird guide, Justin, astounded us by plunging his hand into the lava rocks and plucking out a protesting chick. I was expecting a ball of fluff small enough to fit comfortably into the palm of his hand, but amazingly the chick was enormous and required both hands to hold and restrain it. And, despite its downy appearance, it already sported a ferocious looking bill and an attitude problem severe enough to suggest it might use it to ill effect!

We proceeded thence to Lajes where there is a harbour and a number of vegetated lava rockpools known to hold transient or vagrant waders from time to time. Sure enough, the anticipated waders were at home and we found Long-billed Dowitcher, Semi-palmated and Grey Plover and Semi-palmated, White-rumped and Least Sandpiper. Walking on the lava rocks was a tricky business and more than once an untimely stumble produced a startlingly profane imprecation from the fallen. The harbour itself held quite a few Common Terns and two Grey Herons – as well as at least one feral Muscovy Duck. By now the sun was blazing in all its glory and, wilting from the heat, we took refreshment at a conveniently situated cafe nearby.

With some relief we left behind the breathless heat of Lajes and ascended a minor road into the foothills of Pico Mountain. Here we encountered a rather surreal mosaic of open pasture and dwarf forest, superintended incongruously by a modern windfarm. We were bound for several lakes and ponds that usually held a few interesting birds but stopped along the way to admire a number of Azores Noctule Bats hawking insects above areas of dwarf forest. A little later we were at a secluded and well-weeded pond where Toby and a few like-minded members of the group went in search of butterflies and damselflies. I wandered off in a slightly different direction and found myself beside a tiny stream. As I approached I heard a series of little plops, betraying (I surmised) the presence of amphibians. And a more stealthy approach further along the stream confirmed my suspicion. Quite a plump olive-green frog presented himself, his bold yellow dorsal stripe making subsequent identification easy. This was the Iberian Water Frog, one of three species of frog on the islands (the others, I discovered, being Edible Frog and Marsh Frog).

Other ponds produced Teal, Tufted Duck and European Coot as well as fine views of another Azores Noctule Bat, this time displaying perfectly in the late afternoon light against a backdrop of pine trees, its rusty orange chest clearly visible. Returning to Madalena we added European Rabbit to our mammal list, though not Feral Ferret which, I understand from previous trip reports, is common along these minor roads on Pico.

Saturday September 18th

Rather than continue with terrestrial birding (the original plan) we paid an extra forty Euros each to take an additional boat excursion in search of petrels, shearwaters and indeed anything else, avian or mammalian, that might cross our path. With bird guide Justin at the helm and Enrico riding shotgun, we set off into the wild and woolly waters to the north of Madalena. The prevailing north wind had freshened and quite a choppy sea greeted us. The area was unvigiated and so we were ignorant of what might or might not be lying ahead. Nevertheless, full of hope, we battled our way out into the teeth of the oncoming swell, the RIB juddering and belly-flopping beneath us.

Our first find of the morning came as a bit of a surprise – a flying fish. Incredibly they actually seem to fly! Using their specially evolved pectoral fins as wings they whirr along about a couple of feet

above the surface for as much as thirty or forty metres before tiring and slipping back into the water. We saw at least four throughout the morning.

About two miles out we chanced upon a pod of Striped Dolphins being their usual carefree selves and performing with abandon. Having had superb views previously we didn't force the issue and allowed them to go on their way more or less undisturbed.

Off the headland of Sao Jorge Island we found a fishing boat and went in close to see whether any petrels or other pelagic birds were in attendance. As expected, a number of Cory's Shearwaters were around but more significantly a Greater Shearwater was also present – a new bird for our trip list. We were later to see a number of this species, including one fine specimen at very close range and a lone Manx Shearwater amid a multitude of the ubiquitous Cory's.

Progressing ever northward we got as far as a well-known underwater mountain where the water shallowed to a mere three hundred metres or so. Here, we found (amid various items of flotsam) a plastic bucket floating past. Justin remarked that debris such as this often attracted Trigger Fish – and, incredibly, one was there using the bucket as cover. Justin even suggested that Trigger Fish especially liked buckets as, in the event of a predator approaching, they could save themselves by jumping in! Later, we found an old plastic milk crate; (it's remarkable what one can find floating around in the middle of the Atlantic!); and that too had attracted Trigger Fish. This time, quite improbably, a whole shoal had taken up residence.

However, the serious birders among us were disappointed not to find at least one of the less common petrels – most likely being Wilson's Petrel – and had to be satisfied with the Greater Shearwaters that seemed to be fairly common in this area north of Pico. With time passing we turned around, our return journey with the prevailing wind taking rather less than half the time of the outward one.

The afternoon saw our final boat excursion. That morning, while we had been looking for petrels, another group (diving rather than whale-watching) had found a mixed pod of Common and Spotted Dolphins. So we were optimistic that we might encounter them too, (the dolphins that is, not the divers).

Nevertheless, it transpired that the vigias had seen nothing so far and so we marked time by exploring a few lava caves in the eroded remains of an old caldera off Faial. The geological tour eventually drew to an end and at last we set off eastwards into open sea and the familiar area of deep water south of Pico. For a long time we bounced along on waters almost as choppy as they had been earlier that morning. It seemed that we were simply heading toward a promising area hoping something would turn up, an impression confirmed when we eventually cut the motor and allowed ourselves to drift while we scanned for signs of life. We had learned by now that radio chatter with the vigias promised imminent action (as they sought to direct us to recently observed cetacean activity) but the radio silence that had prevailed so far did not bode well.

With little to be gained by bouncing around uncomfortably in the exposed deeps offshore we retreated inshore a little, apparently to bide our time while the vigias came up with something. Then, out of the blue, something breached ahead of us. I saw a big splash – which might have been a

large fish (for example tuna or swordfish) or, tantalisingly, a beaked whale – but despite circling the area we found nothing.

A little later, a sudden burst of radio chatter had us retracing our steps back out into deeper offshore waters. The protracted chatter and sudden burst of acceleration led us to believe (correctly as it later turned out) that the vigias had finally found something. And not long after we did indeed get on the scoresheet: with a nice pod of Short-beaked Common Dolphins. After hours of aimless wandering we had at last got something to look at! The Commons were in good form and produced an entertaining display of porpoising, breaching and bow-riding. Thinking that it might be the pod that the swimmers had seen earlier I hoped for Atlantic Spotted Dolphins too but it was not to be. Nevertheless it was a fine and very welcome spectacle.

More radio chatter had us on our way again and clearly things now were hotting up. There was a rumour that a Sowerby’s Beaked Whale had been seen breaching and a sudden flurry of activity ahead had Toby calling to that effect. But, on reaching the spot, we discovered a pod of seven or eight Short-finned Pilot Whales – a fine sight in the afternoon sunshine but not the gems we had built up our hopes for. The Pilots came in quite close and we had superb views at twenty metres or less. At that range the extraordinary grunting that they emit whilst blowing can be heard very clearly and each blow heralds a typically slow surfacing sequence during which the rounded dorsal fin (looking like a “Smurf’s hat”) seems to remain visible for an age. After the brief sighting we had previously had it was good to get a more comprehensive sighting at leisure. Nevertheless, it was also disappointing, as we later discovered, to miss the Sowerby’s by a whisker. The vigias had seen the Sowerby’s breaching and had been directing us to the spot – where by co-incidence we had stumbled across the Pilots.

Time was now very much against us and we had to call it a day. It had been tough going in the unhelpful conditions but at least we had made a couple of good sightings. The fine close-range views of the Pilots was a fitting end to what had certainly been a very successful four days. That evening we dined on grilled perch, washed down with Azorean white wine, in celebration of a job well done.

Sunday September 19th

We rose at a moderately ungodly hour to take an early breakfast and catch the 08.15 ferry back to Horta. At the airport, with several hours to kill, we set ourselves up as erstwhile vigias, lounging on a grassy rise overlooking the sea in the hope of glimpsing a distant blow or breach. And, somewhat surprisingly, we succeeded! Toby’s sharp eyes spotted a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins passing by quite close inshore and for twenty minutes or so we had not too distant views. But, all too soon, it was time to board our flight back to Lisbon and begin the tedious journey home.

8 Detailed Record of Sightings

8.1 Mammals Recorded

Species	Latin Name	14/9	15/9	16/9	17/9	18/9	19/9
Sperm Whale	Physeter Macrocephalus		X	X	X		
Fin Whale	Balaenoptera Physalus		X	X	X		
Short-finned Pilot Whale	Globicephala Macrorhynchus			X		X	

Risso's Dolphin	Grampus Griseus			X			
Common Dolphin	Delphinus Delphis					X	
Striped Dolphin	Stenella Coeruleoalba			X	X		
Bottlenose Dolphin	Tursiops Truncatus		X				X
Azores Noctule Bat	Nyctalus Azoreas			X	X		
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus Cuniculus				X		
Total Species	9						

8.2 Birds Recorded

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Great Shearwater	Puffinus Gravis	At least a dozen in open sea north of Madalena.
Cory's Shearwater	Calonectris Diomedea	Abundant at sea and along lava cliffs.
Manx Shearwater	Puffinus Puffinus	One in open sea north of Madalena.
Great White Egret	Egretta Alba	One in vineyard east of madalena.
Little Egret	Egretta Garzetta	Two at Lajes.
Grey Heron	Ardea Cinerea	Two at Lajes.
Teal	Anas Crecca	Two on Pico.
Tufted Duck	Aythya Fuligula	One on Pico.
Common Buzzard	Buteo Buteo	Two on Pico; one at Horta.
European Coot	Fulica Atra	Two on Pico.
Grey Plover	Pluvialis Squatarola	Two at Lajes.
Semi-palmated Plover	Charadrius Semipalmatus	One at Lajes near harbour.
Spotted Sandpiper	Actitis Macularia	One near Madalena.
Semi-palmated Sandpiper	Calidris Pusilla	One at Lajes.
Least Sandpiper	Calidris Minutilla	Several in lava rockpools at Lajes.
White-rumped Sandpiper	Calidris Fuscicollis	Several in lava rockpools at Lajes.
Long-billed Dowitcher	Limnodromus Scolopaceus	One at Lajes.
Whimbrel	Numenius Phaeopus	Two at Lajes.
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria Interpres	Common along rocky coastline.
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus Cacchinans	Common around harbours and shorelines.
Common Tern	Sterna Hirundo	Abundant throughout.
Feral Pigeon	Columba Livia	Common along lava cliffs and caves.
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla Cinerea	Common in towns and environs.
Robin	Erithacus Rubecula	One at Horta airport.
Blackbird	Turdus Merula	Several around Pico.
Starling	Sturnus Vulgaris	Roosting flock in Madalena.
House Sparrow	Passer Domesticus	Common in habitation, especially Horta.
Chaffinch	Fringila Colebs	One on Pico.
Canary	Serinus Canaria	Several flocks on Pico.
Total Species 29		

8.3 Other Sightings of Interest

Species	Latin Name	Notes
<i>Flying Fish</i>	<i>Pisces Volucris?</i>	<i>Four in open sea north of Madalena.</i>
<i>Gray Triggerfish</i>	<i>Balistes Carolinensis?</i>	<i>Several groups and individuals at sea.</i>
Dolphinfish	Coryphaena Hippurus	Shoal of 100+ at sea south of Pico.

<i>Tuna Spp</i>	<i>Thunnus Spp</i>	<i>Several individuals leaping in open sea.</i>
Iberian Water Frog	Pelophylax Perezi	Several along stream on Pico.
Loggerhead Turtle	Caretta Caretta	Two at sea off Madalena.
European Wall Lizard	Podarcis Muralis	Common on Pico.
Total Species 7		

(Species in italics represent “best guesses” rather than definite specific identifications).