

LA PALMA (CANARY ISLANDS)

23 – 30 November 2009

Introduction

After a trip I did with my non-birding father to El Hierro and Tenerife in March 2007 (see: http://www.travellingbirder.com/tripreports/view_birding_tripreport.php?id=218) we decided to visit La Palma to see the ‘palmensis’ Blue Tit, now split in the Netherlands as Palma Blue Tit. La Palma also has some other endemic (sub)species on offer, notably *ellenthalerae* Canary Islands Goldcrest and *palmae* Chaffinch, both potential splits.

During an 8-day visit we stayed at the Taburiente Playa, a 4-star hotel at Los Cancajos, conveniently situated close to the airport, Santa Cruz and the laurels-forests at the east-coast of this beautiful island. We also hired a car for the whole week, which we used to explore the island. For a remote Atlantic island both car-hire and petrol (€ 0,77/litre) is surprisingly cheap.

We had rain on the first and last day of our stay, but during the 6 days in between the temperature rose to 25°C and we had sunny weather all along with little or no wind.

Palma Blue Tit proved to be an easy bird to find and we already saw it on our first day in the field. You certainly don't need to spend a whole week on La Palma if you only want to see this bird, a long weekend will do. We had more trouble getting a good look at both endemic pigeons.

We visited the famous Los Tilos twice but found it a little disappointing. It was often quite busy with noisy people and we didn't hear or see a single Laurel Pigeon. Bolle's Pigeon on the other hand was quite conspicuous and we did get some nice views, including some perched birds close to the path to the Espignon Atravesado. This track starts from the parking behind a wooden building and is easy to find and walk.

We discovered that the best area for both pigeons is the Cubo de la Galga. The visitor centre to this beautiful wooded gorge is well indicated and lies right along the LP-1, in between two tunnels, about 25 km north of Santa Cruz. You can park the car at the visitor centre and walk (2-3 km) to the end of this gorge. We did this walk twice and found dozens of pigeons, mostly heard but also several seen. I was especially happy with the wonderful views of a perched Laurel Pigeon in the open, after a long search on our first visit. Several more were seen in some sort of display-flight over the forest with the tail spread, making the white in the tail clearly visible. Judging by the number of cooing birds that we heard, the ratio between Bolle's Pigeon and Laurel Pigeon is about 2 to 1. Bolle's Pigeon sounds like a hoarse Wood Pigeon and Laurel Pigeon from some distance like the mooing of a cow, so they are easily separated by sound. Actually seeing a Laurel Pigeon is however quite a challenge.

Systematic list of birds recorded

The following birds were recorded during this trip. The taxonomy is according to the Dutch committee for avian systematics (CSNA).

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea cinerea*

Three birds recorded at the reservoir near Celta was the sole observation during this trip.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta garzetta*

Only seen twice at the coast near Los Cancajos.

Buzzard *Buteo buteo insularum*

A few birds recorded at Laguna de Barlovento (2) and Cubo de la Galga (3).

Canary Islands endemic subspecies and a resident breeding bird on all islands, but scarce on the eastern islands.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus granti*

Only one bird seen: one soaring over the Cubo de la Galga on our last day.

Macaronesian endemic subspecies (Canary Islands and Madeira). In the Canary Islands breeds on El Hierro, La Palma, Gomera and Tenerife.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus canariensis*

A few birds were seen at most places visited.

Canary Islands endemic subspecies (El Hierro, La Palma, Gomera, Tenerife and Gran Canaria) and a common roadside bird. On the eastern islands the subspecies *dacotiae* occurs, another Canary Islands endemic subspecies.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres interpres*

Only one was seen at the Salinas near Punta Fuencaliente.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis ssp.*

Rather common along the coast but nowhere large numbers except at the rubbish-dump north of Santa Cruz (150+).

Birds from the Canary Islands, Madeira and the Selvagens are usually separated as *atlantis*, but perhaps they should be included in the nominate *michahellis*, with only the birds from the Azores separated as true *atlantis*.

Rock / Feral Dove *Columba livia livia / Columba 'domesticus'*

We did not differentiate between 'wild' and 'feral' birds. We did see birds with the right set of characters in urban areas, but also obviously feral birds high up in the mountains. If there are any pure 'wild' birds left, they belong to the nominate *livia*.

Bolle's Pigeon *Columba bollii*

- 24-11 4 at Los Tilos, from the parking area, in trees at the opposite site of the valley
25-11 10+ at Los Tilos, along the first part of the track to the Espignón Atravesado, including 3 perched at close range
26-11 15+ at Cubo de la Galga, mostly heard
29-11 30+ at Cubo de la Galga, mostly heard but several seen

Canary Islands endemic. Not scarce in Laurel forest on La Palma, Gomera and Tenerife, but very scarce on El Hierro. Easy to hear but rather difficult to see in the areas that we visited.

Laurel Pigeon *Columba junoniae*

- 26-11 8 at Cubo de la Galga, mostly heard but 2 seen in flight and 1 perched
29-11 15+ at Cubo de la Galga, mostly heard but 2 seen in flight

Canary Islands endemic. Less common compared to Bolle's Pigeon. Easy to separate by song from Bolle's Pigeon and unmistakable in flight but definitely much more difficult to see.

Collared / Barbary Dove *Streptopelia decaocto decaocto* / *Streptopelia 'risoria'*

Collared Doves were seen in most towns and villages, sometimes showing characters between Collared and Barbary Doves. Probably most or all originate from escaped or introduced birds.

Berthelot's Pipit *Anthus berthelotii*

We recorded only a handful of birds at the Punta Fuencaliente and El Pinar, but mentioned as common in other reports.

Macaronesian endemic (Canary Islands, Madeira, Selvagens). Birds from the Canary Islands and Selvagens are usually separated as *berthelotii* (and those from Madeira as *madeirensis*) but is considered monotypic here following 'Pipits & Wagtails' by Alström and Zetterström.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea cinerea*

Single birds recorded at Santa Cruz and the reservoir near Celta.

Birds from the Canary Islands are usually separated as *canariensis* but are included here in the nominate *cinerea* following 'Pipits & Wagtails' by Alström and Zetterström.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula rubecula*

Rather common in forests and recorded near Tagoja and at Los Tilos, El Pinar and Cubo de la Galga.

Robins breeding on El Hierro, La Palma and Gomera, somewhat surprisingly, all belong to the nominate *rubecula*. Robins breeding on Tenerife are now split as Tenerife Robin *Erithacus superbus*. The situation regarding Tenerife Robin on Gran Canaria has yet to be clarified, this could be another subspecies or even a separate (cryptic) species: Gran Canaria Robin *Erithacus (superbus) marionae*.

Blackbird *Turdus merula cabrerae*

Common in parks, gardens and forests.

Macaronesian endemic subspecies (Canary Islands and Madeira). A common breeding bird on the five western Canary Islands.

Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis*

Only recorded near Punta Fuencaliente with several heard and one showing well between the lighthouse and the Salinas.

Macaronesian endemic subspecies (Canary Islands, Madeira, Cape Verde Islands). A fairly common resident breeding bird on all Canary Islands. Birds from the more humid western Canary Islands are darker than birds from the arid eastern islands (and approach the nominate *conspicillata*), a situation which is identical to the situation on the Cape Verde Islands.

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala melanocephala*

Common in all vegetated areas along the coast and at Los Tilos and Fuencaliente (Los Canarios).

Birds from the Canary Islands are sometimes separated as *leucogastra* but are included here in the nominate *melanocephala* for various reasons following 'Sylvia Warblers' by Shirihai, Gargallo & Helbig. The situation regarding (aberrant) Sardinian Warblers on Gran Canaria has yet to be clarified, this could be another subspecies or even a separate (cryptic) species, although from my own (limited) experience I cannot tell any differences from birds on Tenerife.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla heineken*

Rather common in vegetated areas and recorded at Los Cancajos, Santa Cruz, Los Tilos and Cubo de la Galga.

This subspecies also occurs on Madeira and in Portugal and south-west Spain. The nominate *atricapilla* is a migrant and winterer.

Canary Islands Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus canariensis canariensis*

One of the most common birds and recorded from sea-level to at least 2200 metres above sea-level (at Pico de la Nieve). Even recorded in the grounds of our hotel in Los Cancajos.

Canary Islands endemic (El Hierro, La Palma, Gomera, Tenerife, Gran Canaria). An abundant resident breeding bird. The form *exsul*, that occurred only on Lanzarote, is sadly extinct. This taxon is split from both Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* and Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus* (formerly named *Phylloscopus brehmii*).

Canary Islands Goldcrest *Regulus (teneriffae) ellenthalerae*

Common in mixed and deciduous forest. Often noisy, conspicuous and tame and therefore easy to find.

Canary Islands endemic. This taxon has only recently been described and is probably another cryptic species that occurs on La Palma and El Hierro. See:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mksg/jab/2006/00000037/00000004/art00011;jsessionid=aqhd0kc6jp6q3.alice?format=print> . The nominate subspecies occurs on Gomera and Tenerife.

Palma Blue Tit*Cyanistes palmensis*

- 24-11 2 near Tagoja, along the LP4
- 24-11 3+ at Los Tilos, at the first part of the track to the Mirador de las Barandas
- 25-11 2 at Los Tilos, at the first part of the track to the Espignón Atravesado
- 25-11 2 at the Parco recreativo Laguna de Barlovento
- 26-11 10+ at Cubo de la Galga
- 29-11 12+ at Cubo de la Galga

La Palma endemic and the main reason for me to come to La Palma. Turned out to be a rather common bird in forested areas, but rather unobtrusive. Not seen in coastal areas. All observations are listed above.

This taxon is considered monotypic after the splitting of the *Caeruleus*-group as Blue Tit, *ultramarines* (including the former subspecies 'degener' from Fuerteventura and Lanzarote) and *cyrenaicae* as Ultramarine Blue Tit, *teneriffae* as Tenerife Blue Tit (Gomera and Tenerife), *ombriosus* as Hierro Blue Tit (El Hierro) and the recently described *hedwigii* as Gran Canaria Blue Tit (Gran Canaria).

Chough*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax barbarus*

Recorded all over the island, sometimes in large groups, for instance 70+ over the Cubo de la Galga and 80+ near Las Indias.

This subspecies has a strange distribution, occurring in north-west Africa and (in the Canary Islands) only on La Palma.

Raven*Corvus corax ssp.*

Only recorded twice: two birds along the road near Pico de la Nieve and two birds near the rubbish-dump north of Santa Cruz.

Birds from the Canary Islands are sometimes separated as *canariensis*, but the validity of this subspecies has been questioned and it is perhaps better to include them in the subspecies *tingitanus* that also occurs in North Africa. This subspecies itself is sometimes considered a separate species (African Common Raven), see the article in Dutch Birding, volume 28, no. 5, 2006.

Spanish Sparrow*Passer hispaniolensis hispaniolensis*

Only a few seen near Los Cancajos and Santa Cruz.

Chaffinch*Fringilla (coelebs) palmae*

- 24-11 5+ near Tagoja, along the LP4
- 24-11 12 at Los Tilos, at the Visitor Centre
- 25-11 8 at Los Tilos, at the first part of the track to the Espignón Atravesado
- 26-11 4+ at Cubo de la Galga
- 29-11 10+ at Cubo de la Galga

La Palma endemic subspecies. A rather scarce and localised bird, only found in mixed and deciduous forest. All observations are listed above.

This subspecies is part of the *Canariensis*-group, which consist of the subspecies *palmae* (La Palma), *canariensis*, synonym *tintillon* (Gomera, Tenerife, Gran Canaria), *ombriosa* (El Hierro), *maderensis* (Madeira) and *moreletti* (Azores). These taxa are sometimes considered a separate species (Atlantic Chaffinch) or even 5 different species. A potential split.

Canary

Serinus canaria

One of the most common birds, recorded at almost all places we visited.

Macaronesian endemic (Canary Islands, Madeira, Azores). In the Canary Islands this is a common bird (except on the eastern islands), recorded in a variety of habitats.

We did not see the following endemic (sub)species, that breed on La Palma. I saw all these sub(species) however during earlier trips to the Canary Islands:

- **Cory's Shearwater** *Calonectris diomedea*
(nor did we see any other shearwaters or petrels despite some hours of sea-watching)
- **Stone-curlew** *Burhinus oedicephalus distinctus*
- **Long-eared Owl** *Asio otus canariensis*
- **Plain Swift** *Apus unicolor*
(apparently common in summer)
- **Lesser Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella rufescens rufescens*
(there are strong indications that the subspecies *polatzeki* is a synonym of the nominate subspecies *rufescens*. In a recent study no genetic differences could be detected between both subspecies. The difference in appearance is therefore likely to have an environmental rather than a taxonomic origin. If this proves to be true, all birds in the Canary Islands should be assigned to *rufescens*, which was described earlier. Lesser Short-toed lark is apparently a very scarce breeding bird on La Palma, mostly recorded in the dry southern part of the island)
- **Linnet** *Carduelis cannabina meadewaldoi*
(in some reports mentioned as 'common')
- **Trumpeter Finch** *Bucanetes githagineus amantum*
(a vagrant, occasional visitor or breeding bird ?).

For any questions, remarks, et cetera please contact:

E.J. Alblas, The Netherlands
ej.alblas@kpnplanet.nl