

## Fuerteventura in February

Peter and Rosemary Royle, February 8<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> 2017

### Introduction

The reason for this trip was to hopefully get some warm sunshine in a miserable February and to see 5 species of birds. The obvious ones were Houbara Bustard and Fuerteventura Stonechat (now apparently called Canary Island Chat) but we also wanted to catch up with Trumpeter Finch – becoming something of a bogey bird for us as we had missed it in several countries, and similarly Barbary Partridge having missed this in Tenerife and Tunisia. The fifth bird was African Collared Dove, now native on Fuerteventura and we had learnt that there was one paired with a Collared Dove in the hotel where we were staying! We achieved the bird objectives most satisfactorily but I'm afraid the tan remains at it's rather pallid level at which we embarked on the plane at Bristol!



### Reference material

We used the "Crossbill Guide, Canary Islands – 1" extensively for this trip and found it very good for understanding the wider ecology of these rather unusual islands as well as very good for birding routes. (It is a rather expensive book but well worth it) We also had a copy of the really old Tony Clarke book "A birdwatcher's guide to the Canary Islands" – this was mostly completely out of date especially where it dealt with access to sites. We also referred heavily to the Honeyguide 2015 trip report. An extremely useful summary of birding sites is provided by Killan Wasmer cross-referencing all the available sources:

[https://www.cloudbirders.com/tripreport/repository/WASMER\\_Fuerteventura.pdf](https://www.cloudbirders.com/tripreport/repository/WASMER_Fuerteventura.pdf)

For navigation we used the excellent "Fuerteventura Super-Durable Waterproof Map", bought from Amazon.

### Logistics

The Honeyguide group stayed at Casa Vieja in La Oliva so we followed their example and found it an excellent hotel and perfect location. We hired a 4WD Jeep Renegade from Cicar – it cost €302 which included zero excess CDW. (Cicar were easy to use and the zero excess CDW was a blessing). We saw many people driving non-4WD cars on the tracks across the island but this seemed a risky pursuit – we felt much happier in a 4WD. We flew from Bristol on a cheap Easyjet flight which was fine.

### Weather

We could see from the forecast before we went that the weather was set to seriously deteriorate while we were there (it had been sunshine and 20° for many weeks). The forecast was right. Only at the beginning and the end did we have the weather we would have liked – sunny, some cloud, light breeze. In the middle we had one wet day, one very windy and showery day and one genuinely stormy day on which birdwatching was almost impossible. (On the wet day, we could see it looked drier further south so we indeed went south and had less rain. This turned out to be a good ruse as it was very wet in the north all day). It was often quite cold – fleeces and jackets were required. However, we managed to see all the birds we wanted to see quite easily and so the weather was not a disaster – a week is actually plenty of time and we did spend one non-birdwatching day on Lanzarote.

### Note on the breeding season

We saw young birds of several species – Cream Coloured Course, Berthelot's Pipit, Fuerteventura Stonechat, Blue Tit and Iberian Shrike - so it seemed that breeding for some species had been very early. Other species, such as Raven and Kestrel, were obviously just pairing up.

### **BIRDWATCHING SITES**

**La Oliva – tracks to the NW of the village.** From Casa Vieja you can walk out through the back of the village, round the base of the low hill with two windmills on top and out on to the old lava plains where you meet up with the GR131 long distance footpath. We did this walk on our first afternoon and had good views of Iberian Shrike, Spectacled Warbler and Barbary Ground Squirrel. Also spectacular scenery, as there is throughout the island.

**La Oliva – fields S of the village.** There is a road leading to the Secondary School (a rather ugly modern building) out towards to the right of the Casa des los Coroneles (looking from the main square). This road turns into a track and carries on in a big loop eventually coming out on the Caldereta road. It gives good views into the fields but despite the apparent attraction of the weedy fields we saw few birds there apart from Berthelot's Pipits, Trumpeter Finches, Hoopoes and Shrikes. The fields near the school were bright green and on one occasion we did see about 8 Hoopoes here, plus a few Trumpeter Finches and Linnets. And once we had a singing Corn Bunting on a dead stick. But generally speaking we found the fields disappointing and indeed confusing – what do they grow there? They are heavily embanked as if to grow, say, rice, but there was nothing growing when we were there.

**La Oliva – area to the W of the El Costillo road.** This is the area briefly mentioned as site 10 on page 128 of the Crossbill guide and described as La Rosa de los Negrines in Clarke. There is a turn-off to the W immediately as you come out of La Oliva, and indeed another turn into the same general area further on. The little road starts well but got very rough as recent heavy rain had left gullies across it. Again, the areas of cultivation/goat farm did not provide much of interest but if you carry on you get to the fence which is the boundary of the Houbara reserve, though I have to say the ground looks amazingly hostile inside – just stones and little vegetation. We drove both ways along the fence on two occasions in the evening. On our first visit we saw a Houbara about 200m away, below us on the slope, outside the fence. It was just walking along feeding and we had good binocular views from the car. The bird just vanished when we attempted to get better views through the scope outside the car. We also saw two groups of Cream Coloured Coursers here.

**La Oliva – Fimapaire Valley.** Amazingly, this site is still exactly the same as described in Clarke (sketch on P 67) (except no car dump site?) and we saw Fuerteventura Chat exactly where he describes! In case you haven't got the book, the Fimapaire Valley runs to the left (N) of the prominent symmetrical hill (Mt Fronton) to the ESE of La Oliva. The Caldereta road runs along the S side of the same hill. Drive out of La Oliva on the road to Caldereta FV102 then just as you approach the hill, fork left on a wide unsurfaced road. On this road bend right and head for the obvious valley ahead which you gradually descend. The road forks – take the left hand fork. After just about 100 metres a faint track goes off to the left. Here we saw a male Fuerteventura Stonechat. In the willow tree and lush cultivations on the other side of the road we saw both Turtle and Laughing Doves and plenty of the commoner birds. Another few 100m further on there was a dripping overhead water pipe – here was a family party of Fuerteventura Stonechats and we had very close views of a family party of Trumpeter Finches including a very pink male. We tried going further but the track got too broken up even for our 4WD.

**El Cotillo – Toston lighthouse area.** We came here because it was too windy to do much serious birdwatching and the seas were spectacular! The sandy and rocky beach had a good scattering of waders – a Whimbrel, Grey Plover, Turnstones and lots of Sanderling.

**Tindaya Plains** – as described in many locations – just head as best you can straight through the village and on to the very narrow and potholed tarmac road to the coast. We had amazing views of a displaying male at about 8:30 am very near the “crossroads” – we were actually driving back down the track to the N when we saw him from the distance – it looked like a man in a white tee-shirt riding a bicycle across the plains! We watched this bird as it got closer and closer to us for about 30 minutes until he was only 30 metres away. Fantastic views. A few days later in the afternoon we saw what I assume was the same bird – not really displaying, just sometimes thinking about it. In the afternoon the tracks were very busy with holidaymakers from El Cotillo taking their hire cars for an explore across the plains. We explored the road straight on (good views of Cream Coloured Coursers with a well-grown chick) and especially the track to the north, where we saw good numbers of Cream Coloured Coursers. This track eventually descends into a barranco – we struck lucky here with two pairs of Barbary Partridges (one male stood on an earth embankment and called repeatedly giving excellent views) and a flock of 4 Black-bellied Sandgrouse. (We were a bit worried that we saw so few bustards – were the females on eggs?)

**Los Molinos Reservoir** – our first visit here was in such strong winds that we could barely stand up so we called it off and tried again, actually on our last day. There was a good selection of wildfowl on the water and on the banks, and we had three Sandgrouse fly into the distant goat pens towards the end of the reservoir. These were very lush with grass and very smart goats. There were also about 50 Ruddy Shelduck grazing in the pens with the goats. We found the barranco below the reservoir quite productive – there was plenty of water in the pools and it was sunny and sheltered. There were displaying Little Ringed Plovers, a pair of Fuerteventura Stonechats, very tame Trumpeter Finches, a Northern Wheatear, plenty of Berthelot’s Pipits and nest-building Ravens. Also the white mesembryanthemums were starting to flower and they attracted a fresh Painted Lady. This was how it was supposed to be!

**Salinas del Carmen** – Wettish and windy and hardly a bird to be seen.

**Barranco del Torre** – A bit sheltered from the rather unpleasant weather. Plenty of Sardinian Warblers in the tamarisk though they were hard to see, and plenty of quite obliging Spectacled Warblers in the low scrub further up the barranco. Lots of Trumpeter Finches and Clouded Yellow butterflies. The best was to come – as we were walking we heard a strange call behind us and were just quick enough to see a Barbary Partridge fly up from the barranco floor to the rocky hillside. While we were congratulating ourselves, another bird flew and gave excellent views as it perched on a rock.

**Costa Calma** – we struggled a bit with the navigation here but eventually found the hotel to the far south of the resort with the lagoon and saltmarsh. Plenty of kite-surfers but very few birds – probably better at migration times. We did find a flock of Sanderlings being fed breadcrumbs by hotel guests!

**Vega de Rio Palma** – a windy Saturday was probably not the best time to visit – the walking track was quite busy with people having a morning walk before a meal at the restaurant by the second bridge. Instructions say to park at the bridge – so we did, at what turned out to be the first bridge. This was a good ruse as we walked down the river bed to the second bridge and along here we had excellent views of African Blue Tit. We also saw this species well walking back along the road to the first bridge. In the large tamarisks by the old reservoir we heard numerous Sardinian Warblers, a Yellow-browed Warbler, and a Robin – but saw very little in the strong wind. A pair of Barbary Partridges were seen flying from the barranco floor up on to the hillside. There were also two dragonfly species which we couldn’t identify. The walk down to the hermitage was fiercely windy but worth it.

**Pajara** – quite sheltered and there were plenty of birds around. Blue Tits were easy to see and we could hear about 3 Yellow-browed Warblers in the tall evergreen trees. Also a

Blackcap and Goldfinches. A Sudan Golden Sparrow had been reported here early in the year but not recently so we did not search too hard! Good tapas at Casa Isaitas.

## BIRDLIST



(All pictures are stills taken from a video)

<b>Barbary Partridge</b>	4 pairs seen, always in barrancos, and always flying up from the barranco floor to the hillside. (Barranco del Torre, Vega de Rio Palma, barranco N of Tindaya plains junction)
<b>Ruddy Shelduck</b>	Numerous at Los Molinos Reservoir, and apparently happy to fly in very strong winds!
<b>Eurasian Wigeon</b>	A few at Los Molinos
<b>Mallard</b>	A few at Los Molinos
<b>Common Teal</b>	A few at Los Molinos
<b>Mallard x Muscovy</b>	A few at Los Molinos, these dark brown birds puzzled us for a while till we saw more at Los Molinos village where there is a big flock of Muscovies. The green gloss on the head gives away the Mallard influence.
<b>Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon</b>	Those in many locations looked pretty much like real Rock Doves. Able to fly in gale force winds!
<b>European Turtle-dove</b>	Only seen in the Fimipaire Valley
<b>Eurasian Collared Dove</b>	Ubiquitous
<b>African Collared Dove</b>	One obvious bird at Casa Vieja, La Oliva - much paler and pinker
<b>Laughing Dove</b>	A few seen and heard
<b>Black-bellied Sandgrouse</b>	Not seen till the last day - too windy? Seen at Los Molinos and on the Tindaya Plains where they were actually sitting on the track
<b>Plain Swift</b>	Seen on three occasions, each time flying very low in bad weather
<b>Common Coot</b>	Abundant at Los Molinos
<b>African Houbara</b>	One bird seen on the Tindaya Plains at the crossroads - but this was the only one seen there. We did not scan for distant birds, however. Also seen in the area N of La Oliva near the "bustard fence".
<b>Cory's Shearwater</b>	About 6 birds seen from the Lanzarote ferry
<b>Cattle Egret</b>	Only one bird seen, on a vacant lot at Costa Calma!
<b>Little Egret</b>	Quite common in suitable habitat
<b>Grey Heron</b>	Los Molinos
<b>Northern Gannet</b>	3 seen from the Lanzarote ferry
<b>Stone Curlew</b>	Despite intensive searching, only heard once, just outside Tindaya at dusk

<b>Black-winged Stilt</b>	At Los Molinos and salt pans
<b>Grey Plover</b>	One seen at El Cotillo
<b>Little Ringed Plover</b>	Displaying pair at Los Molinos
<b>Kentish Plover</b>	Small group at the salt pans on Lanzarote
<b>Whimbrel</b>	One bird at El Cotillo
<b>Ruddy Turnstone</b>	Seen at several coastal locations
<b>Sanderling</b>	Quite large groups on sandy shores with rocks
<b><i>Purple Sandpiper</i></b>	<i>We saw two birds on large rocks - one each at Corralejo harbour and Playa Blanca harbour - which appeared to be this species though it does not seem to be on the Fuerteventura list</i>
<b>Common Sandpiper</b>	One at Los Molinos
<b>Green Sandpiper</b>	One at Los Molinos
<b>Greenshank</b>	Several locations
<b>Redshank</b>	Several locations
<b>Cream-coloured Courser</b>	Good numbers of birds seen on the Tindaya plains including a juvenile. Also see N of la Oliva near the "bustard fence"
<b>Black-headed Gull</b>	Only at Los Molinos
<b>Lesser Black-backed Gull</b>	Only inland at La Oliva
<b>Yellow-legged Gull</b>	Common
<b>Egyptian Vulture</b>	One rather odd sighting, flying low up a barranco N of La Oliva. Not visible at the nesting area near Vega de Rio Palma. Not searched for in the S of the island.
<b>Eurasian Buzzard</b>	Only one seen, whilst driving
<b>Hoopoe</b>	Delightfully common, though not singing at all
<b>Common Kestrel</b>	Many vocal pairs in village and barrancos
<b>Lesser Short-toed Lark</b>	Easy to see on the Tindaya plains but not that common elsewhere
<b>Berthelot's Pipit</b>	Common, can look very Wheatear-like sometimes
<b>European Robin</b>	Heard ticking from the tamarisk at Vega de Rio Palma
<b>Fuerteventura Stonechat</b>	See in the Fimipaire Valley and at Los Molinos
<b>Northern Wheatear</b>	Los Molinos
<b>Yellow-browed Warbler</b>	Several birds heard at Vega de Rio Palma and Pajara
<b>Blackcap</b>	Heard at Pajara
<b>Spectacled Warbler</b>	Common in low scrub
<b>Sardinian Warbler</b>	Common in tall scrub - not easy to see
<b>Canary Blue Tit</b>	Several birds seen at Vega de Rio Palma and Pajara
<b>Iberian Grey Shrike</b>	Common in cultivations
<b>Common Raven</b>	Common
<b>Spanish Sparrow</b>	Common, though sounds strangely un-sparrowlike
<b>Goldfinch</b>	Only seen at Pajara
<b>Linnet</b>	Only seen around La Oliva and on Lanzarote
<b>Trumpeter Finch</b>	Seen everywhere though often hard to see well. Not really making the expected trumpet calls.
<b>Corn Bunting</b>	Two singing birds to the south of La Oliva. A flock of 6 by a small horse stable in the La Oliva backstreets.