

Azores June 2017: The Tiny and the Mighty

- the Priolo and 10 Blue Whales -



Intro

This is my first trip report. I have decided to do a write up as it was a great success at a time of year where I was not expecting such good results, and also to help me keep track of my own records, as whale watching trips can quickly blur together in the mind. Over 200 individual cetacean sightings were obtained, across 9 species, including 10 blue whales, which was exceptional so late in the season. I would not like to attempt to guess how many of these were sightings of previously seen individuals. All cetaceans were seen in the areas south of Pico island, apart from some common dolphins seen from land. I took a total of 5 whale watching trips with 3 companies. Two of the companies were based in the channel between Pico and Faial, advertising that they are able to go around any area of the 2 islands, but this was never necessary. Seabird sightings were disappointing, only Cory's Shearwater and Common/Roseate Terns were noted despite extensive searching, but most of the native land-birds were recorded, with a few American vagrants too.

After online research I chose to use CW Azores and Espaco Talassa on Pico, and Hortacetaceos on Faial. I believe these three companies were good choices, clearly interested in the animal's welfare and recording

data on the animals seen. All used very similar RIB style speedboats. With one company when a blue whale mother and calf were discovered, we did not attempt to move close, no harassing the animals to take pictures, and with another we were always the first to move away when the skipper felt that too many boats were crowding an animal. The majority of trips were with Espaco Talassa, principally because they were offering morning and afternoon trips, while most other operators were still operating on their low season timetable.

Logistics/Rough Pricing

I have done various animal watching trips, almost all solo, and book these privately without a tour guide or package, I repeated this here. Very good results can be had this way (and significant money saved), but at a cost of extra stress and hassle. This trip went over my expected budget, and was quite a lot pricier than chasing Iberian Lynx around Andalucía, but I feel the costs were still kept reasonably affordable. I used £350 spending money (covered eating in restaurants each night, gifts) £550 flights (this should have been much cheaper, but I made a mess with last minute bookings). £330 on a mix of hotels and AirBnB), £175 on car rental, £250 on whale watching (around £50 could have been saved by booking all trips with the same company) and £60 on petrol. The total trip cost came to roughly £1,800. By splitting costs, booking further in advance and with more forward planning this could have been bought down to £1,200 per head or less.

Results

Fifteen hours on the water produced: 10 Blue Whales (inc. calf), 4 Sei Whales, 2 Fin Whales, 20+ Sperm Whales (inc. 3 calves), 100+ Common Dolphin, 15+ Bottlenose Dolphin, 10+ Striped Dolphin 20+ Atlantic Spotted Dolphin, 20+ Risso's Dolphin. Two hours searching their habitat produced roughly 20 individual Azores Bullfinch, while American vagrants were sparsely located with: American Wigeon, Ring Necked Duck, Black Duck, Pied Billed Grebe and Hudsonian Whimbrel observed.

The sheer number of Blue Whales was unusual for this time of year. I had been expecting to see a straggler at most. The water temperatures were still colder than typical for those dates. Several people in the boat crews remarked to me that there were still krill around the islands, due to the

water temperatures, it seems the unusual numbers of Blue Whales can be attributed to this. Their food source not yet having moved further north.

10th

Flight from Heathrow to Lisbon, wait in Lisbon, flight from Lisbon to Ponta Delgada. After some confusion (and even leaving my bag in the airport!), I made it to my spacious AirBNB apartment for a rest; quail, blackbird, chaffinch and robin song noted from the apartment window, but no attempt made to find the animals.

11th

An 8am flight via Terceira led to a 10am arrival on Pico

All Cetacean trips had already been sold out for this day, so I decided to use my time exploring the island, visibility conditions were adequate. The first sighting of note was a roadkill feral ferret in the highland roads. Ring billed ducks, Tufted ducks and an American Wigeon were recorded at the Lagoa do Caiado. Blackbird, Robin, Canary and Grey Wagtail were noted at almost every single stop, two Snipe sp were flushed from a small farm pond and soaring buzzard were observed twice.

12th

Early start and drive to Madalena harbour. After a half hour presentation, we were off in a large RIB with 3 rows of seats. We quickly encountered a small group of Sperm Whales logging, moved on to a Sei Whale swimming in a straight line and shallow diving when the news got through that good sightings were being had of Dolphins near Monte de Guia on Faial. We sped through a huge group of Common Dolphins to obtain great views of Risso's Dolphins, but we had barely settled there when news came again and we were off to see something even more exciting... when we finally tracked it down we had a Blue Whale diving and surfacing many times in the vicinity of the boat. Four lifer species in a 3 hour trip, a great result!

After a speedy 45 minute drive to Lajes, and an even quicker lunch I was off again, this time in an Espaco Talassa RIB with two seating rows. We quickly found a Blue mother and calf, which we kept quite distant from

and only briefly stayed with. There were reports of many other Blues in the area, so we sped off and quickly found another 2 non-associated blue whales. We spent quite a while with each of these whales, diving and blowing in their regular feeding sequence. One of the Blue whales would stretch out occasionally so that the blowhole and dorsal fin were visible at the same time. After this we went off to find a group of roughly 15 sperm whales milling about and socializing fairly close in to shore, 2 calves were seen and members of the group were deep diving while others stayed at the surface.

In the evening I visited Ponta da Ilha lighthouse and followed a trail there through coastal scrub and bare volcanic habitats observing a large pod of Common Dolphins breaching, a Common Tern colony and a single Roseate Tern, as well as a Blackcap, a large Starling roost and the usual cast of small birds.

13th

Another early morning 45 minute drive to Lajes, Little Egret noted in the harbour, along with Common Terns and then off in the boats just as the rain started. A pod of Bottlenose Dolphins were quickly encountered, they were very active, jumping and staying near the surface on the choppy seas, but we quickly moved on to a group of 3 Sei Whales shallow diving and travelling at speed in a straight line, we kept abreast of these for a while then headed off for another Blue Whale quite far out to sea. Upon heading in we came upon a pod of immature Atlantic Spotted Dolphins (very few had any spots), some of the first of their species to return to the area this year, as the waters were still not quite hot enough for them.

A quick meal in Lajes harbour and then we were off again to see what the sea had to offer. We breezed through a pod of Common Dolphins to go see my first ever Fin Whale, gliding through the water at impressive speed as it made many short shallow dives, often being visible just below the water surface. After leaving the Fin we went and found another Blue, behaving similarly. It was moving focusedly in one direction, the first Blue I saw that seemed to be migrating rather than feeding. From there we tried to locate a second Fin Whale, gave up and started to speed in towards land when I somehow managed to spot the whale a few hundred

meters from the boat and gave a shout to alert the others! We stayed with this Whale for a few blows and then carried on to shore where we again passed thought a large group of Common Dolphins to encounter a pod of Risso's Dolphins with several boats already watching them. While trying to keep abreast of the Risso's Dolphins I remarked to one of the crew that "I just wish I could see a Striped Dolphin now". At that moment a pod of Striped Dolphins leapt into motion, porpoising as they rushed into the distance. The Common Dolphins surrounded the boat, trying to keep all eyes on themselves, and then back to land.

Afterwards I headed to Santo Antonio to try for better Roseate Tern views, the birds are exceptionally easy to see in the colony there, mixed with Common Terns and Feral Pigeons just tens of meters away from a small cafe and recreational area. When it was truly dark (and raining) I headed to the Misterio da Prainha on the tip-off that Barolo Shearwater breed there (and had been heard calling this February), but exploring the area between 10.30pm - 1am produced nothing but huge amounts of Cory's Shearwater, many grounded due to the rain, and a few Rabbits.

14th

This day was mainly devoted to a bit of sightseeing. Of note were 3 Quail showing well near to Gruta das Torres, and multiple roading Woodcock in the regions around Lagoa do Caiado, the American Widgeon was still present. Another late night trip to Misterio da Prainha again produced nothing except huge numbers of Cory's Shearwaters.

15th

A mad dash to the harbour was the precursor for a quick ferry journey with no cetacean sightings of note, then another mad dash across the Horta harbour front to get to the Hortacetaceos stall and explain that it really is fine that I didn't go to the briefing, having already had a small jar of krill and a small jar of whale poo shaken in front of my face by multiple other companies already! Conditions were calm, but with a large swell, this combined with the air humidity made whale blows hard to spot, giving the vigia a tough time locating anything from shore, so after a short while with a small Blue Whale that was being crowded by boats we decided to head out and deploy the boats hydrophone, they picked up what they assumed to be a very big male Sperm Whale. We headed in

that direction, very far out to sea, moving 1 mile and re-checking, hearing more and more animals clicking, until finally we found a young Sperm Whale... then another, an adult, and another, and another! There were a huge gathering of animals; logging, blowing, socializing, multiple animals sticking their rostrums out of the water, 20+ Whales. A small number were seen fluking before deep dives, and they were also associating with Bottlenose Dolphins. The return journey bough my 10th and final Blue Whale sighting of the trip, and a pod of Common Dolphins.

16th

Travel to Sao Miguel island and then sightseeing. Hudsonian Whimbrel were noted at Mosteiros, Buzzards were more common than on Pico, Common Waxbills were the avian highlight of Sete Cidades.

17th

After noting a squashed European Hedgehog on the motorway, the morning was spent birding the Tronquera road looking for the Azores Bullfinch, sightings were most common at the Miradouro da Serra and then heading south and predominantly downhill from there. The initial birds were located by sound at the viewpoint, but then the majority were often from the car, often at close range. Twenty three sightings were obtained, which I believe were of roughly 20 individuals. No guide was used. After this I went to the Priolo Environmental Centre, not very well signposted, but well worth a visit with it's friendly and informative staff. A Pied Billed Grebe was seen at the northern end of Furnas lake, along with one reasonably pure looking Black Duck, as well as a lot of hybrid ducks and domestic Muscovy Ducks.

18th

Travel home. A far too early end to a truly great trip.

Mammals

	11th	12th	13th	14th	15th	16th	17th
Common Rabbit (<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>)	1			1		3	
Brown Rat (<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>)		1					
European hedgehog (<i>Erinaceus</i>)							1

europaeus)							
Ferret (<i>Mustela furo</i>)		1					
Fin whale (<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>)			2				
Sei Whale (<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>)		1	3				
Blue Whale (<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>)		5	3		2		
Sperm Whale (<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>)		20			20		
Risso's Dolphin (<i>Grampus griseus</i>)		15	10				
Bottlenose Dolphin (<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>)			15		10		
Short-beaked Common Dolphin (<i>Delphinus delphis</i>)		60	30		20		
Striped Dolphin (<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>)			10				
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin (<i>Stenella frontalis</i>)			20				
Azores Noctule <i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>	20+		5	10+		2	

Hedgehog and Ferret were road-kill, the numbers for Baleen Whales are accurate, the numbers for Dolphins and Sperm Whales are best approximations.

