Lanzarote Trip Report

Early October 2016



Our accommodation (<u>Casa Margarita</u>, Soo) was paid for by the Lanzarote Tourist Board and our hire car cost was split between the Municipality of Teguise and the Tourist Board. We were given a free pass to all tourist authority attractions.



We stayed in a very prettily renovated villa on the edge of the small town of Soo (originally a slave village) with desert literally on the doorstep.



The rear of Casa Margarita

This trip was organised for us by Carmen Portella, leading light of Lanzarote Active Club and founder of Desert Watch Lanzarote. She invited us to the island to experience for ourselves the birding opportunities in this unique environment.



Throughout the trip Carmen was a brilliant hostess, guide and friend. She sorted out every problem with a smile and gave us huge amounts of information. Her enthusiasm for the island is contagious and her passion for conservation admirable. I felt an immediate kinship and resolve to help in any way I can to make sure this unique environment gets the protection it sorely needs.

A couple of words of warning. If you avoid salt (I have to) eating out is a bit of a trial. Potatoes are cooked in sea water leaving a crusting of sea salt and every restaurant we ate in added too much salt to the fish or meat dishes. Be prepared to ask for 'sin sal', and good luck as it never worked for us.

We also hired two different 4x4 vehicles... one (a Volvo) wasn't and the other, a small 4x4 Jeep was also very underpowered when it came to driving on desert tracks and we got stuck in both of them. You really need a Land Rover to be sure.

Birding Overview

I loved the birding here, but if you are one of those who must get a long list and many new birds then go elsewhere. Birding Lanzarote is subtler than that.

Fifty different species may be expected, a full-on birder would expect 70-80 and the very lucky few who work very hard, at the right time of year, with lady luck smiling on them might get the magic 100. However, they will see many 'quality' birds, many birds that are extreme rarities in the UK and probably half a dozen 'lifers'. Moreover, many of the birds that are familiar at home or on trips to southern Europe will be new subspecies.

Nor should you expect to see lots of birds. Most areas seem, at first sight, completely devoid of animal life, although villages will have plenty of rock and collared doves.

In a few places, on a few occasions you may get a whole raft of birds. We saw a flock of perhaps 200 lesser short-toed larks flocking at dusk. Once we found a roost of gulls and terns and on one other occasion a small muddy inlet with good numbers and variety of waders and herons.

Pick the right time (spring or autumn) and some places can be alive with off course migrants. On one day at the poolside our tiny garden had a

continuous stream of half a dozen warbler species and flycatchers etc. The edges of small towns was often the best place as some have lots of palms and cactus whereas most of the island is treeless and only supports low shrubs and crops.







The patch of 'waste' ground behind our villa

The patch of 'waste' ground behind our villa, which merged with the desert edge was sometimes completely dead and other times full of birds, especially migrants who cared not one whit that there were a couple of abandoned cars, builder's rubble and litter. In fact the old cars probably had trapped rainwater so were very attractive.

Bear in mind too that this is an island with no streams, rivers or ANY standing water (apart from one recently built and ineffectual dam). Torrential rain might fill a wadi very briefly (hours only) before the porous volcanic ash traps the water below the surface. There are mosquitos no doubt from drains and sceptic tanks, but where on earth do the dragonflies breed? I saw at least three species one of which was common in the desert.

Birders travelling with their non-birding families should try to get away for two or three early mornings or late afternoons and use a guide to see the most sought-after desert species in particular.

The far north of the island is quite spectacular with high hills and deep gorges with massive cliffs rising over 2000 feet from the ocean... here Cory's Shearwaters breed as well as Barbary Falcons. Being high it is often misty, and being misty it is very green.

The whole island is a biosphere reserve and its black volcanic ash highly fertile but terribly dry. The rainy season (if one can call it that) was always the end of January and beginning of February but climate change has not passed the island by. Now October and November can see short bursts of rain, mostly at night as the temperature drops.

Despite the volcanic desolation there are pretty white villages as, by decree, no building can be more than two stories high and can only be white... anything else requires a difficult to obtain permission.

Spring is the time to visit if you are botanically inclined with flowers blooming in the desert including *Cistanche phelypaea* known as the 'desert orchid' and a stunning dessert lily *Androcymbium*

psammophilum. There are no snakes but one lizard and a gecko. Very few mammals and these mostly introduced like rabbits.

There is a two-thousand-year history as it was known by the Romans and has seen invasions and piracy from Norman times. It was also a place where slaves were used to cultivate the land. Soo was a slave village.

There are museums, botanical gardens (a cactus plantation) and the usual tourist attractions, but for family holidays there are plenty of beaches, waterparks and even a couple of golf courses.

My visit was in early October when uncertain weather can make the birding even more interesting.

Monday October 3rd 2016



I always take a 'rest day' after flying... my arthritis insists upon it. So today we just spent at our villa on the edge of Soo. This is a pretty typical Lanzarote location with parched 'desert' all around with palms in villages and only occasional weedy patches in the volcanic 'soil'. Our villa had a pool and, at first light, several birds came and stood on the floating membrane cover to sip water. A

party of half a dozen immature **Common Linnets** (a local endemic race) lined up first followed by some **Collared Doves**. Beyond the wall several **Cattle Egrets** flew by and some **Yellow-legged Gulls** circled overhead (Soo is just five kilometres from the sea). Nothing else put in an appearance until several **Spanish Sparrows** came to take the waters.

Maggie and I walked behind the villa to an uninspiring building site where a couple of villas will eventually rise from the desert edge.

Three feral cats caught our eye and between them and us, on a small fence were a party of Spanish Sparrows. Maggie noticed a flash of red and closer observation uncovered a female **Common Redstart** with the sparrows.

A stray dog wandered across the weedy patch and flushed a bird, which immediately shouted 'Stone Curlew' on jizz. As we focussed we eventually found a party of three stone curlews periodically running along. On a telegraph pole was a **Wood Pigeon** (I had no idea that this is a very scarce vagrant). On walls and wires were several **Rock Doves**.

An hour later I went back to the pool to watch the linnets when a bird popped down ten feet from me to sit on a stone and call (not that I can hear well enough) a three-note call of some sort from whatever race of **Chiffchaff** it was.

Distant raptors or ravens over the hilltops appeared before we grabbed our bins and had disappeared by the time we had them again. The rest of our restful day only produced more of the same.

Tuesday October 4th 2016

Next to the area at the back of the villa is someone's dumping ground... two old cars and assorted detritus. But I assume, for the birds some rusting dent had collected some of last night's rain as several species were flitting about. The female (juvenile?) redstart and at least the chiffchaffs were joined by a new bird for the trip **Spectacled Warbler**. A striking male which to my naked eye was briefly like a Dartford Warbler until the bins revealed it. Having satisfied myself of ID using my Collins app I went back for a second look... it had gone, but there was a female in its place. More views of the redstart confirmed it as definitely a Common

Redstart not a Black Redstart. Having scoped them both days I think there were two different birds. Scanning with the scope having seen a Yellow-legged Gull on a telegraph pole, I lucked upon a Stone Curlew. As I appreciated this close view another walked in my field of view.

Lunchtime was spent at the coastal villages around Soo. At La Santa we stopped to look at the sea. There were plenty of Yellow-legged Gulls but also two small waders... probably common **Ring Plover**. But as we moved off on the desert side of the road two **Berthelot's Pipits** my first lifers!

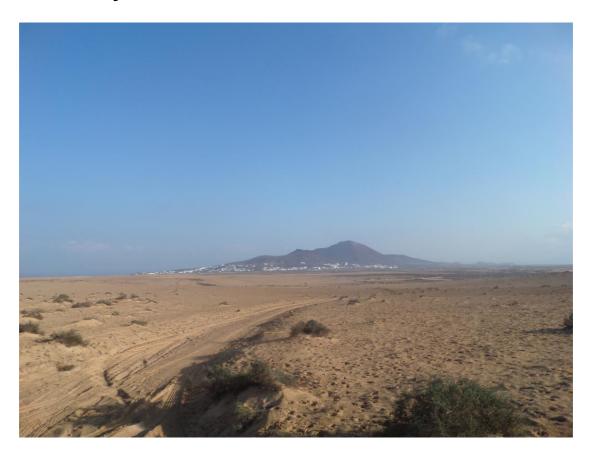
Back at the villa I was having a snooze when Maggie ran in to ask if there were any shrikes here, dragging me to the poolside. The grey shrike she had seen had fled but there were sparrows, chiffchaffs and a splendid **Pied Flycatcher**; a bird, larger than a sparrow that we could not identify, joined it. It was in full moult so its plumage was too dishevelled to help ID but the beak was truly massive... like a grosbeak – since researching at home I am pretty sure this was a **Rose-breasted Grosbeak**!



We went back to our 'patch' behind the villa, but there was no sign of the shrike, just a redstart, some migrating chiffchaffs and one **Common Whitethroat** and two Cattle Egrets. On the telegraph wires what I took to be a Merlin, but when I scoped it, it was a **Kestrel**... the very small race they have here.

At dusk we went the 1 kilometre to the supermarket and there saw two **Hoopoes** and a number of **Turtle Doves** coming to roost around some properties with a lot of palm trees.

Wednesday October 5th 2016



Carmen fetched us at 8.00 am to go into the desert. Our supposed 4x4 drove out and within seconds we were watching Hoopoes, Stone Curlew and **Southern Grey Shrike** of the local race *koenigi*. In the first five minutes we had seen more Stone Curlews than I have ever seen in the UK. Berthelot's Pipits also showed next to us. We drove on and soon Maggie spotted our first pair of **Cream-coloured Courser**. Having just seen two before, ever, this was a delight. Several more pairs followed along with a sudden diving, swooping form of a stunning falcon; **Barbary Falcon** another lifer for me! We moved on towards that area of the dessert best for

bustard. All along the way we saw small groups of **Lesser Short-toed Larks**. As we took a new track off towards the best bustard spot the car began to sink in the sand. No amount of 'four-wheeled drive' reversing or whatever could get us out!

So, we had one hour's birding followed by another hour waiting to be winched clear! During this time we added several **Ravens** to the trip list and watched a pair of shrike doing their thing. Maggie spotted a small butterfly we have not identified and a tiny dragonfly. A few Yellow-legged gulls flew by in the distance and, at one point some pipits played by the car.



Having been pulled clear we returned to base intent on swapping the car for something better with, as usual Carmen being incredibly helpful oiling all the wheels and smoothing our path. Almost back into Soo we lucked upon a female **Houbara Bustard**, the second lifer of the morning!

Having swapped our non-four-wheel drive car for a manual, Jos and I went to fill up. Crossing the Soo desert again (15% of the island is sand dessert when Ice Age trade winds blew the shores of dropping oceans up against the cliff that was Lanzarote) we saw several more shrikes and a linnet and missed several illusive warblers.

Back at the villa I was treated to a continuous stream of migrating warblers; a few Chiffchaff, lots of Willow Warblers, Icterine Wablers, one Wood Warbler, a Reed Warbler, a Garden Warbler and a couple that were too quick for me to ID. All the time Pied Flycatchers were turning up too. Overhead were the usual Collared Doves and one fly-by Kestrel.

After getting down to our axles in the desert what else could go wrong?

Well after sitting cooling off in the pool Maggie careful got out, gingerly walked along the pool's edge and descended the gardens steps helpfully painted in gloss paint! So she slipped and fell injuring her shoulder, elbow and turning her little finger black! Painkillers and sleep was the order of the day.

During the night the pain just got worse.

Thursday October 6th 2016

Today was Hospital day! Rising early instead of birding Carmen drove us to the hospital, first going to the private hospital near the golf course to find our insurance wasn't acceptable, then it was off to the public hospital and around four hours spent mostly doing nothing. The good news is that nothing was broken. The bad news that she will be in pain for around five days and needed to have her arm in a sling to immobilise her shoulder.

It was an all-round (enforced) rest day.

Friday October 7th 2016

An 8.00 am start again to go to the north of the island. Maggie was determined not to miss any birds so gritted her teeth against the discomfort and managed to overcome the pain sufficiently to enjoy some relaxed and enjoyable birding.

We first swung by the beach at Caleta de Famara where there were only gulls and the cliffs were shrouded in mist so we moved north to a gorge - Valle de Temisa where migrants can be expected.

At the gorge the first birds were **Serins**, not quite yellow enough overall for Canaries, but with very bright yellow rumps. Berthelot's Pipits were everywhere and then some **Atlantic Canaries** turned up. Even with their backs to us the deeper notch in the tail is diagnostic. Watching a stunted fig tree with these birds on was productive as first a pair of **Blackcaps** turned up and then a splendid lifer, **African Blue Tit**.

We slowly drove down the track seeing many pipits, and a few warblers with Spectacled Warbler most in evidence. As we watched I spotted a falcon over the hill... eventually there were no less than seven **Eleanora's Falcons** hunting the hills with a Common Raven mobbing them.

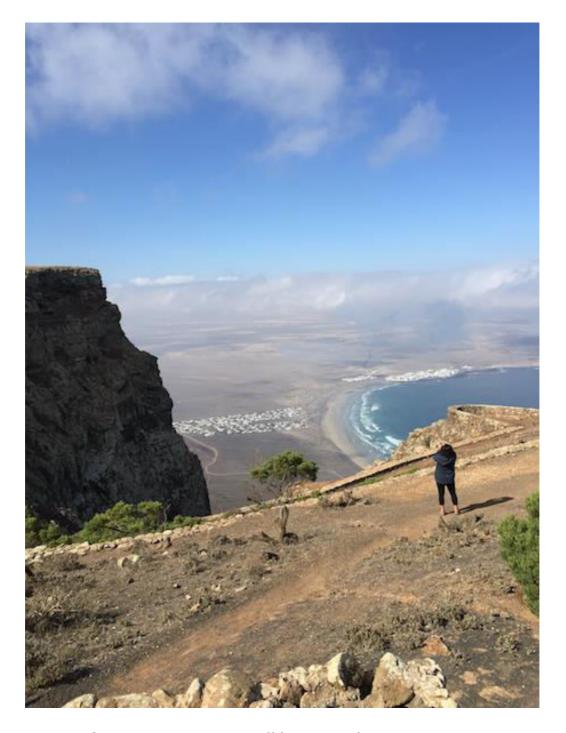
Further down the valley were a pair of kestrels and then a Barbary Falcon. Oddly in the scrub was a **Grey Heron** that was standing stock still.

We continued driving the track in search of a new lifer, which Carmen spotted, in fact two **Barbary Partridges**. We drove into a small village where the only new birds for the day were Yellow-legged Gulls, Collared Doves and Rock doves.

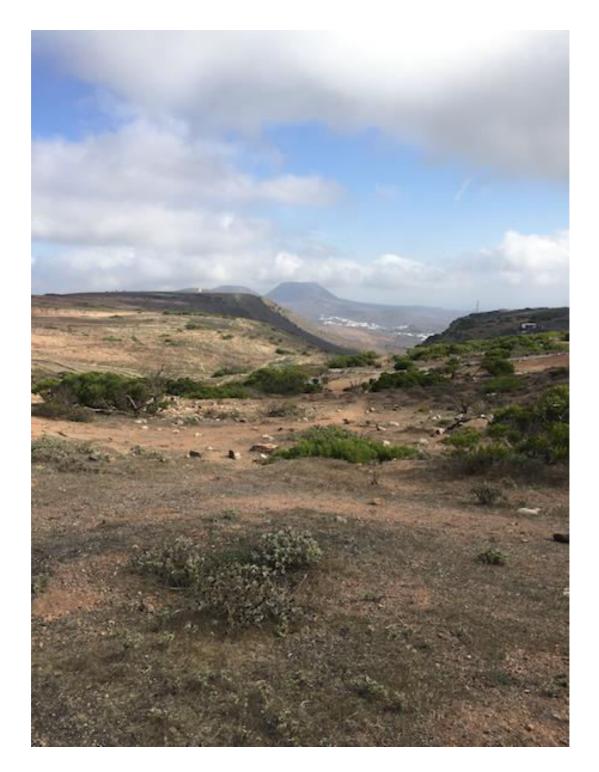
We drove out of the village back on to the highway and up out of the valley to the high point where we drove off the road along a track to Peñas del Chache the highest point on the island (670m), where we could park and walk to the cliff edge, where there is a view not unlike looking down from an aircraft.

Here on the cliff was a pair of Barbary Falcons, which flew past us at head height, wonderful. Around and about were more Spectacled Warblers, pipits, canaries and a number of kestrels and shrikes. Most shrikes were of the race *algeriensis*, *or excubitor* on migration rather than the residents of the desert that are *koenigi* - that race is distinguished by the faintest pale mark above the black eye stripe.

The view from 670 metres



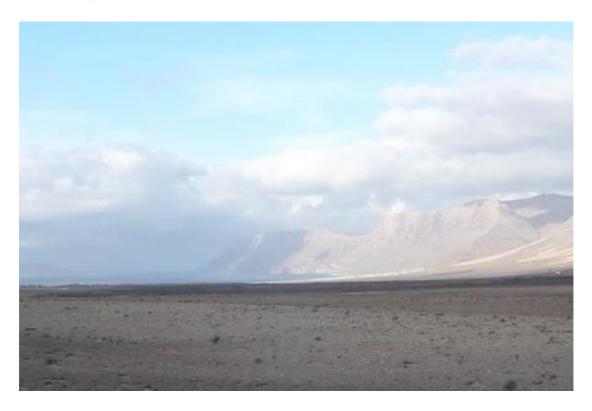
Carmen searching the cliff for a pair of Barbary Falcons



On our return journey were had several more Eleanora's Falcons. We drove across El Jable towards Soo looking, without luck for bustards... just large groups of Lesser Short-toed Larks and pipits, shrikes and several Hoopoes. Just before Soo are a number of goat pens. Here there were Linnets, our first **White Wagtails** and our first **Trumpeter Finches**... up to nine (mostly females and sub adults) on the fences. As we reached Soo, in the last patch of desert scrub were two Stone Curlews.

Late afternoon we drove down to Costa Teguise to change hire cars. On the way out we spotted a **Plain Swift**.

Saturday October 8th 2016



Caleta de Famara nestles beneath towering cliffs pounded by surfer's waves

Today was a family beach day... but scope and bins go everywhere that a birder does when overseas. We spent the morning at Famara where sand dunes and beach give views of the massive cliffs and the islands off the northwest coast. The only bird added was **Little Egret** and the only other birds seen were Shrikes en route and Yellow-legged Gulls.

We lunched at El Sol Restaurant overlooking the rocks and beach. This is a great setting to eat although we were unimpressed with the food.

On the rocks were a **Whimbrel** and a **Common Sandpiper** as well as a Berthelot's Pipit.

We drove back through the dessert seeing Shrikes, Hoopoes, and Pipits as well as half a dozen Cream-coloured Coursers, a White Wagtail, Spanish Sparrows and some Trumpeter Finches.



In the evening we drove past the Club La Santa to La Isleta where there is a natural inlet as well as an area created by the club for sailing with a number of areas of sand. The inlet itself is very green with mud as well as numerous rocks and the area has a gull and tern roost as well as waders and herons. I gather this is called La Santa wetland.

The terns were all Sandwich Terns in various plumages. The gulls all Yellow-legged. We saw Grey Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Great Egret and Eurasian Spoonbill. The waders were Whimbrel, Curlew, Grey Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin, Common Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper and Common Ringed Plover.

We finished the evening with a ride through the desert but saw little apart from a few shrikes, upwards of 150 Lesser Short-toed Larks and a couple of Ravens.



Sunday 9th October 2016

Sunday is, apparently 'hunting day'... maybe the birds knew as it was very quiet today. Perhaps the weather has changed so that no migrants were blown off course. The area behind the villa was totally devoid of life. La Santa wetland was also very quiet with just a few gulls and terns, one Grey Heron and a lone Spoonbill.

Monday 10th October 2016

The family today decided they wanted to return to Costa Teguise and shop, look at the seafront there and have lunch. I needed to catch up with some work, answer mails etc., so stayed back.

Those who went to Costa Teguise once again saw Plain Swifts... in fact every time they passed the large white sculpture made from old boat parts apparently symbolising fertility, Plain Swifts were seen overhead.

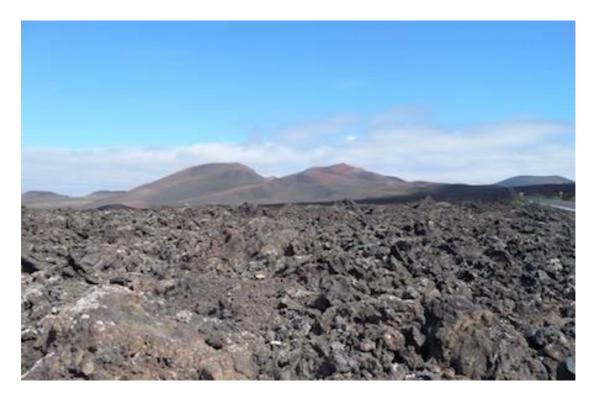
Later I went out for a few hours with Carmen starting by crossing the desert in search of bustards. This time we were lucky seeing two females and a male Houbara Bustard. During the journey Carmen told me of a local farmer telling her that many years ago when he was a boy and there was no food for the family they ate Stone Curlews, in their crops they all had snails which they had somehow found underneath the sand! In search of more bustards we drove to the spot we had been stuck in previously... and grounded into the sand despite driving a 4x4 Jeep! We were able to manoeuvre our way out without a tow this time.



We then went to the southwest of the island to the Salinas de Janubio. This is an active slat extraction site with many square lagoons where sea water is slowly evaporated by the sun until only the salt is left.

The area is attractive to waders and waterfowl and we added a few new birds for the trip; **Greenshank**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Black-necked Grebes**, **Osprey** and **Ruddy Shellduck** (a new resident to the island where first one then two pairs took up residence and have bred). Not being able to walk far my observations were confined to roadside laybys one looking down from the cliff to the 'beach'. Some distant terns and the usual Yellow-legged Gulls were the only other birds we could positively ID.

Tuesday 11th October 2016



Being such a poor sailor I turned down the offer of a pelagic today, which is sad as several lifers, that can be seen nowhere else are possible. Instead we planned a family day visiting the Parque Nacional de Timanfaya.

I am sure more searching would have produced something, but the only birds we saw were Cattle Egrets, a Kestrel and some gulls.

After we stopped at the Bodega Rubicon hoping for some lunch as it had been recommended and is in a beautiful setting with views of the volcanoes, lava fields and vineyards.

The fish eaters decided that the only thing on the short lunch menu they liked was tuna, the carnivores could only pick the goat stew. The waiter came to our table and said two items on the menu were not available; the tuna and the goat stew!

We ended up at the Verde Mar in La Santa as the best place we had been before. Lunch wasn't up to the previous dinner. Two chose exactly the lamb dish they had enjoyed before but it was not the same being very salty and the gratin mash was also a different taste. My Tuna was cooked in the fashionable way with a raw line

running through it which was not really to my liking... what a shame.

Wednesday 12th October 2016

We planned a last visit to the unique Desert of Soo. So at 8.00 am we went straight behind the church as this is the usual haunt of some Stone Curlews, not only were we not disappointed, but we saw at least thirty birds there! Moving on through the dessert we saw our usual Pipits, Shrikes and Lesser Short-toed Larks.



Today we travelled to areas of the desert we hadn't visited before seeing both the pristine habitat and areas degraded by 'agriculture'. Some areas were a carpet of millions of bleached snail shells. In one place a fire had burnt out an area by some goat pens and the lava was showing through where the desert sand was most shallow. Every turn and dip in the road confirming the uniqueness of El Jable and the urgency of proper conservation.



Lanzarote Trip Report 15.10.2016 - © Bo Beolens - Fatbirder 1997-2016

After an hour or so we took a track the on the east of Soo towards the volcano where we encountered more larks and a large group of Trumpeter Finches. We followed this road down to the sea but apart from gulls and crabs saw nothing of note. Back to the desert south of Soo we met all the usual species with very close views of hoopoes, shrikes and kestrels. We lucked upon one male bustard and had great views.

We met up with an English guy in Teguise who is part of the group hoping to open the Museum of the Desert in Soo.



After this we went to the Presa de Mala? (This dam was a water capture project that basically doesn't hold much water as the bedrock is too porous – and the dam is cracking). Here we had splendid views of both a Barbary Falcon and three Eleanora's Falcons as well as Ravens.

Going back to Soo across the desert we again came across a male bustard and all the usual species.

Other Taxa



The island has at least three species of dragonfly as we saw them, but as we are not odonatologists again we could not identify them, but, with help from a leading odonatologist we managed to ID them as **Emperor** *Anax imperator*, **Lesser Emperor** *Anax Parthenope* and **Red-veined Darter** *Sympetrum fonscolombii*.

We were surprised that they find anywhere to breed on this arid island? They were there before the one and only dam was built. However, the same guy advised that they are probably migrants from the other islands. We did see some rather small dragonflies which, in all probability are merely small Red-veined Darters which can vary in length considerably.

I understand that Lanzarote has a very high density of lizards... good news for shrikes, owls and all. We saw two species **Atlantic Lizard** *Gallotia atlantica* and **Lanzerote Gecko** *Tarentola augustimentalis*... there may also be a rare skink, but these make

up the entire reptile population. The lizards when fully grown have an attractive line of blue-green spots along the side.

We saw just one small rabbit and one house mouse.



Crimson-speckled Moth - Utetheisa pulchella

Moths and butterflies were more numerous and some were highly attractive. A very common small white butterfly was everywhere and in the gorge we saw a number of **Monarchs**. We managed to photograph one attractive moth and a very nice beetle. We also saw some really big black beetles, but not being entomologists, let alone colyopterists do not know the species.



There is a very high flora endemism, and spring would be the time to enjoy the flowers in the desert and elsewhere.

Some of the plants are interesting even to non-botanists such as a parasitic straw-like plant (Dodder or Cuscuta, *Cuscuta europaea*) that lives on some small bushes making them look as if they have had a handful of reddish or yellow hay thrown over them.

Species Seen

Common name Scientific name Locations

		Costa Teguise	Valle de Temisa	Caleta de Famara	Peñas del Chache	La Santa Wetland	Salinas de Janubio	Soo/El Jable	Parque Nacional de Timanfaya	Presa de Mala
Ruddy Shelduck	Tadorna ferruginea						Х			
Barbary Partridge	Alectoris barbara koenigi		х							
Cory's Shearwater	Calonectris borealis					Х				
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia					х				
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis		х	Х		Х		Х	х	
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		х			х				
Great Egret	Ardea alba					х				
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta			х		х				
Houbara Bustard	Chlamydotis undulata fuertaventurae							х		
Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus insularum							х		
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus					Х				
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola					х				
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula					х				
Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus			Х		Х				
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata					х				
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos			х		Х				
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus					x				
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres					х				
Dunlin	Calidris alpina					х				
Cream-colored Courser	Cursorius cursor							х		
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis atlantis	х	х	Х	Х	х	Х	Х	х	х
Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis					х				
Rock Dove	Columba livia	х	х	х	х	х		х		х
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus							х		
European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur							х		
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		х	Х	х	х		х		х
Plain Swift	Apus unicolor	х								
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops		х	х	х	х		х	х	
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus dacotiae		х		х	х		х	х	х

Eleonora's Falcon	Falco eleonorae		х		х			x
Barbary Falcon	Falco pelegrinoides		х		х		Х	х
Southern Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis						Х	
	Lanius meridionalis koenigi		х	х	х	х	Х	
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone						Х	
Northern Raven	Corvus corax canariensis		х		х		Х	
African Blue Tit	Cyanistes teneriffae degener		х					
Lesser Short-toed Lark	Alaudala rufescens polatzeki		х				Х	х
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus						Х	
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita						Х	
Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix						Х	
Icterine Warbler	Hippolais icterina						Х	
Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus						Х	
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla heineken		х					
Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin						Х	
Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis						Х	
Spectacled Warbler	Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis		х				Х	
European Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca		х				Х	
Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus						Х	
Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis		х			х	Х	
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba alba		х				Х	
Berthelot's Pipit	Anthus berthelotii	х	х	х	х	х	Х	х
Trumpeter Finch	Bucanetes githagineus amantum						Х	
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina harterti				х		Х	
European Serin	Serinus serinus		х					
Atlantic Canary	Serinus canaria		х		х			

Reptiles

Atlantic Lizard Gallotia atlantica

Lanzerote Gecko Tarentola augustimentalis

Odonata

EmperorAnax imperatorLesser EmperorAnax parthenope

Red-veined Darter Sympetrum fonscolombii

Lepidoptera

Crimson-speckled Moth Utetheisa pulchella