

Woodchat Shrike on Santa Maria - a new species for the Azores archipelago

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On 19 May 2011, I was nearing the end of the first stage of a two-part exploratory trip around the Azores and Madeira. The purpose of the visit was to identify potential new birding sites in both archipelagos, ascertain the extent of any spring migration in the islands and seek out a number of breeding specialities. In these aims it was proving successful, especially so for migration: two days earlier on Graciosa I had found a Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus* and several other unexpected species, including a flock of about 25 House Martins *Delichon urbicum*. At the time there was an easterly airstream over the islands which appeared to be delivering migrants from south-west Europe and north-west Africa.

From Graciosa I travelled via São Miguel to Santa Maria to conclude the Azores leg of the trip. Arriving at Vila Nova on 18th, my main priority was to look for Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*, a pair of which had been intermittently reported on the island since the previous summer. I began working some of the locations recommended by the original finder of these birds, Alan Vittery, and on the afternoon of 18th eventually tracked down a single Killdeer in an interesting area of habitat north-west of Vila Nova. Unfortunately, I obtained just three images before the bird flew off, and despite much searching saw it only briefly once again that day, in flight.

On the morning of 19th I therefore returned to the same area, determined to refind the Killdeer. I began by searching the location in which I had last seen the bird, an open area of rough ground with scattered weeds, surrounded by low scrub and a few small trees on the boundary of the airport perimeter. I was quickly distracted,

however, when on scanning the dirt track ahead I noticed a distant bird with bright white underparts perched on top of a small bush (Fig. 1). Its size and posture immediately suggested a small shrike *Lanius* sp., and as I looked more closely I could see the diagnostic chestnut cap of a Woodchat Shrike *L. senator*. Knowing this would be an unusual species for the Azores, I temporarily abandoned my Killdeer search and slowly approached the shrike, taking some record shots and making a few notes, both of which were used to document the occurrence:

Description: body size larger than a Common Chaffinch, but somewhat atypical shrike profile created by entire tail being missing. **Head:** broad black 'mask' extended from forehead above bill back just over eye to ear coverts. Mask quite solidly black, with only small pale area on the lores which did not reach eye. Crown rich orangey-chestnut, extending onto nape where neatly demarcated from dark mantle. **Upperparts:** mantle greyish-black, contrasting with prominent white scapular patch which reached back to base of tertials. Wing coverts black, but flight feathers more faded brownish-black, with obvious white patch at base of primaries. Rump not seen clearly, tail missing. **Underparts:** clean white from chin and throat to vent, except on flanks, where distinctly tinged apricot. **Bare parts:** thickset, slightly hooked bill gunmetal-black, legs greyish. **Behaviour:** typically shrike-like, perching prominently on bushes and fence; active.

The presence of a distinct white patch on the base of the primaries (Fig. 1) confirmed that the bird was of the nominate subspecies *senator*, rather

than the west Mediterranean island subspecies *badius*, which lacks this character.

Despite having lost its tail the bird was behaving actively, appearing to be on the lookout for prey while making its way north through the scrub and inside the perimeter fence of the airport into denser vegetation. At that point I was no longer able to follow it, and within a matter of minutes of finding the bird it was lost to view and not seen again.

Woodchat Shrike is a summer visitor to southern Europe, breeding from north-west Africa and Mediterranean Europe north to Germany and Poland and east through the Balkans, Turkey and northern Middle East. It winters in sub-Saharan Africa (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). This sighting thus represents not only the first record for the Azores, but also the most westerly documented occurrence to date of the species.

REFERENCES

Lefranc, N. & T. Worfolk 1997. *Shrikes: a Guide to Shrikes of the World*. Pica Press, Robertsbridge.

RESUMO

MITCHELL, D. 2012. Picanço barreteiro em Santa Maria: uma nova espécie para o arquipélago dos Açores. *Anuário Ornitológico* 9: 88-89.

No dia 19 de Maio de 2011, um picanço-barreteiro *Lanius senator* foi observado e fotografado na ilha de Santa Maria, Açores, constituindo o primeiro registo desta espécie para o arquipélago. Esta ave apresentava características da subespécie nominal.



Fig. 1. Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*, 19th May 2011, Santa Maria, Azores. Picanço-barreteiro *Lanius senator*, 19 de Maio de 2011, Santa Maria, Açores. (© Dominic Mitchell / www.birdingetc.com).