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BRIEF NOTES ON BIRDS SEEN IN AND AROUND SELVAGEM GRANDE, AUGUST 17TH - 18TH, 1987

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Much has been written about the Selvagem Islands. The breeding seabirds are well known and partially documented. Moreover, the recent researches of Jouanin and Roux (1965, 1966), Zino (1971), and den Hartog *et al.* (1984) among others have highlighted the lacunae that still exist in our knowledge of these fascinating islands.

In August 1987, as part of on-going research into seabird identification and distribution in East Atlantic waters, a brief period was spent on Madeira and Selvagem Grande. In this short communication the observations made on Selvagem Grande and in the waters between Funchal and the island are briefly documented. It is hoped to carry out further, more detailed work, at a later stage. The data are presented as a species list with commentary. The very brief pelagic observations were made between 20.00 hrs. and 21.30 hrs. on 17th August (all times given are local time); between 06.30 and 08.30 hrs. on 18th August and between 20.30 hrs. and 21.30 hrs. on the same day. Eight hours were spent on the island, between 09.00 hrs. and 17.00 hrs., 18th August. The weather throughout was dominated by the conditions that prevail in this area from May to September, with light or moderate northerly winds, clear skies or light high cloud. Over Selvagem Grande, the skies became overcast from noon on 18th, with misty low cloud and light northeast winds.

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The sea surface varied from smooth to lightly choppy with moderate surface wind Beaufort force 2 to force 4.

SPECIES LIST

Pterodroma feae/madeira

A single bird passed south-west-wards across the bows of the vessel at 32°29'N 16°50'W, within sight of the Deserta Islands.

The presence of a broken breast band limited the identification to *feae* or *madeira*. No attempt was made to distinguish the species/subspecies involved, though the bird appeared large-billed. P. A. Zino (pers. comm.) suggests that in the field differentiation may not be possible, though the differences in the hand are clear-cut (Zino and Zino 1986).

Bulweria bulwerii

Shortly after leaving Funchal on 17th (between 20.15 hrs. and dusk) c.560 birds passed eastwards across the bow of the vessel. The passage was obvious, continuous and without rafting. The highest density was recorded at 32°33'N 16°52'W. Plotted on a map, the trajectory taken by the bulk of these birds would bring them to the Desertas group. Dawn observations on the 18th near Selvagem Grande revealed no birds but in a dusk count about 2 km. offshore late on 18th, c.30 birds were seen heading for the island. The late evening arrival of this species in Selvagem waters and the dusk movement of the species towards the Deserta Islands may reflect the particular susceptibility of this species to predation. Certainly, studies on Selvagem Grande have shown that small petrels, including *Bulweria bulwerii* form a large part of the diet of Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* there (Mougin and Stahl 1981).

No adult birds (save two moribund individuals) were observed on the island. However, of 27 carefully examined, apparently suitable sites, 8 were found occupied by well grown young. One was examined and photographed briefly.

The nest site openings were invariably small and elongate (vertical axis longest: averaging c.8 cm). The small size of these openings possibly reduces direct competition with *Calonectris diomedea*.

Calonectris diomedea

At dusk on 17th, c.90 birds were counted passing eastwards in waters close to Madeira. The movement appeared to be directed towards the Deserta Islands or eastern Madeira. Around Selvagem Grande at dawn on 18th, many thousands were seen, but it was impossible to gain an impression of true numbers. In the afternoon and evening birds began rafting inshore at about 1.5 km. from shore. Off the southern shore alone, over 30

rafts were seen, each with about 1000 individuals. In the short period before dusk, as the vessel moved north away from the Selvagens, large numbers of this species were still flying towards the island.

On the island, no attempt could be made to estimate numbers, but of 110 "suitable" nest sites, 53 were occupied by partly grown young birds and 10 were occupied by adult-type birds.

The young birds appeared all of a size, a synchrony in accordance with the findings of Jouanin and Roux (1966) and Zino (1971). In the one case investigated, the nest occupied by a full-grown adult-type bird held no nestling simultaneously. In the afternoon, the first birds began flying over the island in very small numbers at about 14.15 hrs. and by 17.00 hrs. there were c.120 in the air above the southern cliffs. Timing and behaviour of birds approaching land are variable (e.g. Mougin and Stahl 1982), though den Hartog *et al.* (1984) suggest that in June 18.45 hrs. is a more usual arrival time. On the 18th August, the weather was dull with very low misty cloud passing across the island from the North-east. The overcast conditions may be related to the birds' early arrival, some six hours before sunset.

Puffinus assimilis

The species was only observed close to Selvagem Grande, three being seen at dawn on 18th and c.110 birds seen rafting in small groups about 1 km. from the island, late the same evening. When disturbed by the vessel, the birds flew away while remaining in these small groups. No birds were seen on the island.

The presence of this species inshore outside the presumed breeding period is probably related to this species' tendency to come to land throughout the year. Jouanin (1964) has recorded the species on Selvagem Grande six months before laying.

Oceanodroma castro

No birds were seen from the vessel on either leg of the journey.

Rather than disturb the crumbling habitat on the southern side of the island only five "suitable" sites were examined. One small live chick and one tiny mummified chick body were discovered. No adults were seen. Bannerman (1963) suggests that egg-laying occurs on Selvagem Grande from June to September though findings elsewhere suggest a variety of breeding strategies (Cramp *et al.* 1977).

Larus argentatus

Outside the waters close to Funchal, no *L. argentatus* was observed. However on Selvagem Grande, four adults and two juveniles were seen, the latter two birds being only months old. Hartog *et al.* (1984) noted that

numbers of this species fluctuate and are apparently low in late summer. Jensen (1981) suggests that there may be periodic arrivals from elsewhere, to supplement the local population.

Apart from seabirds, five other species were identified on the island. A single *Egretta garzetta* appeared briefly, feeding in the shallows near the wardens' house. At 16.00 hrs. an adult *Milvus migrans* was noted over the central plateau and later near the light beacon. Two female or immature *Falco tinnunculus* were seen throughout the day, especially near the steep western cliffs.

About six *Hirundo rustica* spent the day on the island, feeding close to the ground over the central plateau or in the sheltered alcoves near the wardens house. A juvenile bird, recently dead was found at the latter location.

Anthus berthelotii is apparently resident. Both adults and juveniles were seen. Seven birds were counted in the southern half of the island.

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