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Identification of Cape Verde Shearwater

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Although there are not yet any records of Cape Verde Shearwater (*Calonectris edwardsii*) in European waters, could it be that they have been overlooked? Recent observations have shown that these shearwaters are really very distinctive, indeed even easy to identify, given good views. British and Irish seawatchers should be on the lookout – maybe not all those large shearwaters are Great or Cory's.

Cape Verde Shearwater has generally been treated as a race of Cory's Shearwater (*C. diomedea*), but it was originally described as a distinct species (Oustalet 1883, Alexander 1898). Recently, Hazevoet (1995) has afforded it full specific status again, based on the phylogenetic species concept – a view with which we concur. Indeed, based on our observations at sea off Senegal, we would go as far as to say that Cape Verde Shearwater is quite different from Cory's Shearwater and easily separated from it, even at a distance. Bourne also found it to be quite distinct in the field and gave a helpful summary based on observations around the breeding grounds (Bourne 1955).

Cape Verde Shearwater is endemic to the Cape Verde Islands, where there are colonies on six islands totalling an estimated 10,000 pairs. According to Hazevoet (1995) it departs from the islands between late November and late February, during which time its pelagic distribution is poorly known, but it probably disperses into the South Atlantic. Until our observations, most records away from the Cape Verdes were of single birds off the coast of West

Africa in winter, and off Senegal in small numbers in June and possibly January. We can now add that it is common off the Senegal coast in October.

Recent observations off Senegal

From 12th to 25th October 1995 and from 6th to 16th October 1996, we watched seabirds off the Senegal coast, either by seawatching from the Ile Ngor, an island off the Cap Vert peninsular, or by undertaking pelagic boat trips and journeying up to 30km out to sea from there. Cap Vert is the most westerly point of Africa. In 1995 the observations were made by Duncan Brooks, DN & RP, and in 1996 they were made by RJ, TM, DN & RP. The earliest date we saw a Cape Verde Shearwater was 6th October (in 1996) and the highest number we recorded was 1,700 on 9th October 1996.

Although we ventured out to about 30km west and northwest of Cap Vert, no Cape Verde Shearwaters were seen beyond about 8km, where a fishing fleet was often in operation. Details of our observations are given in Table 1, whilst Figure 1 shows the sea area of our observations.

We found that Cape Verde Shearwater is relatively easy to identify at sea. Even from land, with telescopes, we were confidently identifying them at distances of at least 500m. We positively identified only one Cory's Shearwater, in a flock of Cape Verde Shearwaters around a fishing boat on 10th October 1996; it was immediately distinctive!

Table 1: Cape Verde Shearwaters seen from or at sea off Cap Vert, near Dakar, Senegal in 1995 and 1996; periods of observations 12th-25th October 1995 and 6th-16th October 1996.

October	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
From land							2		28		1				67	38	2	4	14	35	
1995																					
At sea*								4		3			5		26						
From land	1			1350	17	210	6	1		19											
1996																					
At sea*		85		1700		1000															

* up to 8km NW of Cap Vert.

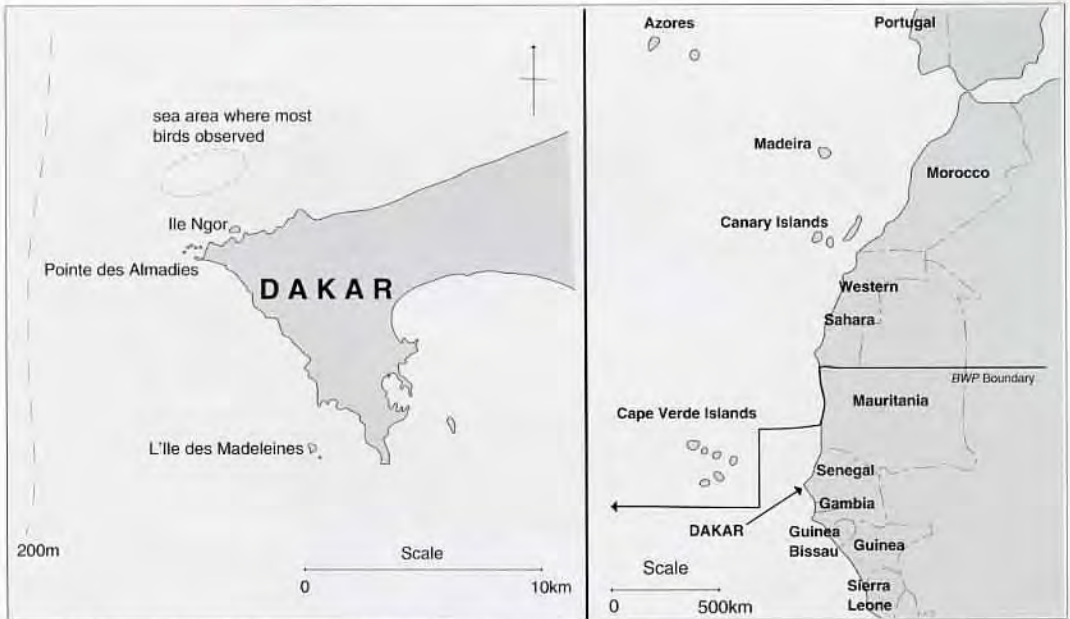


Figure 1: Cap Vert, Senegal, and its location, showing Ile Ngor, from where land-based observations were made, and the sea area where most Cape Verde Shearwaters were observed in October 1995 and October 1996.

Plate 1: Cape Verde Shearwaters *Calonectris edwardsii* and other seabirds feeding around a fishing trawler, off Dakar, Senegal, October 1996 (Dick Newell).

Probably due to the presence of the fishing fleet, many more Cape Verde Shearwaters were seen in October 1996 than in October 1995 (see Table 1).





Plate 2: Cape Verde Shearwaters *Calonectris edwardsii*, off Dakar, Senegal, October 1996 (Richard Porter). Note the small-headed and narrow-winged appearance, longish tails and generally dark greyish-brown colouration.

Identification

Cape Verde Shearwater is quite similar to its congener, Cory's Shearwater. In particular, it is close to Cory's in size and it shares clean white underparts, a wavy pattern of pale feather edgings across the back and pink legs, and it frequently has white uppertail-coverts. However, it is sufficiently distinctive in some other respects for easy identification at close range.

We first saw Cape Verde Shearwaters at a distance, when they looked like rather grey Cory's Shearwaters. On the first occasion that they came close, a party of 15 came in to join six South Polar Skuas which had been attracted to chum. Their strange appearance had us reaching for *Seabirds* (Harrison 1983) to check that we were not seeing something altogether different. Their shape and the darkness of their upperparts even led us to think initially of pale morph Wedge-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus*).

Cape Verde Shearwater is about 10% smaller in linear measurements (BWP) and almost 30% smaller in bulk than the Atlantic race of Cory's

Shearwater (*C. d. borealis*). The Mediterranean race of Cory's Shearwater (*C. d. diomedea*) is slightly smaller than the Atlantic race, but still larger than Cape Verde Shearwater. A Cape Verde Shearwater corpse that we found in the sea had a wing length of 320mm (BWP gives 330-372mm for both races of Cory's as opposed to 298-325mm for Cape Verde Shearwater).

Cape Verde Shearwater has darker greyish-brown upperparts than the sandy brown upperparts of Cory's. A distinctive plumage difference is the clear demarcation between the dark upper head and the white throat. This is particularly marked below and behind the eye, but can extend in front of the eye, giving the bird a rather capped appearance. Together with a quite prominent eye-ring (which can be present in Cory's) and more angular head shape (see below), this produces a facial expression quite different to that of Cory's Shearwater.

Even more remarkable is the structural difference between the two. Cape Verde Shearwater is slimmer than Cory's in both wing and body, and has a proportionately longer tail and smaller, more angular head. In contrast, Cory's



Plate 3: Cape Verde Shearwaters *Calonectris edwardsii* (and a Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*), off Dakar, Senegal, October 1996 (Richard Porter). Note the generally dark greyish-brown colouration, small head, thin grey bill, longish tail, narrow wings and consistently white uppertail-coverts.

Shearwater looks full-bodied and bulbous-headed. Importantly, the bill of Cape Verde Shearwater is grey with a darker sub-terminal band. There is sometimes a hint of greenish-yellow to the bill, but it nothing like the bright yellow of the bill of Cory's. The bill is also distinctly slimmer, and longer-looking, in Cape Verde Shearwater.

In flight, Cape Verde Shearwater tends to hold its wings angled well forward, accentuating the resemblance to pale morph Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

The following are the identification features of Cape Verde Shearwater, listed in approximate order of obviousness:

1. Bill noticeably thinner than in Cory's, and grey or pinkish-grey with a blackish subterminal band (looking black-tipped at a distance), quite unlike the large yellow bill of Cory's. At 500m range or more, the colour of the bill may not be discernible, but is clearly not yellow.
2. Upperparts darker and greyer brown than in Cory's, with a dark 'W' often noticeable across the upperwings.

3. A clean demarcation between the dark upper and white lower parts of the head, on some birds giving a slightly capped appearance.

4. Smaller and slimmer than Cory's, with longer tail, smaller head and slightly narrower wings.

5. Uppertail-coverts tend to show consistently more white than in Cory's.

6. Flight similar to that of Cory's, but perhaps with less deep wing-beats and the wings held slightly more forward, with the hand at right angles to the body when gliding.

These features are clearly shown in the accompanying photographs, which also show Cory's for comparison. The birds were also captured on video by RJ and DN.

In addition to the plumage and structural differences, Cape Verde Shearwater has a different voice to Cory's. It sounds more like a baby crying or a Siamese cat, but with a nasal quality, whereas Cory's can be likened to a donkey braying. We heard Cape Verde Shearwaters calling frequently when fighting for fish scraps.



Plate 4: Cape Verde Shearwaters *Calonectris edwardsii* (and two Sooty Shearwaters *Puffinus griseus*), off Dakar, Senegal, October 1996 (Richard Porter). The dark greyish-brown plumage and thin grey bill with a blackish tip are obvious on the water at this range.

Plate 5: Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*, off Tenerife, Canary Islands, April 1987 (Dick Newell). Note the large yellow bill and large head, and the lack of a capped appearance compared to the Cape Verde Shearwater in Plate 6.

Plate 6: Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*, off Dakar, Senegal, October 1995 (Dick Newell). Note the longish tail, dark-capped appearance and thin grey bill with a blackish tip compared with the Cory's Shearwater in Plate 5.





Plate 7: Cape Verde Shearwaters *Calonectris edwardsii*, off Dakar, Senegal, October 1996 (*Dick Newell*). Note the small heads, thin grey bills with blackish tips (actually subterminal bands) and white uppertail-coverts.

Plate 8: Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*, off Dakar, Senegal, October 1996 (*Tony Marr*). Note the capped appearance and thin grey bill, and the white uppertail-coverts contrasting with the blackish tail.

Plate 9: Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*, off Dakar, Senegal, October 1996 (*Dick Newell*). Note the thin grey bill, longish tail and white uppertail-coverts showing well here.





Plate 10: Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*, off Dakar, Senegal, October 1995 (*Dick Newell*). Note the small head, thin grey bill and longish tail compared with the Cory's Shearwater in Plate 11.

Plate 12: Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*, off Dakar, Senegal, October 1996 (*Richard Porter*). Note the dark 'W' across the upperwings showing well here.



Plate 11: Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*, off the Desertas Isles, Madeira, August 1990 (*Tony Marr*). Note the heavy yellow bill and heavier-looking, shorter tailed appearance than the Cape Verde Shearwater in Plate 10.

In conclusion

Given that they differ from Cory's Shearwater in size, shape, colour and voice, there seems no doubt that Cape Verde Shearwater deserves full specific status. Furthermore, it is obviously worthwhile closely examining any Cory's-type shearwater anywhere in the Atlantic – it may be just a matter of time before Cape Verde Shearwater is identified in European waters.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Duncan Brooks for helpful discussion in the field. We are grateful to Bill Bourne for commenting on a draft of this paper (although he does not necessarily concur with the view that Cape Verde Shearwater is a separate species), and thank Kees Hazevoet for his continuing interest in what happens to Cape Verde Shearwaters after they leave their breeding islands.

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