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Sao Tome and Principe

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Tour Report by Michael Mills

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The islands-nation of São Tomé e Príncipe is an unusual evolutionary experiment. High levels of endemism and some unusual island forms make it a great destination for a short birding tour. Although our 2012 week-long tour was rather wet (even by usual standards), we did well to see all the reasonably expected island endemics.

We arrived several hours late on São Tomé, thanks to the relaxed attitude of the airline that brought us from Libreville in Gabon. Our first afternoon on São Tomé was spent notching up some of the more common and widespread species in the vicinity of Bom Successo. Our first stop along the Agua Grande River produced the island form of Southern Masked Weaver, São Tomé Thrush, Newton's Sunbird, São Tomé Prinia and São Tomé Spinetail, species we'd have many more opportunities to study in detail. A São Tomé Kingfisher (now generally regarded as a subspecies of Malachite Kingfisher) shot off before most of the group could get on to it. A little further along we enjoyed good looks at São Tomé Paradise Flycatcher, a very confiding Black-capped Speirops that was feeding a fledgling, the islands form of Chestnut-winged Starling, some São Tomé Weavers feeding nuthatch-like in one of the larger trees, and our first Príncipe Seedeater (this a potential future split as São Tomé Seedeater). A White-tailed Tropicbird passed distantly overhead, while a couple of Lemon Doves, the São Tomé form of which is sometimes split as Forest Dove, were watched along the road, but the two most significant finds of the day was Giant Weaver around its nest, which gave some good views, and best of all a few São Tomé White-eye (now split from the Principian one).

The next day we made our assault on the higher-altitude forest around Lagoa Amelia. All of the previous day's endemics were seen again, including even better views of São Tomé White-eye and some lovely male São Tomé Paradise Flycatcher. And there were a few noteworthy additions. Best of all was a couple of sightings of Giant Sunbird, which gave some superb close-up views and was a bit of a surprise to see on this part of the island, and also in farmland. São Tomé Oriole sang

loudly from depths of the forest and took a little effort to track down, but São Tomé Green Pigeon was easy to spot where it fed on a fruiting fig tree. By mid-morning the clouds and mist were rolling in, and all too soon we'd lost our visibility. The calls from a nearby São Tomé Olive Pigeon were very frustrating and we could even hear the wing beats of the birds moving around the tree above us, but the mist was simply too thick, and soon after the rain set in, sending us back down the mountain on a soggy march. As we drove down to the coast we started to dry out, and decided to make a late afternoon detour to the northern savannas, where it wasn't raining. Here some Red-headed Lovebirds flew past, Giant Weaver was scoped for even better views, a couple of Harlequin Quail were spotted on the deck and watched foraging on the scope, a Red-necked Spurfowl crowed in the distance, and the main target bird, Island Bronze-naped Pigeon, showed very well after a bit of persistence.

With most of the island's endemics now seen, there was one last area to visit – the notoriously wet and difficult south of the island. An overnight camping expedition was called for, and thanks to the newly improved road we were in the forest by mid-morning. A couple of short stops on the way turned up some excellent views of São Tomé Kingfisher and African Emerald Cuckoo, plus Reed Cormorant, Striated Heron, Western Reef Heron and a single Common Moorhen. The trail was wet and slippery, and as we slowly climbed we scanned the flatter, damp areas for ibis, enjoying great views of São Tomé Oriole as we went. The first birds flushed and couldn't be relocated, but a second pair of São Tomé Ibis flew up and landed nearby, in the open. We quickly had the scopes swung in their direction, and over the next 20 minutes everyone had ample opportunity to study what must be the island's least numerous endemic in great detail. In fact, we walked away from the bird still sitting there. Higher up the slopes the calls of São Tomé Scops Owl caused further excitement and a short while later we had a lovely red-phase bird sitting very nearby in a stand of giant bamboo, giving great views. We climbed a bit further, but it was getting late, so we decided to return to our muddy camp and give the remaining endemics another try tomorrow. It rained on and off during the evening and night, but fortunately our rain shelter and tents kept us dry. Soon after sunrise we set off once again, in high hopes. However, heavy rain, for which this part of the world is so well known, soon set in. Fortunately it slowed for about an hour, just long enough to track down the unusual São Tomé Shorttail, which sat out in the open and allowed some great looks. As we continued on upwards, however, the rain set in in all earnest, and it rained and rained and rained until the late afternoon, when we were back down the mountain with nothing further to show for our efforts. Needless to say we were pleased to arrive back at our comfortable accommodation in São Tomé town and dry out.

The next morning we made the short flight across to Príncipe islands, but not before notching up some of the seed-eating birds thought to be introduced to the islands. These included Yellow-fronted Canary, Common Waxbill, Bronze Mannikin, Pin-tailed Whydah, Blue Waxbill and Black-winged Red Bishop, White-winged Widow and Golden-backed Bishop all in non-breeding dress. We also spotted another party of Harlequin Quail foraging on some short grass and giving great views.

Soon, though, we were sitting in our hotel on Príncipe, again waiting for the rain to stop. It slowed a bit, and perhaps unwisely we were impatient and headed straight out. The rain soon returned, although it was not all bad, as we found a veranda from which we could watch birds while staying dry, and soon were enjoying views of our first island endemics, bright and busy Príncipe Golden Weavers, fruit-eating Príncipe Starling and a pair of Príncipe Speirops sitting on some wires! We returned to our hotel for lunch, and then spent the (thankfully rainless) afternoon exploring some areas near town. We enjoyed more great looks at the Starling, Weaver and Speirops. Both Príncipe Kingfisher (now known to be a form of Malachite Kingfisher) and Blue-breasted Kingfisher showed exceptionally well, African Green Pigeon, Splendid Starling and Grey Parrot were

numerous and conspicuous, Lemon Dove was confiding and Olive Sunbird easy to see. However, the three highlights were several loud and musical Dohrn's Thrush-Babbler, which allowed close approach, a couple of male Príncipe Sunbird watched foraging in some flowering trees and, in the late evening, two sightings of Príncipe Drongo, a form often lumped with Velvet-mantled Drongo.

With all the usual island endemics now seen and one more day on the island, some of the group decided to have a relaxed day around town, while others opted for a boat ride and muddy slog into some of the southern forests. The southern excursion initially seemed like a good idea, as lines of Brown Booby drifted by our boat and good numbers of White-tailed Tropicbird circled overhead. However, soon after landing on the southern shores the rain returned. Calling Príncipe Seed eaters (probably to be split from their São Toméan relatives) remained hidden in the canopy, a probable flock of calling Príncipe White-eyes passed briefly overhead without being seen, and we spent hours traipsing around in the rain looking unsuccessfully for Príncipe Thrush. In the late afternoon the weather dried out a bit, and a short boat trip across to Jockey Cap Islet soon produced some reasonable views of the endemic subspecies of Príncipe Seed eater, before we turned for town.

Our last day on the islands was spent making our way back to São Tomé, and then for the keener members of the group, another wet and unsuccessful attempt to look for São Tomé Olive Pigeon in the Lagoa Amelia area, rain and mist again thwarting our attempts. Needless to say, we were relieved to arrive back in a relatively dry Gabon the next day.