

# The lifer in the year of the pandemic: the Gran Canaria blue chaffinch



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Frontcover left to right and up to down. Photos by Miquel Bonet except group photo (Salvador Cases). plain swift (*Apus unicolor*), male Gran Canaria blue chaffinch (*Fringilla polatzeki*), Roque Nublo, african blue tit (*Cyanistes teneriffae*), female Gran Canaria blue chaffinch, great grey shrike (*Lanius excubitor*), muscovy duck (*Cairina moschata*), african collared dove (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*), common buzzard (*B.buteo*), canary (*Serinus canaria*), group photo, kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*)

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## INTRODUCTION

None of us had ever made a trip for just one species. Nonetheless, we transformed the need into a virtue and -having postponed for 2021 trips, combining all the participants, to places as suggestive as Egypt, Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, United States, Malaysia, Tibet, New Zealand, Australia and New Caledonia- we regained a destination that had fallen into oblivion.

Gran Canaria was not on our global or palearctic birding radar, but from 2013-2016, when the blue chaffinch was split between Tenerife and Gran Canaria, an endemism "appeared".

In 2017, Miquel Bonet visited the traditional area of Inagua without finding the blue chaffinch. On similar dates, I tried to convince my sisters to make our family trip to Gran Canaria and thus take the opportunity to tick a lifer, but the performances of the Spanish pigs on October 1st 2017 have since ruled out any family trip to Spain.

Obviously, the pandemic has changed everything. Without the possibility of leaving the Palearctic and even, in many cases, of visiting Europe, there is the option of taking advantage of the possibilities to visit Spain.

Also, as it is difficult for the situation to improve before mid-2021 (when we will eventually be able to schedule out of the cage), I have written this little report in case anyone wants to use these uncertain times to visit Gran Canaria.

## SPECIES OF INTEREST

Here we will only focus on the birds.

**Gran Canaria blue chaffinch** (*Fringilla polatzeki*). Undoubtedly, this is the species that can motivate an excursion to Gran Canaria.

From Juncal you can access the forests of Inagua where the original population can be found (approximately 90% of the current population). The visit is highly recommended, but the chances of finding it there are low.

A captive-bred population has been released in the Balico/Llanos de la Pez area, and with a little patience it is possible to find it.

This species is the one that marks the trip and the easiest place to see it is the area of Balico-Llanos de la Pez. The strategy of spending three days on the chaffinch and three days visiting the island seems like a good option. The central part of the island is full of paths, so it's ideal for people who like hiking, who also have the added bonus of being able to find a lifer along the way.

**Muscovy Duck** (*Cairina moschata*). It has recently been added to the Palearctic list, but it can only be counted in the Canary Islands. So even though it's an ugly duck to add to the list for its farm duck appearance -and much more in a place like Parque del Sur (which means South Park!)- we found about forty of them, breeding, flying and eating bread fed by human families who take selfies with them. We were told that it is considered a pest and that the island government occasionally removes a few.

As it is easy to find, it can be an interesting addition to the list.

**African Collared dove** (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*). It has recently been removed from the C list in the Canary Islands, so if you want to count it well, you have to go to the south of Egypt, on the border with Sudan. However, in the Canary Islands you can find it in different places, such as Maspalomas (which means More Doves!), Parque del Sur or Parque San Jorge.

With no other special species to find beforehand, we did a general tour on the island to see what else we could find there.

## Transport

Car rental is very cheap. A vehicle for six days at full risk, rented at CICAR, cost € 115. Another car, for three days, rented at TopCar, € 40.

For those who want to go by public transport, you can reach Ayacata or the Tropical Bar. Given that both Llanos de la Pez and Balico are camping areas, someone may consider not renting a car, arriving by public transport and being relaxed for a few camping days.

## Accommodation and food

The coast is full of hotels that can be booked with the flight included. If you choose this option, it may be best to be close to Maspalomas, although it takes an hour from there to the blue chaffinch area.

The best option is to be in the mountains and Ayacata seemed like the best place. No

hotels, but some rentable houses. Casa Carmen (up to 4 people and from € 60 per day) and Casa Naranjo (up to 6 people and from € 70 per day) are two places totally recommended.

Although you can cook at home, most of the time we opted for the only bar-and-restaurant that was open.

In Tejeda or Cruz de Tejeda there is much more accommodation, including a "parador", although it is further away from Pajonales. Anyway, the distances are short.

There is also the option of camping in Balico or Llanos de la Pez, where you can cook on the grill.

### 10/30/2020. Barcelona (12:05 h) - Las Palmas (14:35 h) - Maspalomas - Parque Urbano del Sur - Ayacata.

After renting the cars, we went to Maspalomas. As Santiago Sánchez Cabrera told me, Maspalomas "to a Catalan is a bathtub" and, in fact, it is a small sheet of water at the mouth of a small ravine. However, it is the point of the Canary Islands with the most recorded bird species. If you only look for the blue chaffinch you won't see more than ten species, so we sacrificed three hours of searching for the blue chaffinch in order to have a more distracting list. For those who want a beach with good dunes this is the place.

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S75601773>

After the first canary birds, with **plain swifts** as the most remarkable, we moved two kilometres to the Parque Urbano del Sur. The target were two ticks for the Palearctic: the **African collared dove** (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*) and the **Muscovy duck** (*Cairina moschata*). We didn't see the former neither here nor in Maspalomas, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75602730>

With the work done, we went to the supermarket to buy groceries. Then, we drove to Ayacata, a village with just over 30 souls and at 1300 meters above sea level, strategically located near the blue chaffinch areas. Both the Balico/Llanos de la Pez area and the Juncal are just over 5 km and a 9-minute drive away.



Muscovy Duck (*Cairina moschata f. domestica*) Miquel Bonet

In the two houses where we stayed it was possible to cook and thus protect ourselves from the COVID-19. However, most of us took advantage of the only restaurant open: the Ayacata Grill Restaurant (27.95614, -15.60924). Good and cheap food, plus friendly staff. What else can you ask for?

### 31/10/2020. Campamento el Garañón - Llanos de la Pez - Presa de los Hornos - Balico - Roque Nublo.

We started our day by visiting Campamento el Garañón, where supposedly there was a spring where many species would go to drink, among which, from time to time, the Gran Canaria blue chaffinch. It was supposed to be the second best place to see the bird, but we couldn't get in because there was a mountain bike race. So we went to Llanos de la Pez. What a wise truth when they told us not to go there on a weekend! Edu and Clara thought they saw a female blue chaffinch flying overhead, but we couldn't locate the bird again.

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S75626198>

When those campers emerging from their tents constituted a crowd, we fled to the **Presa de los Hornos**, where blue chaffinches had been released, and some of them had stayed nearby. This was supposedly the best place to find the species. We were unable to access where we were told, as there was a fence surrounding the entire grounds. However, we spent about two hours walking around the reservoir and the pine forest. The result? Seven species of birds, comprising about thirty individuals, out of which about twenty were a flock of pigeons. Just to give you an idea of the richness and abundance of birds in this habitat. No trace of the blue chaffinch!

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S75627320>

We went back to **Llanos de la Pez** for a second breakfast

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S75628200> and from there we headed to

**Balico**, where we had the third point to find the blue chaffinch: a table next to a bar. <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75628975> There was, however, no open bar and a lot of people. So we went back to Llanos de la Pez, where some chose to give up and take a nap and others kept looking for the chaffinch without any success. <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75633710>

After lunch, we left the best blue chaffinch area. Then, while Edu, Clara and Sofi returned to Ayacata, the rest of us took an excursion to the **Roque Nublo**, one of the two mountains sacred to the natives, who were exterminated when they were "civilized". The odds here of finding the chaffinch were lower, but the scenery was well worth it.

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S75640310>

After visiting Roque Nublo, Salvador and I walked back to **Ayacata** and Miquel and Anna drove back. <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75652406>

### 1/11/2020 Pajonales/El Juncal - Tejada - Llanos de la Pez - Presa de los Hornos.

Since it was All Saints' Day and also Sunday, we wanted to avoid the crowds of the previous day. So we went to Pajonales, where the original population of blue chaffinches is preserved. The walk from the Juncal is highly recommended, the views are spectacular and the tranquillity is absolute: for four hours we found less than ten people and eleven species of birds <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75679490>

Halfway through, the surprise of the day: Sofi, accompanied by Ana, gave Eugeni a bouquet of wild flowers from his partner, who had stayed in Catalonia, on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of living together.

However, finding a blue chaffinch here does not seem like a very easy task.

For lunch, we went to Tejada, a very beautiful place, but not the most beautiful village on the island in our opinion. In the afternoon, we returned to Llanos de la Pez, where we were able to check that the Garañón camp was closed <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75696470>. At the Hornos



Crow (*Corvus corax* ssp. *tingitanus*) Miquel Bonet



Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major* ssp. *canariensis*) Miquel Bonet



De Balico a Ayacata Eugeni Capella

dam we repeated the same fate <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786467>. At the end of the day we were already saying that we would not return to Gran Canaria until there was a feeder where the blue finch could be guaranteed. The idea of leaving the island without our lifer looked quite probable!

**2/11/2020 Balico - Antilope Canyon - Parque de San Juan - Charcas de San Lorenzo - Charca de los Alemanes - Charcas Hoya de**

**Ariñez - Presa de Pinto - Arucas -Teror.**

Early in the morning, we followed a ravine near Balico that we had been advised to visit. After following it and then spreading ourselves out, watching for different points of water that had remained on the rocks or in the torrent, Miquel walkie-talkied us that he was watching a female Gran Canaria blue chaffinch. Called by the Good News, we moved until he pointed out the Canary Island pine tree from which it had left. Miraculously, after a few minutes, he returned to the same pine: half a minute, half hidden, a good photo and then flying away not to return never again. Why does such an elusive bird return to a pine tree guarded by eight people? We don't know, but with the lifer



Anna Trabalón at Antilope Canyon Miquel Bonet

in the bag, Eduardo, Clara, Sofi and Salvador returned to the airport.

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786498>

With the mission accomplished, the rest of the group relaxed and headed NE, near the coast, to a rather spectacular canary **Antelope Canyon**, where we also found a great grey shrike and a spotted flycatcher. <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786609>

From there, we continued to **San Juan Park**, where we had lunch and found the **African collared dove** (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*) <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786635>. From here we started to visit a number of water points that are a bit unfortunate, if you do not take into account that you are on an island with virtually no wetlands. In the Ponds of San Lorenzo we found two **ruddy shelducks** <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786650>. In the Los Alemanes Pond, three species! <https://ebird.org/checklist/>



Ruddy shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*) Miquel Bonet

S75786655.

In the Hoya de Ariñez Ponds, five partridges <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786667>.

At the Pinto Dam, black-winged stilts <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786678>.

Coming from Catalonia they don't look like very exciting findings. And the sites don't deserve attention for any other aspects either.

Having finished birdwatching, we were able to admire the Parish of San Bautista de Arucas and walk through Teror, the most beautiful village we saw on the island.

### 3/11/2020 Balico - Montañón - Ayacata.

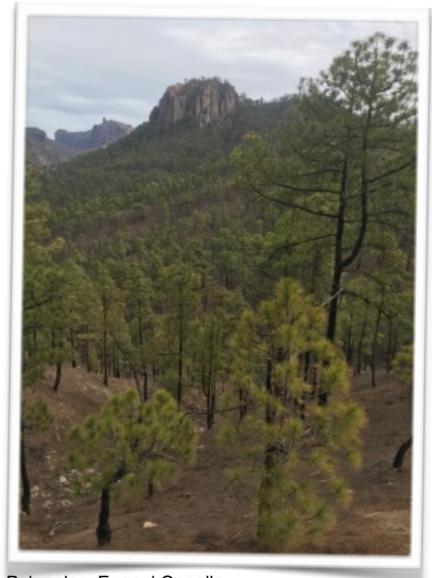
Even though the days of birding were over, on the one hand I didn't want to be the fifth wheel, and on the other hand, I wanted to find a male blue chaffinch. So I went back to the point of the day before, and after walking through the ravine for an hour, I found a point with two males and a female of blue chaffinches! <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786702>. I saw them up close. Then, feeling happy, I returned to Balico and from there I went up to Montañón <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786738> and, after finding a way to overcome the cliff, I followed the path to Ayacata: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75786454>

### 4/11/2020 Pajonales/El Juncal - Presa de las Niñas - Balico.

I had already seen the male blue chaffinch at close range, but it population. As I had time, I returned to the Juncal to walk the same itinerary that we all walked on Sunday. Did I say the scenery was spectacular, but the birds were few? In four hours and more than 5 km I saw nine species and sixty specimens, counting heard-onlies and thirty pigeons. It is an advisable place as a maximum exponent of relax birding, without any obsession to find anything in particular. Finally, I saw a male blue chaffinch, although, like those observed in Balico, it also had four rings -one metallic and three coloured. <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75822246>

came from a released

Were they "wild" finches captured and ringed to be studied? Either way, I could no longer expect to see the blue chaffinch any better nor in a better habitat. So I went down the track to the Dam of the Niñas. Did I say the first five kilometres were poor? Everything is relative, during the next four km I counted fifteen specimens -mostly only heard- of four species: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75822264>



Pajonales. Eugeni Capella

There, I was picked up by Miquel Bonet, who had already finished the route around the island and, obviously, did not want to miss the opportunity to photograph a male Gran Canaria blue chaffinch. So we went back to Balico and even though the sky was cloudy and cool, he was able to photograph a slightly elusive male: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75822202>

### 5/11/2020 Juncalillo del Sur - La Florida - Aldea Blanca - salinas de Arinaga - Los Espinales del Oeste y del Este - Las Palmas (15:50 h) - Barcelona (20:10 h)

On the last day, we took the opportunity to visit more and more disappointing and unfortunate places before boarding the plane.

We started the day well enough, at least from a landscape point of view, in **Juncalillo del Sur**. We didn't find the trumpeter finch (*Bucanetes githagineus*), although it looks like a good place: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75873475>

From there we went to **La Florida**, with the intention of reaching the fifty species listed, where we didn't find the cormorant (*Ph. carbo*) but we added a lesser black-backed gull: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75873482>

We continued to **Aldea Blanca** ("White Village"), which proved unsuccessful for the rock sparrow (*P. petronia*) <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75873493>

After a short stop at the **salinas de Arinaga** <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75873507> we arrived at the most unfortunate place of all: **Los Espinales del Oeste y del Este**. A place of greenhouses, many of them abandoned, reminiscent of a post nuclear accident landscape, which Miquel gave as a present to Ana as their last memory of Gran Canaria <https://ebird.org/checklist/S75873451>. Luckily, Ana always knows how to find a point of humour in any situation -although in such a place it really was a notable achievement.

And from there to the mousetrap that home has become, to wait for an opportunity to escape again!

As I said at the beginning, if you have a week off and want to go to Gran Canaria, I will be happy to answer any questions at [grallariculalineaifrons@gmail.com](mailto:grallariculalineaifrons@gmail.com) or [eugenicapella@gmail.com](mailto:eugenicapella@gmail.com) or Instagram @grallariatours



Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus ssp. canariensis*)  
Miquel Bonet