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Wildlife and Fauna of Cape Verde

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Introduction

The archipelago of Cape Verde, officially the Republic of Cabo Verde, rises from the heart of the Atlantic Ocean some 570 kilometers off the West African coast. These ten rugged volcanic islands—divided into the windward Barlavento and leeward Sotavento groups—offer a stunning variety of landscapes, ranging from green mountains draped in mist to stark, windblown deserts and gleaming white-sand beaches. Despite the islands' arid to semi-arid climate, their isolation and unique environmental conditions have turned them into a remarkable center of biodiversity, with a high proportion of plant and animal species found nowhere else in the world.

Before their discovery and settlement by the Portuguese in the 15th century, Cape Verde's islands were uninhabited. Over the centuries, natural colonization by wind, water, or animal flight, combined with human introductions, shaped a fascinating blend of wildlife. The islands' geographic isolation allowed a distinct evolutionary journey, fostering significant endemism among birds, reptiles, and invertebrates. While the number of species is limited compared to continental terrains, the uniqueness and rarity of Cape Verde's wildlife have drawn scientists, conservationists, and nature lovers to experience its wonders.

Cape Verde's terrestrial fauna is characterized by scarcity of native mammals but a notable diversity of birds, reptiles, and invertebrates. From the critically endangered Raso Lark, which finds refuge only on a single islet, to the mysterious, possibly extinct Cape Verde giant skink, these islands are home to extraordinary creatures adapted to their specific and fragile environments. Rich in geckos, lizards, and small mammals like bats, Cape Verde's terrestrial wildlife reflects both ancient natural processes and the dramatic influence of ongoing human settlement.

The marine environment of Cape Verde is equally spectacular. Warm tropical currents and diverse underwater landscapes have created a biodiversity hotspot for both resident and migratory species. Coral reefs teem with colorful fish, while the ocean hosts over sixty species of sharks and rays, visiting whales, and globally significant populations of nesting sea turtles. The archipelago's location, at the meeting point of different oceanic currents, gives rise to a dynamic mosaic of marine habitats unmatched in the eastern Atlantic.

Yet, this wealth of biodiversity faces ongoing challenges. Human activity, habitat loss, invasive species, climate change, and unsustainable resource use threaten both terrestrial and marine ecosystems. In response, Cape Verde has taken significant steps toward conservation, establishing a network of protected areas and partnering with local and international organizations to protect its rare and vulnerable species.

Community-based conservation and eco-tourism are emerging as promising models for balancing environmental protection with human well-being.

This book provides an in-depth guide to the wildlife and fauna of Cape Verde, exploring its unique natural heritage, the threats it faces, and the efforts underway to ensure its survival. From endemic lizards basking on sunlit stones to humpback whales breaching offshore, the story of Cape Verde's wildlife is one of resilience, adaptation, and hope. Through these pages, we invite readers to discover the wonders of Cape Verde's biodiversity and to join in the growing commitment to safeguarding it for generations to come.

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CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate of Cape Verde

Nestled in the vast expanse of the central Atlantic Ocean, approximately 570 kilometers (about 354 miles) off the western coast of Africa, lies the archipelago nation of Cape Verde, also known as Cabo Verde. This cluster of ten volcanic islands and several smaller islets, with a total land area of 4,033 square kilometers (1,557 sq mi), presents a remarkable study in geographical diversity. The islands are divided into two distinct groups by the prevailing northeast trade winds: the Barlavento (Windward) islands to the north and the Sotavento (Leeward) islands to the south. This geographical arrangement, coupled with their volcanic origins, has shaped the varied landscapes and contributes significantly to the archipelago's climate patterns.

The Barlavento Islands, facing the brunt of the trade winds, include Santo Antão, São Vicente, Santa Luzia, São Nicolau, Sal, and Boa Vista. These islands exhibit a range of topographies. The western islands within this group, such as Santo Antão, São Vicente, and São Nicolau, are generally more volcanic and rugged, with some capacity for semi-arid agriculture in certain areas. Santo Antão, for instance, is known for its dramatic mountains and deep valleys. The eastern Barlavento islands, Sal and Boa Vista, along with Maio in the Sotavento group, are characterized by flatter, more desert-like terrain with extensive sandy areas, including impressive sand dunes on Boa Vista. These flatter islands have historically relied on salt production and now heavily feature tourism and fishing in their economies. Santa Luzia, one of the Barlavento islands, stands out as the only large uninhabited island, designated as a nature reserve.

Moving south, the Sotavento Islands comprise Maio, Santiago, Fogo, and Brava. The western islands of this group – Santiago, Fogo, and Brava – are distinctly more mountainous and volcanic, boasting the longest histories of human settlement and agricultural activity. Santiago, the largest island in both size and population, is home to the capital city, Praia. Its landscape is a mix of fine sandy beaches, mountains, dry steppes, fertile valleys, and high plateaus, with Pico da Antónia being its highest point. Fogo is dominated by the active volcano Pico do Fogo, the highest peak in the entire archipelago, reaching 2,829 meters (9,281 feet). The volcanic nature of these islands contributes to their rugged beauty but also means that natural water sources like rivers and lakes are scarce. The varied topography across the islands, with sheer cliffs rising from the sea on mountainous islands, adds to their dramatic visual appeal.

The climate of Cape Verde is predominantly dry tropical, often described as arid to semi-arid, a characteristic significantly influenced by its location off the coast of the Sahel region of Africa and the prevailing trade winds. The surrounding Atlantic Ocean

plays a crucial moderating role, preventing the extreme temperatures found on the nearby African mainland. Average annual temperatures across the archipelago are remarkably stable, generally ranging between 24°C and 30°C (75°F and 86°F), with minimal variation between day and night. The coolest months typically fall between January and April, while September and October tend to be the warmest.

Cape Verde experiences two main seasons: a long, dry season (Tempo das Brisas) and a short, rainy season (Tempo das Chuvas). The dry season generally runs from November to July and is characterized by clear skies and consistent sunshine. During this time, the islands are under the influence of the northeast trade winds, which are particularly strong from November through March or April. These winds, while contributing to the islands' arid nature by limiting rainfall, are also responsible for creating ideal conditions for various water sports, making Cape Verde a popular destination for surfers and kiteboarders. The trade winds can also carry dust from the Sahara, sometimes creating a dry mist known as *bruma seca*, which can occasionally impact visibility.

The rainy season is typically concentrated between August and October, although rainfall can be quite irregular and unpredictable. Despite the name "rainy season," the total amount of precipitation is generally low, classifying Cape Verde among the driest countries in the world. When rain does occur, it often comes in the form of short, intense tropical downpours rather than prolonged periods of light rain. The amount of rainfall varies significantly across the islands, largely influenced by their topography and position relative to the prevailing winds.

The mountainous islands, particularly those in the Sotavento group and Santo Antão in the Barlavento group, receive considerably more rainfall due to orographic lift. As the moist air is forced upwards by the mountains, it cools and condenses, leading to precipitation on the windward (northeastern) slopes. This creates distinct microclimates, with some valleys on these islands being surprisingly green and capable of supporting more lush vegetation, contrasting sharply with the arid coastal areas. Islands like Brava are known for their increased moisture due to consistent cloud formation over their mountains.

In contrast, the flatter, eastern islands like Sal, Boa Vista, and Maio receive very little rainfall and have a more consistently arid climate. Sal, for instance, has an average annual precipitation of only around 90-145 mm, with most of it falling between August and October. These islands truly embody the "dry" aspect of Cape Verde's climate.

Ocean currents also play a role in shaping Cape Verde's climate. The islands are influenced by the cool Canary Current flowing southward, which contributes to the arid atmosphere, and warmer waters from the Gulf of Guinea to the south. The interaction of these currents creates a dynamic marine environment and influences sea temperatures, which generally remain warm year-round, ranging from around 22°C to

29°C (72°F to 84°F). The convergence of different water masses around the archipelago, known as the Cape Verde Frontal Zone, adds to the complexity of the marine climate.

While the climate is generally mild and pleasant, the irregularity and scarcity of rainfall pose significant challenges, particularly for agriculture and water supply. The islands have experienced prolonged periods of drought throughout history. This arid environment, shaped by volcanic activity, trade winds, and ocean currents, forms the backdrop for the unique wildlife that has managed to adapt and thrive in these challenging conditions. Understanding this interplay of geography and climate is crucial to appreciating the remarkable biodiversity of Cape Verde.

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