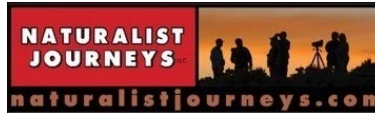


Caribbean Endemics of Jamaica | March 17-24, 2024 | Trip Report | by Pat Lueders



With guide Pat Lueders, local guide Ricardo Miller, and participants: Jean, Kathy, Tom, Anindya & Michael



Jamaica features the highest number of endemic species in the Caribbean region and an incredible diversity of habitats, flora, and fauna, ranking Jamaica #5 among the world's islands for endemic plant diversity. During this adventure, we visited a large area of the island, marveling at this diversity and the ease in finding and learning about their 29 endemic bird species. In addition, we enjoyed the year around residents and the many North American breeding songbirds seen on their wintering grounds.

Sun., Mar. 17 Arrival in Kingston

Arriving at the modern Kingston airport, we were greeted with breezy temperatures in the 80's, reminding us that we had left winter behind to enjoy a week on a Caribbean island. Our first lodging was located on the bay near Port Royal with views of Brown Pelicans, Sandwich and Royal Terns, Laughing Gulls, and Magnificent Frigatebirds seen circling over the water from the dining room. Those who arrived early spent time walking the grounds seeing Prairie & Yellow Warblers, American Redstart, Common Ground Dove, White-winged Dove, and a busy Vervain Hummingbird, second smallest in the World. What a great beginning! At our introductory



dinner, we met Ricardo Miller, our Jamaican guide for the week, and introduced ourselves to him and each other. Our journey begins tomorrow morning!

Mon., Mar 18: Hellshire Hills & Hope Gardens

We left Port Royal and drove around the bay to the dry Hellshire Hills, one of the largest remaining areas of dry limestone forest in the Caribbean, supporting several Jamaican specialties usually only found there. As we drove a quiet sand road, Ricardo immediately heard a Bahama Mockingbird vocalize, and we saw the large Jamaican Mango perched nearby. A pair of Stolid Flycatchers was perched as was a Loggerhead Kingbird. What a great start! We slowly continued on the road and Kathy spotted a Bahama Mockingbird only a few feet from the van to the delight of all. Success!

We drove a short distance, leaving the dry habitat behind, to visit the Greater Portmore Sewage Ponds. What's a birding tour without a sewage pond? There were so many birds we didn't know which direction to look. Purple and Common Gallinule; Little Blue, Tricolored, and Green Heron; Snowy, Cattle, and Great Egret were all feeding along the shore. Anindya spotted a Least Bittern perched in the reeds, and Ricardo put his scope on a group of Chestnut Munia in the grasses. Yellow-crowned bishops were nearby. We hated to leave this bountiful location!

After lunch, we visited the Hope Botanical Gardens in the city of Kingston, a public park managed by the Nature Preservation Foundation. As we exited the van, we immediately heard Yellow-billed Parrots vocalizing above us. Our first Jamaican Woodpecker, their only woodpecker species, was excavating a nesting hole on the same tree. White-chinned Thrush, eventually a bird we would see every day reminding us of our American Robin, Greater Antillean Grackles, and Smooth-billed Ani were seen though out the park. We experienced some local color when we heard a minister loudly and passionately delivering a sermon to a small group under a pavilion. Lyndon, Ricardo's partner, led us through the park finding four different perched Northern Potoos. Wow! But the most exciting sighting for all of us was our first Red-billed Streamertail of the week. What a magnificent hummingbird!

We left the park and drove to our lodge for the next three days, the Starlight Chalet, enjoyed a delicious dinner, and excitedly went through our checklists noting the large number of species we had seen so far.



Tue., Mar 19: Blue Mountains

We awoke with much cooler temperatures in the Blue Mountains, known for its delicious coffee and part of the Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park, a UNSECO World heritage Site. As we drank our coffee, we watched Red-billed Streamertails, male and female, visiting the feeder. A cute Sad Flycatcher visited us daily as did the resident Black-throated Blue Warbler. A pair of Jamaican Spindalis and a Jamaican Oriole also showed interest in the feeder. All of this while we watched from a few feet! We left after breakfast to bird the Silver Hill Gap, stopping at hot spots to listen for Crested Quail-Dove or hoping to spot one on the quiet road. Ricardo heard and found one close to us for great scope views to the delight of the photographers. What a lovely dove! We stopped again and, while birding, Ricardo found a Jamaican Blackbird, probably the only one that would be seen on the trip. On a trail near a dirt bank, we saw two Jamaican Todys on a branch across from a hole in the dirt bank that they were excavating for nesting. It's hard to imagine a cuter bird species than a Tody! On this walk we also saw our first Arrowhead Warbler, Blue Mountain and Jamaican Vireo, White-eyed Thrush, and Greater Antillean Bullfinch.

After lunch and an afternoon break, we returned to the road, hearing numerous Rufous-throated Solitaires and their haunting vocalization with Michael determined to see one, but they eluded us. We had open looks at a pair of Ring-tailed Pigeons, Black-and White Warblers, and the daily Bananaquit. Another successful day was tallied at dinner and on the checklist. After dinner, we took a short walk on the grounds and heard three, and had a short glimpse at one, Jamaican Owl. We will try again!

Wed., Mar 20: Blue Mountains

We started this morning around the lodge, getting good looks at an Ovenbird, Orangequits, a Yellow-faced and Black-faced Grassquit, and the striking Yellow-shouldered Grassquit. Our destination this morning was the Hardwar Gap. As we drove, Ricardo spotted a Solitaire, so we quickly got out and heard, and then saw it up the hill, much to Michael's delight! We also began to hear the recently arrived Black-whiskered Vireos, a summer breeder for Jamaica, and saw a few as we successfully pursued the Greater Antillean Elaenia. A Louisiana Waterthrush was on the edge of the road as we drove to lunch. We stopped near a creek, and Ricardo heard a Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo. As we tried to find the elusive but very large cuckoo, Jean said, "I'm looking at a large bird with a long tail and bill". She had found it for us! We stopped at Café Blue for lunch and watched a male Cape May Warbler, a Common Yellowthroat, and a Yellow-faced Grassquit from the restaurant's balcony. Many of us purchased bags of their Blue Mountain Coffee to take home to enjoy. What a magical day!



Thurs., Mar 21: Descent to the coast & Port Antonio

Sadly, we bid farewell this morning to the cheerful staff of the Starlight Chalet and their delicious meals. During the descent, we stopped for another sighting of the Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo and our nesting Jamaican Todys. Because of some minor engine problems, we quickly switched to a newer van in Buff Bay. As we crossed the Rio Grande Bridge, Ricardo expertly spotted a pair of Green-rumped Parrotlets excavating a nesting hole in a dead tree close to the road. Such cute little birds! We stopped for lunch in Port Antonio at a popular local spot, Roots 21, many of us enjoying the popular curry goat, curry chicken, curry fish, or curry oxtail. We checked into the Bay Side Eco Lodge and then met to bird the San San Police Station Road, a lovely forest walk, seeing Ruddy Quail-Doves along the road. We heard a Mangrove Cuckoo and had good looks at a Caribbean Dove, new for the trip. We had dinner at the lodge near the pool and rested well after finishing our checklists of today's sightings.

Fri., Mar 22: Ecclesdown Road

Some of us got up before sunrise this morning for better looks at a Jamaican Owl, and we weren't disappointed, seeing two adults and hearing a juvenile. Ricardo's torch also found a Northern Potoo perched nearby. We were also rewarded with a beautiful sunrise! We picked up our box breakfast to get an early start to our first destination, Happy Grove, a cliff overlooking a nesting area for White-tailed Tropicbirds. Ricardo knew we needed to arrive before the birds departed for deeper waters to feed. We were right on time and watched approximately 20 Tropicbirds majestically flying near the cliffs and over the open water.

We then drove the world-class Ecclesdown Road, a seldom-used road that travels along the foothills of the John Crow Mountains for approximately 12 miles. It's entirely flat and passes through open forests and well as small patches of farmland. We soon hear, and then see, the impressive Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, getting great photo opportunities. We also saw the Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo again and a tree with seedpods with Green-rumped Parrotlet and Olive-throated Parakeets enjoying the seeds. Initially, we had a quick flyby of Black-billed Parrots, but a little later two flew low by us for good looks at their black bills. Stopping soon afterwards, we heard the Jamaican Crow and saw two on the hillside vocalizing, getting good scope looks. As we walked, Tom spotted a Shiny Cowbird, the only one we would see. Finally, we found the last of the 29 Jamaican endemics, the Black-billed Streamertail. Both species are amazing to watch and photograph. As we drove, we spotted a Jamaican Becard nest and both the male and female carrying nesting material to construct their huge nest.



To celebrate our successful morning, we stopped for jerk at the Gurley Aston Boston Jerk Stop, enjoying what many said was the best jerk chicken they had ever tasted! And we finally saw Cave Swallows from their porch for which we had been searching. As we returned to the lodge, White-throated Swifts were feeding along the road for all to see.

Sat., Mar 23: Return to Kingston

We left Port Antonio this morning to return to Kingston. In route, we stopped at the Castletown Botanical Garden, the second botanical garden on the island, established in the early 1860s. The lovely garden has a beautiful river running through it and amazing trees such as the Cannonball Tree with its huge hanging balls. We enjoyed seeing many of their bird species that we can now recognize but are probably seeing for the last time. A traditional Jamaican artist was selling his crafts at the visitor center and many of us purchased his handmade bowls. As we returned to Kingston, Ricardo had one last stop planned for us, the Masked Duck wetland, and it didn't disappoint with us seeing, eight Masked Ducks, Short-billed Dowitchers, a variety of sandpipers, a just returned Gray Kingbird, and Ricardo's favorite bird of the trip, a Blue-winged Teal x Northern Shoveler hybrid. What a perfect end to a wonderful trip!

We had dinner on the porch of our new hotel, the Hotel Four Seasons, and did our final checklist. All were asked to share their three favorite birds and their favorite experience of the tour. The Jamaican Tody was chosen as the #1 bird, and the Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo and the Red-billed Streamertail tied for second. The favorite experience was staying at the Starlight Chalet. We all agreed that we would always remember the wonderful experience we had birding together in Jamaica!

Photos: Group (Pat Lueders - PL), Olive-throated Parakeet (Michael Good - MG), Red-billed Streamertail (MG), Jamaican Tody (Anindya Sen - AS), Crested Quail-Dove (AS), White-tailed Tropicbird (MG), Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo (AS), Jamaican Mango (AS), Bahama Mockingbird (MG), Yellow-crowned Bishop (MG), Northern Potoo (MG), Sad Flycatcher (MG), Jamaican Vireo (MG), Group (PL), Jamaican Tody (MG), White-eyed Thrush (MG), Jamaican Blackbird (MG), Red-billed Streamertail (AS), Green-rumped Parrotlet (AS), Bananaquit (AS), Jamaican Woodpecker (MG), Olive-throated Parakeet (PL), Ricardo (PL), Scenic (MG)