

Lesser Antilles Endemics: A 3-Island Classic

Dec. 3-14, 2024 | Trip Report | by Chris Harbard



Chris Harbard with Gary, Connie, Tom and Holly



Tues., Dec. 3

Arrive St Lucia | Balenbouche

On their arrival at St Lucia airport, guests were met by Naturalist Journeys guide Chris, and local guide Adé. On our drive to the hotel, Adé explained how the airport had once been a military airstrip with many of the roads around it part of the old runways. He took us along some back roads past the Heineken brewery and other businesses. He told us a little about himself – born in the UK, but brought up on St Lucia, with an education at college in the UK. As we turned into the entrance drive at Balenbouche Estate he explained that it had once been a thriving sugar cane plantation, with the main house still remaining. The owner, Uta, came out to greet us along with several of her friendly dogs. She showed the guests to their rooms and a briefing was arranged for 6pm, just before dinner, giving everyone time to unpack and relax a little. Dinner was served on the veranda of the main plantation house, a delightful buffet of home-cooked local food.

Wed., Dec. 4

Des Cartiers Rainforest | Aupicon | Highlight

Breakfast was at 6:30 and Adé arrived soon after we had finished so we were able to depart at 7:30 sharp, ready for a busy morning. We are visiting the Des Cartiers Rainforest, along a trail which would take us to a wonderful viewpoint across a valley in which we hoped to find the endemic St Lucia Amazon. Along the way we would be looking for other special Caribbean birds, including some more endemics. We were prepared for the walk, which is one of the hardest of the trip. If wet, it can be very slippery, and rocks and tree roots along the trail meant



that we had to watch our step at all times. One or two places along the trail did prove to be challenging and walking poles proved to be very useful.

As we walked along the trail Adé demonstrated his encyclopedic knowledge of trees. Once working in forestry, he knows every native tree and most introduced ones too, and was able to identify everything and tell us what it was good for in terms of the use to locals, as well as to wildlife. A high warbling song was heard in the distance, and Adé told us this was the endemic St Lucia Warbler. It soon appeared, actively feeding on some nearby branches, a delightful bright yellow and gray bird. As we slowly continued upwards, a small black bird appeared high in a tree which Adé identified as a St Lucia Black Finch, another endemic – not great views but still welcome.

As we progressed along the trail we were overtaken by another bird guide with a couple of birders, and just after they passed by us, they suddenly stopped and both their guide and Adé peered up into the trees above us. Adé pointed upwards to where the others were looking and quietly told us that there was a St Lucia Amazon there, feeding on palm fruits. Soon we were taking turns looking through scopes at the most beautiful bird – the once rare, and still vulnerable endemic parrot of the island. Fifty years ago only 150 remained but now there are more than 1,000. The bird we were watching moved to another tree nearby and we all had great views, even seeing it have an altercation with a Pearly-eyed Thrasher who also wanted to feed there! Eventually we reached the viewing platform where we heard and saw parrots in the distance as they flew along - the valley. In the trees and vegetation in front of us there were movements – a Purple-throated Carib, a large colourful hummingbird, whizzed by while a movement in a tree in front eventually revealed itself to be a Lesser Antillean Euphonia. As we stood there Holly remarked that there should be benches for people to sit and watch, which we all agreed would be a good idea.

Soon it was time to walk back, looking and listening carefully for St Lucia Oriole which we had not seen so far. We heard the two-note call of the Scaly-naped Pigeon, songs from many St Lucia Warblers, calls from St Lucia Black Finches and the song of a Gray Tumbler, but no orioles. We occasionally stopped to rest and listen, finding a rock or tree trunk (not a bench) to sit on and were rewarded by a finding a Lesser Antillean Flycatcher and the St Lucia form of the Lesser Antillean Pewee. . It was with considerable relief that we reached the parking lot at the start of the trail and cleaned our boots before getting back into the van.

Our stop for lunch was at the Grill N Chill, where we ordered some wraps before checking out a nearby wetland area at Aupicon (otherwise known as Eau Piquant, betraying the French heritage of much of St Lucia). We



activity as the boats get back. A drive through the town showed us many old buildings and many names which show the French influence on the island. We drove into the valley to the south before returning to Pete's Place where our food awaited us.

After lunch we headed back south towards Moule a Chique, the headland at the very south of St Lucia where at the eastern side there is a lighthouse. The road climbed up the headland and we parked just by the lighthouse. Here we had a fabulous view down across Vieux Fort and the bay, towards the airport. Offshore were two small islands which Adé told us held a colony of seabirds. We climbed past the lighthouse onto a grassy area at the top and walked carefully towards the edge. Below us were some white birds wheeling, with incredibly long, thin tails – Red-billed Tropicbirds!! What a treat, to look down on these fabulous feathered beautys – it was difficult to tear ourselves away.

We headed back towards Balenbouche, with Adé taking us on a scenic route, telling us more about the history of the island. As some of us had expressed an interest in visiting a supermarket, we drove past Balenbouche towards the town of Choiseul, to Massy's Stores which was full of interesting local foods as well as many imported treats from the UK, which excited Chris. After purchasing candies, biscuits and rum, we headed back Balenbouche, arriving back about 3:30. With some time to spare, we accepted Uta's offer of a tour of the house and part of the grounds. She told us about the plantation's history and showed us many things she had found on the property, including pottery pieces from some of the original native inhabitants. In the grounds we could see where there had been pools, where water was kept, and the channel which carried it along to a huge water wheel, still well preserved, which provided the power for crushing the sugar cane. After a wonderful tour there was time to relax before the bird list and dinner.

Fri., Dec. 6 Fond Doux | Volcano | Botanic Gardens

A slightly later breakfast was welcome, but an attempt to do some early birding before breakfast was thwarted by rain but we did see Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, plus Common Ground and Zenaida Doves from the veranda. Adé arrived to pick us up and we headed north, up the west coast towards Soufriere, and past Gros Piton, one of two volcanic plugs which St Lucia is famous for. We were heading to Fond Doux, a resort built around chocolate growing where we would learn how it was made. We arrived early which gave us time to explore the trails around the resort which looked good for birds. We soon saw our first Cacao tree with its large pods, varying in



colour from pale green to a ripe orange-brown. The trees around the trail were labeled and we were thankful for this as Adé had left us until after lunch. As we explored, we saw several hummingbirds which eventually perched and were identified as Antillean Crested Hummingbirds and Green-throated Caribs. The ubiquitous Bananaquit was plentiful and we heard a Gray Trembler. At the visitor centre we saw more hummingbirds and Lesser Antillean Bullfinches, plus a couple of Broad-winged Hawks overhead.

The chocolate tour began with a talk about Cacao trees and a chance to suck on a cocoa bean straight from the pod - surprisingly tangy. Beans are fermented, roasted and then ground to powder. This is then mixed with cocoa butter and sugar and made into bars. We were each able to stir the chocolate paste and place it into molds which were then chilled to make the final chocolate bar. In the chocolate lab (not a dog) there were photographs of a visit Prince (now King) Charles and Camilla made to Fond Doux and we felt privileged to be doing the same! After our tour, it was time for a lovely buffet lunch at the restaurant.

Adé arrived to collect us and we headed to the world's only drive-in volcano. First we stopped at the visitor center, where an informative film explained everything about volcanoes and the process of eruptions. Then we drove down to the volcanic area, now fenced off for safety reasons, with its bubbling pools of muddy liquid and smell of rotten eggs from the sulphurous gases. The last eruption there was in 1776 and in the 1800s it was a sulphur mine - now it is a tourist attraction, complete with hot springs. The next stop was fairly close – the Diamond Falls Botanical Gardens and to get there we had to drive through the delightful town of Soufriere, with a wonderful running commentary from Adé. We parked outside the gardens with an hour until they shut – just enough time for a walk round. It goes without saying that there were a lot of trees and plants, but there were also some good birds with Purple and Green-throated Caribs being the highlights.

On the drive back to Balenbouche Adé took us across country through the small town of Fond St Jacques famous as an agricultural center, growing dasheen, mangoes, cocoa and coffee. Back at the plantation there was a short time to relax before the bird list, and another wonderful dinner from Uta, our last one before we depart for Dominica.

Sat., Dec. 7

Soufriere | Castries airport | Dominica

This morning we managed to find a Mangrove Cuckoo before breakfast, and glimpsed Scaly-breasted Thrasher. This was our last meal at Balenbouche, and we all felt bad about leaving, but excited to be going to a new island. Two vehicles were needed to take all of us and all of our luggage to the airport. Adé arrived, and we were also joined by another guide, Willow, who we briefly met in the rainforest when we looked for parrots. We said our



farewells to Uta and then headed north up the west coast, towards Soufriere, in search of a couple of missing endemics. The road above Soufriere winds through some lovely forest habitat and we had the morning to explore it. At our first stop we soon heard our target – St Lucia Wren, formerly just a race of House Wren, but since summer 2024, a species in its own right. Like most wrens its song is loud, and also like them, it can be hard to see. Glimpses of movement through the undergrowth were not enough, but eventually it sat out for all to see, and another also appeared by the van. Hurrah!

We stopped at a couple of places along the road seeing St Lucia Black Finch, Lesser Antillean Swifts, Scaly-breasted Thrashers and Gray Tremblers. At Bouton Junction Willow suggested a longer walk as he had seen St Lucia Oriole here previously. It was raining slightly, so armed with our umbrellas, and Adé following us in one van, we explored down the road. It was very birdy – Mangrove Cuckoo, three species of hummingbird, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, Gray Trembler and St Lucia Black Finch. Suddenly both Willow and Chris heard something – the call of an oriole. We spread out and watched hoping it would appear. At one end of the group, Chris spotted a bird fly by, black and orange, then it was gone. Nobody else saw it and despite searching for some time it did not reappear. Such is the nature of birding!

Lunch beckoned and we headed for The Beacon, a popular restaurant with a fabulous view of the Twin Pitons. The buffet here was excellent with dasheen pie, baked chicken, fish fingers, followed by orange pie ice cream. Well filled, we headed north towards Castries, stopping for a quick look in a couple of places on the way. The market in Castries is a bustling center for trading, everything from food to clothing and souvenirs. We explored it for an hour or so before it was time to head for the airport, but not without a quick detour to St Mary's College, Adé's old school, and an opportunity to hear firsthand about education in St Lucia. We then stopped at Petra's café, opposite the airport, where we met with Adams, who owns the birding company which supplied our guides. He bought us all an early dinner before we walked across the road to check in for our flight to Dominica. The flight was quick and easy, passing over Martinique as we journeyed north. At Dominica's airport we were met for our hour plus drive to the Tamarind Tree Hotel, arriving about 10:30 where Stefan welcomed us and showed us to our rooms.

Sun., Dec. 8

Layout | Lower Colihaut | Indian River

The morning started with a relaxed breakfast at the outdoor restaurant of the hotel, perched high above the Caribbean. As we sat there we saw Green-throated Carib, Caribbean Elaenia and Bananaquits. At 9 o'clock we met our guide on the island 'Dr Birdy', Dominica's most knowledgeable birder. Our first stop was the river bridge



just along the road from the hotel, where we saw egrets and a Belted Kingfisher. Next came the mouth of the Layou River where we saw Little Blue Herons and Spotted Sandpipers. After this we drove north up the coast to the Lower Colihaut valley to explore the forest there. One of the first birds we saw was the Plumbeous Warbler, found only on the islands of Dominica and Guadeloupe – a good local endemic. A Lesser Antillean Saltator popped up and just as we were about to drive away, a Red-legged Thrush landed on the road in front of us giving brilliant views – a species found only on the Greater Antilles and Dominica. We continued along the road, stopping occasionally. We heard a Kalinago Wren singing and screeched to a halt. Formerly a subspecies of the House Wren, it was given full species status in 2024 and is endemic to Dominica. Despite trying to lure it out we only got brief glimpses. A Mangrove Cuckoo gave us scope views and we had a good look at three Lesser Antillean Euphonias. Lunch was back at the hotel and afterwards we drove north to Portsmouth, stopping at a local church which has a roosting Lesser Antillean Owl, a subspecies of the newly split American Barn Owl. Next stop was at the mouth of the Indian River where we joined a canoe cruise along this famous waterway. Our boatman was Roscoe, who regaled us with tales of how they filmed scenes for a Pirates of the Caribbean movie here. The river is lined with huge Dragonsblood trees with their massive buttress roots and deep red sap. A small ramshackle building by the river was specially built for the Pirates movie and left afterwards as a tourist attraction. Yellow-crowned Night Herons gave us nice views and a rattling call announced a Ringed Kingfisher flying past. We travelled as far as the famous ‘Bush Bar’ (with its different local rums) where our boatman made some special bird models from palm leaves – gifts for Connie and Holly! On a short walk here, we saw a loudly calling Lesser Antillean Flycatcher. Back at the landing we hopped in the van to head back to the hotel. Bird list and dinner followed, and some of us enjoyed the local rums on offer.

Mon., Dec. 9

Morne Diablotin Syndicate Trail

We had an early start this morning, leaving the hotel at 6am with a packed breakfast. Today the main target is the Imperial Amazon, one of the world’s most endangered parrots. One of two endemic parrots in Dominica, it is very difficult to see as access to the rainforest areas it likes can be tricky, involving long, muddy treks. We have chosen the easiest location although it may only contain a handful of pairs of Imperial Amazons. We arrived at the Morne Diablotin Syndicate Trail with its lovely information center with picnic tables and other facilities, and sat to enjoy our packed breakfast.



The walk to the viewing area was not too challenging although recent rain meant we had to watch our feet. Along the way Dr Birdy saw a Ruddy Quail Dove and we heard another calling. Along the way we could hear parrots calling, but these were the commoner Red-necked Amazons. The viewing area looked out across a forested valley, with a high hillside across from us. Parrots flew around in the distance and Dr Birdy told us how he knew they were ‘rednecks’ by their wing flapping rate, also to look out for a yellow tail. We saw several of these quite well but kept hoping for more. After a couple of hours, with occasional rain, Dr Birdy suddenly exclaimed ‘There ... that’s one calling’ – he had heard an Imperial. It was off to the right, almost at the limit of our vision. It called a few times, then went silent. We waited. An occasional hummingbird whizzed by a female Blue-headed Dr Birdy told us, but the views were poor. Some Scaly-necked Pigeons perched on a tree across the valley and we scoped them. A Kalinago Wren was singing in the background, but we waited and chose not to look for it. Umbrellas came out ... and went away. Eventually the decision was made – we would head back for lunch, looking for hummingbirds on the way back, and return here later in the afternoon when the parrots get more active again.

Dr Birdy knew a couple of spots on the way back which can be good for Blue-headed Hummingbird. At the first there was nothing but at the second a brief view of a likely bird made us stay, and we were rewarded by a nice view of a male, another near endemic, found only here and Martinique. Back at the main road we headed and stopped by Molly’s Pork Parlour where we enjoyed a nice lunch, Dr Birdy then dropped us back at the hotel for a while, coming back later for a second attempt at the Imperial site. Connie and Holly decided they would leave us to it and remained back at the hotel. The weather looked brighter, and we had high hopes as we once again stood at the viewpoint. Some Red-necked Amazons perched out in the open across the valley, giving us great scope views. Broad-winged Hawks soared across the forest. “There” cried Dr Birdy, and we could hear a different call, way to the right, “There ... in flight ... going right ... gone!” His was the only sighting ... no more calls. So after more than five hours standing at the viewpoint we gave up. Back at the hotel we said our goodbyes to Dr Birdy, who would not be with us tomorrow, then a short break before doing the bird list followed by dinner.

Tues., Dec. 10

Macoucherie River | Roseau Whale Trip

After a relaxing breakfast, Chris took us out to explore a trail along the Macoucherie River, near to the hotel. On either side of the trail was thick vegetation with many Bananaquits and Black-faced Grassquits. As we neared



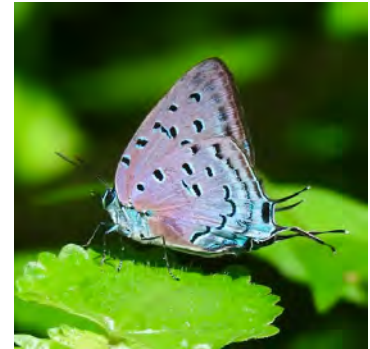
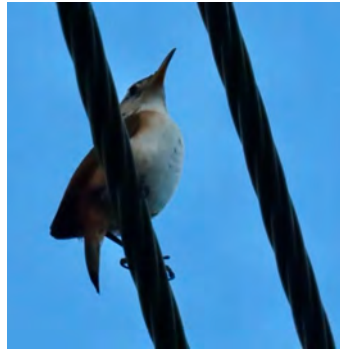
the river a loud rattling call alerted us to a Ringed Kingfisher, flying up and away. We quietly walked onto the bridge, and checking out both sides we saw several Green Herons, plus Little Ble and Great Blue Herons. Walking on down the trail we encountered a group of Smooth-billed Anis, and beside the river, in the long grass, some Scaly-breasted Munias, an introduced species. A couple of Yellow Warblers popped up, known locally as 'Golden' Warblers and some Cattle Egrets accompanied cattle grazing nearby. A local who introduced himself as 'Soldier Boy' aka 'Junior' aka Harry and told us about the history of the area, and the old rum distillery nearby. We continued down the trail and had views of the endemic Kalinago Wren, with several singing. A Lesser Antillean Flycatcher rounded off the walk, and we returned to the hotel for an early lunch at 11:30.

After lunch our driver arrived to take us south to Roseau, the capital of Dominica, where we boarded a whale-watching boat to head offshore searching for the local pod of Sperm Whales. The team on board explained how they would use an underwater hydrophone to listen for the whales, which use a clicking sound when feeding and can be detected many kilometers away. We headed straight offshore and after a while stopped to listen. A possible noise was heard, and we moved again. This became the pattern, and we travelled up the coast until we were nearly level with Portsmouth. Sadly, we had no sightings and can only assume they were not feeding and so could not be heard. Heading back down the coast we could just make our hotel. We did sight a Brown Booby, plus some Magnificent Frigatebirds, and back by the pier, there were a few Ruddy Turnstones on the rocks. Back at the Tamarind Tree it was time to pack, do the list, have dinner, and say goodbye to our hosts as we would be up early tomorrow.

Wed., Dec. 11

Dominica airport | Barbados | St Vincent

Our flight from Dominica was in the early morning and we needed to depart from the hotel at 5am! A packed breakfast was provided, and we were all packed up and ready to go. At the airport check-in they were weighing all of our luggage, including carry-on, which meant some repacking for some of us. There was a minor panic when one of our boarding passes went missing going through security, luckily it was found inside one of the machines! Our flight was in two stages, first to Barbados, and then a change to another flight which would take us to St Vincent. As so frequently happens in the Caribbean, the second flight was delayed until the afternoon, with many hours waiting on Barbados. Our wonderful tour agent arranged for us to leave the Barbados airport



were warned, could be tricky to access. Along the way we stopped at a likely site for the St Vincent Wren, another former House Wren recently split. One was obligingly singing and was seen quite well. We arrived at the warbler site and walked across some fields to reach a nice area of forest, spotting a Common Black Hawk on the way. Recent rain made the path slippery, and we agreed that the ladies had made a good decision. There were plenty of birds as we made our way up the hillside. Purple- and Green-throated Caribs, and Antillean Crested Hummingbirds were seen. A bird flew into a tree by the trail and quivered its wings – a Brown Trembler! Then a couple of smaller birds appeared and revealed themselves to be Lesser Antillean Tanagers.

We came to a shady clearing in the forest and stopped – this was one of the warbler spots, but despite several false alarms, no warblers were seen. We climbed onward (and upwards!) along some tricky steps cut into the hillside and it was no mean feat to reach another likely spot for the warbler. As soon as we positioned ourselves, Pewee exclaimed “There is one calling ... a young bird”. He spotted a movement low in the vegetation and whispered “Here it is ...” just as it disappeared. Trees had blocked our view, so we shifted position. It popped out again, but only for Pewee to see. A Grenada Flycatcher appeared, another near endemic, but not the main target. Pewee tried to attract one out and we could hear an adult singing from up the hillside where there was no access. On some vegetation near us Pewee pointed out a St Vincent Tree Anole, an endemic lizard, and a St Vincent Blue Hairstreak, an endemic butterfly but this was no real compensation for missing the warbler.

We drove to a nearby beach where we were met by Lystra, Connie and Holly. There was a good place to have our packed lunch by the beach and Lystra explained that after this we would head into another part of the island to look for the St Vincent Amazon, which flies to a particular spot towards the end of the day. The drive to Jennings Guest House (otherwise known as Amazons Rest) was quite an experience. Recent rains had damaged what surface had existed on the track there and we had to make seven crossings of a small river, driving through it. We arrived at a lovely setting at the edge of the forest, to be greeted by a small dog who took an immediate liking to us. A Merlin perched in a nearby tree and a Grenada Flycatcher was also on show. Some Lesser Antillean Swifts were flying overhead, and it wasn’t long before we heard the call of a parrot. Four St Vincent Amazons flew in and perched in a tree nearby giving great views. The drive back down seemed easier and we headed back towards the hotel.

Lystra said she know a place that might be worth visiting on the way back, especially for the St Vincent Wren, so we said let’s go! She took us to the Brighton Saltpond Road, and we parked by a couple of houses which



overlooked a wooded valley. As soon as we got out Lystra heard a wren, and we located it in a nearby tree. As we watched it flew onto a nearby building and perched out in the open, and another joined it on an overhead wire. A couple of birds flew over which were identified as Spectacled Thrushes, a species we had missed elsewhere. Lystra and Tom went in search of them down a grassy slope, while the rest of us watched from above. A couple of thrushes showed themselves where we could see them and in the bottom of the valley we also picked out some Yellow-bellied Elaenias. A Lesser Antillean Tanager and a couple of Yellow Warblers were also seen. Back at the cars we remembered that Pewee had found some coconut at the parrot site, and his handy machete soon opened them up for us to enjoy a refreshing drink of coconut water. Back at Beachcombers we said goodbye to Lystra and Pewee, as this was our last day of guided birding. It was soon time to do the bird list for the last two days and then have dinner.

Fri., Dec. 13

Boat trip to Bequia and Grenadines

After breakfast Desmond's daughter collected us for the short drive to the marina where we were to join a boat taking us around some of the nearby Grenadine islands. We met with Captain Michael who welcomed us aboard *Bonsai II* and we soon headed out towards the island of Bequia. Leaving St Vincent we saw some Royal Terns perched on posts, and as we got further out to sea we saw distant groups of boobies. As we approached Bequia the boobies flew closer, and we could see both Brown and Red-footed flying past. As we had earlier decided that nobody wanted to either snorkel or swim, Captain Michael decided to circumnavigate Bequia, taking us as close as possible to seabird nesting areas. We passed the Bequia Bullet, a small island with Brown Boobies perched on ledges. An American Oystercatcher called from a nearby shore, and later three flew past us. As we sailed around the island Captain Michael pointed out some of the larger (luxurious!) properties and told us something about them. Many more Brown Boobies were seen, and as we neared the Isle a Quatre and Petit Nevis, two smaller islands to the south of Bequia, we saw several Red-billed Tropicbirds, a couple perched on ledges. A couple of turtles were seen briefly and we also enjoyed sightings of two Ospreys, one carrying a fish. Several Royal Terns were perched on a jetty as we neared the main town where we moored up so that we could enjoy a wonderful lunch at the famous Jack's Bar. After lunch it was time to slowly head back to St Vincent. Back at Beachcombers we had time to relax before doing our final list and having a Farewell dinner.



Sat., Dec. 14

Beachcombers

In the morning there was time for relaxing breakfast and a look at some of the birdlife in the hotel gardens, which included Common Ground Dove, Tropical Mockingbird, and the black morph of Bananaquit. Then it was time checking out and heading for the airport. We all said our farewells - Tom and Holly had a flight to Barbados, with an overnight there, while Gary, Connie and Chris were flying to Miami. We all agreed it had been a truly memorable trip, with great experiences on every island.

Group (Chris Harbard - CH), Red-billed Tropicbird (CH), Tetrion Sphinx moth caterpillar (CH), St. Vincent Parrot (CH), St Lucia Parrot (CH), Group Birding (CH), Male Lesser Antilles Bullfinch (CH), Looking for St Lucia Thrasher with guide Adé (CH), Lunch at Fond Doux (CH), Group Lunch & Gros Piton (CH), Soufriere (CH), Twin Pitons (CH), Rainbow (Connie Armitage - CA), Cucumber moth (CH), Sunset at Portsmouth (CH), Dragonsblood trees (CH), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (CH), Cuban Tree Frog (CH), Looking for Imperial Parrot with Dr Birdy (CH), Broad-winged Hawk (CH), Smooth-billed Ani (CH), Rainbow over Dominica (CH), St Vincent Blue Hairstreak (CH), St Vincent Bush Anole (CH), St Vincent Tree Anole (CH), Grenada Flycatcher (CH), Gray Kingbird (CH), St Vincent Wren (CH), Enjoying fresh coconut milk, with Lystra and Pewee (CH), Bequia Bulle (CH), Brown Booby (CH), Red-billed Tropicbird (CH), Quite a catch (CH), Lunch at Jack's Bar (CH), Royal Tern (CH), Tropical Mockingbird (CH)