



PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632
Phone 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667
Email info@naturalistjourneys.com

Jamaica Trip Report March 30 - April 6, 2012

Guide Narca Moore-Craig with local guides Ricardo Miller and Roger Thompson, and five participants: Ralph, Regina, Leslie, Jay, and Carol.

For part of the trip we enjoyed the pleasure of our former Jamaican guide, John Fletcher's company too!

Report by Narca Moore-Craig.

Photos by Narca Moore-Craig and Regina Anavy, pool scenic courtesy of Hotel Mockingbird Hill

Sat., March 31 Arrival in Kingston / Blue Mountains at Forres Park

We gather today in vibrant Jamaica to begin exploring this island, so rich in endemic species. Ralph, Regina, and Narca have a leisurely start at our hotel in Kingston, where we have arrived ahead of the trip's first day. Regina gets off to a quick start by finding a grassquit nest on the hotel grounds! Ralph and Regina have spent yesterday perusing the endemic parrots in Hope Garden, with longtime Jamaican friend and retired birding guide, John Fletcher, who will join us for the first couple of days of the trip. It's a big treat for Narca to see John again, too.

Soon we meet Carol, Jay and Leslie—just arrived—and enjoy a lovely outdoor lunch under the big trees at the Devon House. After lunch, we head over the mountain crest with our driver Wayne, to our first home base, the charming lodge of Forres Park in the Blue Mountains. Immediately we are greeted by Red-billed Streamertails, one of Jamaica's spectacular endemic hummingbirds. We settle into our simple but comfy rooms (there's even wifi!), but not for long! Soon we are out with John, exploring the hillside trails that radiate through the lodge's gardens and onto the slopes beyond. We find our first Jamaican Euphonias, our first Black-faced Grassquits.

Sun., April 1 Forres Park / Old Mine Road

We watch the tropical dawn from our plain-air breakfast table, where the marvelous streamertails appear at first light, and then head out with our excellent local guide Roger Thompson, with John Fletcher, and our driver Duane for the 2 or 3-mile drive to Old Mine Road. What a feast of endemic species we find! Jamaican Todies, Jamaican Pewee, Jamaican Elaenias, Jamaican Oriole, Jamaican Woodpecker, Jamaican Spindalis, White-chinned and White-eyed Thrushes—birds around every bend of the old, shaded road!

The first very fun surprise is a lovely male Yellow-shouldered Grassquit. More follow on his toes. Sharp-eyed Leslie spots the first tody; the perky, brilliant todies comprise a family endemic to the West Indies. Ralph spies the White-eyed Thrush at a pile of material left from coffee processing—here in the Blue Mountains, people grow that famous Blue Mountain coffee.

Tropical butterflies also flit along the trail: we marvel at the beauty of the Malachites, the Julias, the False Androgeus Swallowtails.

After lunch we enjoy a siesta, and then go out to further explore the garden trails and to photograph the Red-billed Streamertails as they come to flowers. Our main goal is a better look at the Jamaican Oriole, and that is a big success.



This night we celebrate John’s birthday with a lovely cake baked for the occasion! Food here has been excellent, and we could easily enjoy the charms of Forres Park for a longer stay... but the higher mountains are beckoning.

**Mon., April 2 Blue Mountains / Hardware Gap /
Woodside to Mockingbird Hill**

Here it’s important to arrive early in the high country, so we say farewell to John and leave before dawn for the cool climes of Hardware Gap, high in the Blue Mountains. John has advised us to stop at Woodside Road to look for one of Jamaica’s more difficult-to-find endemics, the Crested Quail-Dove. We do stop, and walk a short distance down the narrow road, and there they are—a fabulous pair of Crested Quail-Doves, which take sashaying to a ‘ole new level, ya mon.

We meet our local guide Roger again (whose real calling seems to be music—so he’s very good with vocalizations), and spend the rest of the morning birding along the mountain road, where the eerie songs of solitaires reverberate, and where good looks at Jamaican and Blue Mountain Vireos are appreciated by all.

For a break, we duck into a little coffee shop at Portland Roads, where folks order coffee. That turns out to be quite a process—and an education! First the coffee has to be roasted over a wood fire and pounded by hand in a big wooden mortar with a tall wooden pestle, while the water is also heated over a wood fire. We are fascinated by the process, and eventually people are even served coffee!

Later this afternoon, after a stop at a river mouth to scope the birds, we pull into the very beautiful Hotel Mocking Bird Hill, our



base for the rest of the trip. It is lovely, impeccably-appointed, with luxuriant gardens and gourmet food. Some of us opt to swim. All of us opt for tea with homemade treats! As the day cools, most of us bird the quiet road above the lodge and find a small group of Yellow-faced Grassquits.

Tues., April 3 Lower Ecclesdown Road / John Crow Mtns / Frenchman's Cove

This morning brings perhaps the best birding of the entire week, as we walk through the forest along the little-traveled Ecclesdown Road. Another local guide joins us today—Ricardo Miller, very skilled, professional, and the president of BirdLife Jamaica. As we enjoy the birds, we also learn about the conservation issues in Jamaica.

A huge highlight is finding a Jamaican Blackbird (the rarest of the endemic birds), then watching it forage, and then bathe (!) inside a big bromeliad, not too high off the ground. After the bromeliad bath, the blackbird retires to a nearby perch to preen. Meanwhile, flocks of chattering Black-billed Parrots wing past, and several settle in to feed in a big tree over the site where we stop for our picnic breakfast. The cuckoos impress everyone, with Chestnut-bellied being the more numerous and the more cooperative today. Big Ring-tailed Pigeons seem to be everywhere, and we find three Jamaican Becards, including two at a nest.

After our morning of birding, what could be more relaxing than a dip in the sea at Frenchman's Cove? During this interlude, Narca finds the nest of a pair of Jamaican Woodpeckers, and we—and nearby people who have never birded before—enjoy prolonged scope views of the woodpeckers.

Dinner back at Hotel Mocking Bird Hill astonishes us! Both the food and the camaraderie give us cause to linger into the night at our balcony table.



Wed., April 4 Hotel Mocking Bird Hill / Rio Grande Rafting

Relaxation is planned for today! However, Narca is up very early, galvanized by the calls of Jamaican Owls. A pair is vocalizing behind the swimming pool. They bow to each other and then dive into a big palm tree to roost. We look for these again tonight, though alas!—they are stubbornly elusive.

When everyone assembles, we start the morning by ambling through the gardens. Here we enjoy more views of



the Jamaican endemics we're coming to know—the euphonias, the Black-billed Streamertails, the todies—as well as regional species like Black-whiskered Vireo and Olive-throated Parakeet, and North American migrants like Cape May Warbler.

By mid-morning, it is time to go rafting on the Rio Grande—serene and tranquil. We divide into pairs, each pair in a raft with our boatman, and experience life on the river. (Narca has to return to Jamaica, if only to find some Day-of-the-Dead jeans like her boatman was wearing!) Egrets and grebes share the waters with us, and

Spotted Sandpipers bob on the banks. Carol spots a couple of Tricolored Herons. Just as we're feeling a bit hungry (how is that even possible?), we disembark at a makeshift restaurant set up on the secluded riverbank, and relish the delicious Jamaican fare.

People opt for swimming and relaxing this afternoon. Another adventure awaits us tonight, when for dinner we go to Woody's Low Bridge in Port Antonio. Here we find true Jamaican fun: Jamaican color, good food, and Papa Woody's sayings plastered all over a wall ("Two things that cause a lot of pain are loose lips and tight shoes—so tighten your lips and loosen your shoes"). Woody is a Reggae performer, and Regina asks for a song. After the meal, when we are the only remaining guests, he comes out, puts on some music, and sings a couple of very choice songs. It has been a fine night: an elderly Jamaican gentleman singing; a nearly full moon; soft breezes through the open-air restaurant; and great conversation.



Thurs., April 5 Upper Ecclesdown Road / John Crow Mtns / Port Antonio

Of several possible options, we choose to return today to Ecclesdown Road, to a part of it which we didn't reach during our first morning here. Again, Ricardo guides us. Ecclesdown rewards us with quick views of the one hummingbird that has been very elusive—the Jamaican Mango—and with outstanding views of Arrowhead Warblers, Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoos, and Chestnut-bellied Cuckoos. A curious group of Smooth-billed Anis investigates us and our picnic breakfast. Gray Kingbirds are just arriving in Jamaica for the season; a few are sprinkled among the more abundant Loggerhead

Kingbirds.

Lunch is at a seaside restaurant, where we also board a boat for a trip in the harbor at Port Antonio. We circumnavigate Navy Island, while Magnificent Frigatebirds and Royal Terns sail overhead. After this halcyon afternoon, we return to our hotel to indulge in another delicious dinner, this one a little bittersweet because it is also our farewell dinner, and we are enjoying each other's company and the ambiance of Jamaica very much indeed.

Fri., April 6 Scenic Coastal Drive / Departures

Today is about getting to the airport in Kingston to head for home, yet we still enjoy the beautiful 3-hour drive along the coast and over the mountains, with a stop at Castleton Botanical Gardens to feast on a bountiful packed breakfast. (Hotel Mocking Bird Hill knows how to pack a meal!) Our driver Wayne takes the best route to avoid tangled traffic, and we pull in right on schedule for our flights home, taking with us lots of memories to savor and some of Papa Woody's music.



(Past travelers note – Ralph's hat has been on MANY adventures!)

Thank you, Regina and Ralph, Jay, Carol and Leslie, for what each of you added to our wonderful time in Jamaica!

