

Jamaican Endemics | March 24 – 31, 2023

Trip Report | by Steve Shunk



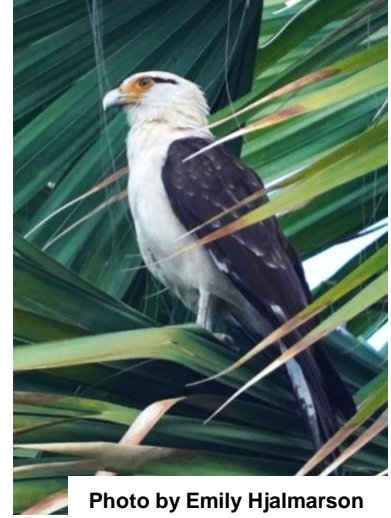
With guides **Ricardo Miller and Steve Shunk**, and participants: **Emily, Brett, Allan, Helen, Christine, Turner, James, Mary, Joan, Bill, and Joan**



Why should you bird Jamaica? It's simple: Island endemism. Jamaica has the highest number of endemic birds and plants of any Caribbean Island; and for plants alone, Jamaica ranks 5th in diversity among the world's islands. Island endemism creates a fascinating experience, and Jamaica's 29 endemic bird species make the birding here some of the best in the world. Here are a few stories from our 2023 trip to Jamaica.

One would think that finding the 'bird of the trip' before the trip hardly starts might make the rest of the trip a bit anticlimactic. However, finding Jamaica's first confirmed record of Yellow-headed Caracara was just the beginning of a truly exciting adventure in endemism. And though the caracara was not endemic, our other experiences on this Caribbean Island impressed upon us Jamaica's lofty status in the global biodiversity.

Jamaica's endemic birds not only drove our daily itinerary, they also dominated the entire island avifauna! With only a couple of exceptions, we easily found all of Jamaica's 29 endemic bird species. The exceptions meant that



we had to work a little harder for a few birds, but our work was always rewarded. At several stops, we exited the vehicle and found an average of one endemic bird per minute! Of course, that stopped after 10 or 15 minutes, but where else can you so easily find 10 to 15 endemic bird species? We had Jamaican Crows cackling a few feet from us and Orangequits constantly calling from the canopy. Streamertail hummingbirds came to the feeders while Sad Flycatchers plucked moths off the lodge walls; just part of our morning ritual at the Starlight Chalet in Jamaica's legendary Blue Mountains. I'll start at the beginning.

Most of the group arrived early into Kingston, and we all got settled at the Excelsior Grand Port Royal Hotel (a little hyperbolic for this weathered but comfortable accommodation). While most of us slept in the morning before our scheduled 6 p.m. rendezvous time, Emily and Brett were busy scouring the grounds and neighborhood for birds.

At 7:22 a.m.—yes that's a.m.—Brett posted to our WhatsApp group that they had found "... a likely Yellow-headed Caracara in the parking lot of the hotel" Our local guide, Ricardo, who was *not* sleeping in, responded with a series of "shocked scream" emojis.

The conversation went like this:

Ricardo, 7:29 a.m.: "Take a pic. I've never seen one in Jamaica."

Brett, 7:31 a.m.: "We have photos and sound recordings."

Ricardo, 7:32 a.m.: "I'm going to rush there now," though he lived all the way across the busy city of Kingston.

Brett, 7:36 a.m.: "We have eyes on it and it's favoring one palm tree so it will hopefully stay."

Ricardo, 7:38 a.m.: "Going through the door now, but I'm an hour away with traffic,"

Then, at 8:29, Ricardo posted, "I am looking at a Yellow-headed Caracara!"

As mentioned earlier, some of us (Steve) were sleeping, though those of the group who were awake joined Emily, Brett, and Ricardo in the parking lot for drop-dead looks at this gorgeous Central and South American raptor. Steve sauntered to the restaurant for breakfast, apparently not having checked his phone yet that morning, and there were the early arrivers and Ricardo reeling in their discovery. Emily offered to take Steve to see the bird, but he casually dismissed the offer because the bird surely must have left by now; one of those 'story of my life' big misses. He congratulated the group and silently 'kicked' himself for sleeping in.

Fast forward to the next morning. All those now present (Joan and Bill were delayed by flight cancelation) headed out for our pre-breakfast birding. We enjoyed a territorial near-endemic Vervain Hummingbird 'singing'

from the top of a tree and an endemic Jamaican Mango hummingbird feeding on aloe flowers in the parking lot. And within minutes of hummer time, the Yellow-headed Caracara tore across the parking lot at roof level, screaming as if we had invaded its territory! It landed in the now-famous palm tree, where all of us enjoyed excellent views.

How important was this find? After a little research and a posting to the Birds Caribbean list serve, we realized that this was the first confirmed record for the island. We use the term “confirmed” because Emily and Brett had garnered photos and voice recordings, and because it’s impossible to prove that the bird have never occurred on the island before. In any case, we received broad congratulations from the greater Caribbean birding community. It was an auspicious start to what would become a fantastic tour.

The caracara eventually hid inside the palm fronds, and we spent the next 45 minutes or so combing through the parking lot trees for warblers. We found Cape May, Yellow, and Prairie Warblers, plus American Redstart and Northern Parula, the collection of which would become our most common warblers of the trip. Emily spotted a distant Gray Kingbird, a migrant species that had just begun returning to the island for breeding season. The hotel bayside also brought us a slow procession of waterbirds, including both White and Glossy Ibises, six heron species, Laughing Gulls, Royal Terns, frigatebirds, and pelicans. As the morning warmed, we headed out for our first formal birding stop.

After a long drive across Kingston, we entered the desert-like habitat of the Hellshire Hills. Formally gazetted in 1950 as the *Healthshire* Hills, this Forest Reserve is part of the Portland Bight Protected Area, and it comprises over 8,500 hectares (21,000 ac.) of “tall open dry forest.” According to the Jamaican Forestry Department, the Healthshire Hills Forest Reserve is “the last significant area of primary, undistributed, dry limestone forest in the Caribbean and Central America.” The significance of this habitat in the western tropics cannot be understated: Healthshire is home to six endemic animals and 271 species of endemic plants. Our goal was to find a handful of bird species that are difficult or impossible to find elsewhere on the island.

It was already quite warm when we arrived, so we tanked up on water and started our hike down the bright limestone road. We quickly found a couple of Jamaican Mangos and our first of many Common Ground-Doves. Turkey Vultures soared low overhead on the sea breeze, and an Osprey made a quick appearance. We heard a couple of endemic Jamaican Vireos before finding our first endemic Jamaican Oriole—both of which would occur in good numbers throughout the trip. Our two biggest targets here were the near-endemic Stolid Flycatcher and the Bahama Mockingbird—a common species of the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands but only found at Hellshire in Jamaica. A couple of very vocal Northern Mockingbirds repeatedly distracted us from finding their larger cousin, but we were quickly successful with great looks at the Stolid Flycatcher. Ultimately, a couple of Bahama Mockingbirds made an appearance, though our only decent look was of one bird buried deep in the shrubs. On to the creatures of the brown lagoons.

Before lunch, we made a pass through the Portmore Sewage ponds. Among more than 20 species we found were eight that we would not see elsewhere on the tour, mostly because we would essentially be done with waterbird habitats. The most obvious of these were over 20 Black-necked Stilts and several Common Gallinules and Northern Jacanas. We found a few shorebirds, including Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers and both yellowlegs species. A pair of Blue-winged Teal and a couple of Mourning Doves were our only ones of the trip. A couple of flocks of seed-eating songbirds proved to be elusive, though we were pretty sure there were some munias in there.

After a great introduction to traditional Jamaican cuisine at Sonia’s Homestyle Kitchen, we headed for the famous Hope Botanical Gardens. The first thing we noticed in the gardens was the racket of parrots in the

canopy. We hoped to see the endemic Yellow-billed and Black-billed Parrots, but the parrots at the gardens are known to largely be hybrid individuals—either hybrids between these two species or between one of these and other escaped species. We looked carefully through the birds and had a couple of fleeting glimpses of Yellow-billed, but our best looks came shortly before we left the gardens, when two birds were feeding in a 'Flame of the Forest' (*Spathodia campanulata*) tree along with a small flock of Olive-throated Parakeets, which may soon be taxonomically split as Jamaican Parakeet.

Hope Gardens also gave us our firsts for a few additional island endemics, including a half-dozen Jamaican Woodpeckers, a single Sad Flycatcher, and at least five White-chinned Thrushes, all of which would turn out to be quite common during the trip. We found three dove species, including White-winged Dove and Caribbean specialties White-crowned Pigeon and Zenaida Dove. Just after finding a sleeping Northern Potoo, we ran into a flock of at least 10 Smooth-billed Anis. Other Caribbean endemics of the visit included Antillean Palm-Swift and Loggerhead Kingbird.

As a rain shower ensued and evening approached, we headed for the hills, with a two-hour drive ahead of us into Jamaica's impressive Blue Mountains. We arrived after dark at our base for the next three nights, the Starlight Chalet at Silver Hill Gap. This would be the start of an endemic bird extravaganza.

We awoke at dawn and converged on the balcony of the Starlight Chalet. While we enjoyed our hot coffee, endemic Red-billed Streamertails zipped to and from the hummingbird feeders, though they were frequently interrupted by a Jamaican Oriole that would sing from the railing in between feeding bouts. We watched White-chinned Thrushes in the grass and a male Black-throated Blue Warbler in the shrubs around the lodge. Other before-breakfast endemics included a couple of Rufous-tailed Flycatchers, two Jamaican Spindalises, and a solo Yellow-shouldered Grassquit. Endemic Ring-tailed Pigeons crossed the canyon below the lodge, and a small group of Jamaican Euphonias kept us busy until the breakfast bell. By now—only the second morning of the trip—we had already tallied nearly half of Jamaica's 29 endemic bird species.

We would wander through the grounds several times over the next few days, both in the mornings and the afternoons. The delightfully cool weather defied what one usually expects in a tropical climate. Endemic Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo and Jamaican Vireo made appearances, along with Yellow- and Black-faced Grassquits. Other 'quits' at the property included several Bananaquits and the endemic Orangequits. We found seven warbler species here, including the common American Redstart, Northern Parula, and Black-and-white Warbler. Though we had seen the potoo at Hope Gardens, we were very pleased to have another one perching on a snag each night just a few feet from the lodge.

Our adventures farther afield took us to such famous Blue Mountain birding spots as Section and Hardwar Gap. We wandered the lightly traveled routes high in the mountains, stopping at various locations and birding along different stretches of road. We would bird for 30 minutes or more over variable distances, and the bus would come and pick us up at the end of each stretch.

Our final morning in the Blue Mountains produced 20 species of birds—before breakfast— including 14 Jamaican or Caribbean endemics. Sad Flycatchers continued their forays from the balcony railings to the walls of the lodge, catching moths and other insects remaining from the prior night. We all finally got good looks at the grassquits, and the early risers again enjoyed the Northern Potoo and Jamaican Owl. After breakfast, it was time to head downslope toward the coastal side of the Portland Parish.

One more high-mountain birding stop produced an impressive 27 species. Finding our penultimate Crested Quail-Dove seemed a little anticlimactic after racking up about 15 individuals earlier on our mountain days!

More of the eponymous Jamaican birds included seven species: tody, woodpecker, pewee, vireo, euphonia, spindalis, and oriole. We saw two individuals of the island's endemic Red-tailed Hawk subspecies, which, incidentally, is the nominate subspecies for this widespread western buteo. Six warbler species included our third of the endemic Arrowhead Warbler.

Our last mountain birding took us to lower elevations, into the Mullett Hall region. We enjoyed our second of several Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoos, and everyone saw Greater Antillean Grackles, after fleeting glimpses by few at Hope Gardens. A couple of Red-billed Streamertails deserved a careful look, as we were closely approaching the rough geographic line between this and the Black-billed species. We continued our long drive down the northern slope of the Blue Mountains toward lunch in Port Antonio. Then, after settling into our rooms at Bayview Eco Resort, we met for an afternoon scouring of the grounds and nearby roads.

The next few days around Bayview lodge produced 35 bird species—more than a quarter of the total trip list of 118. I said it above, and I'll say it again: the diversity and endemism in Jamaica make for an excellent birding experience. Our birding at Bayview brought us our first Black-billed Streamertail, right next to the lodge. We also saw a half-dozen of the tiny and adorable Green-rumped Parrotlets, one of the few introduced species on the island. White-collared Swifts were a common site overhead, and swallows included a few Barns and just one of the Jamaican-endemic subspecies of Cave Swallow. We found plenty of Zenaida Doves, and White-crowned Pigeons frequently bolted across the top of the canopy. One of three 'heard-only' birds at Bayview included our only Mangrove Cuckoo of the trip.

The birding around Bayview was very good, but it couldn't quite match our two visits to the world-renowned Ecclesdown Road. We visited Ecclesdown twice: once in the late morning and once in the early morning. Several of our birding spots during the tour tallied more than 30 species, but between our two trips to Ecclesdown, we found a whopping 46 species, nearly half of which were Jamaican endemics.

The 25-km (15.5-mi.) Ecclesdown Road leaves from two points on Jamaica's far western coast and arcs into the foothills of the John Crow Mountains, which are part of the Blue & John Crow Mountains National Park and UNESCO World Heritage Site. At the lower elevations, the road winds through small, developed communities, but the entire route showcases dense humid forest that one might expect on a tropical island. Birding the developed habitats brings out the curious locals, who love hearing about what we are doing while walking their road with binoculars in hand. Up in the higher reaches, the road narrows and the vegetation encroaches, making travel a challenge. After a storm, trees might be down, and rocks may have cascaded into the road.

Covering the whole road in one morning is next to impossible due to the abundance of birds, so we split our visit into two successive mornings. We started later the first day—after birding the coastal cliffs (see below)—so the second morning brought us the most birds; mornings are key since things get quiet when the forest steams up after intermittent showers.

Despite a little rain, we scored on birds. Seven dove species kept us busy, with another Crested Quail-Dove for the trip and our first visuals of Ruddy Quail-Dove. Both the Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo and Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo made multiple appearances. Four Black Swifts were the only ones of the trip, representing the small (and nominate) Caribbean subspecies of this sought-after bird. We found three of Jamaica's four hummingbirds here, with four Black-billed Streamertails seen on the second day. Black-billed Parrots showed well, with great scope views of at least 17 birds in one of the neighborhoods, and we saw most of our Yellow-billed Parrots up here. We were serenaded both mornings with an abundance of singing Black-whiskered Vireo which had only recently returned to breed from their South American wintering grounds. Twelve Orangequits rounded out the tally of Jamaican endemics. Surprisingly, we also tallied our only Green Heron of the trip

coming out of a small pond near the road. Three more birding stops—one each on the last three days of the tour—deserve additional mention. On our first Ecclesdown day, we spent the early part of the morning above the coastal bluffs of Hector’s River and Happy Grove in search of one special bird. Elegant and striking, the pelagic White-tailed Tropicbird spends most of its life at sea, returning for only a couple of months each year to breed on the sea stacks and cliffs of far western Jamaica, among other global haunts. Our trip was timed perfectly to witness the acrobatic courtship flight of at least a dozen birds as they cruised among the rocky faces of Happy Grove. As a bonus, we found a nesting pair of American Kestrels here. We had seen kestrels elsewhere on our journey, but the male of this pair represented the exceptionally dark Cuban subspecies, a striking bird, to be sure.

We spent the afternoon of our second Ecclesdown day in a lovely stretch of forest along the San San Police Road. Dense native forest creates a closed canopy over most of the San San Road, and there is very little traffic—perfect for birding. Of the 24 species we found in just 90 minutes, half were Jamaican endemics. Jamaican Woodpeckers and White-chinned Thrushes seemed to be especially common, with eight of each, including one thrush carrying nesting material. At least four Caribbean Doves called from the forest throughout our walk.

Our final birding stop of the trip came on our drive back to Kingston. We stopped at Castleton Botanical Gardens and were met with a special treat. We were missing one Jamaican endemic, and our esteemed guide, Ricardo, had this one up his sleeve. Just a few meters from the vehicle we found a group of six Jamaican Crows! Judging from the loud squawking and their obliviousness to our presence, we expected that a few of the group were juveniles. We watched the show until it was time to go.

Castleton meant the end of a fabulous trip. Endemic Red-billed Streamertails feeding among the endemic blue mahoe blossoms; cacophonous flocks of Black-billed and Yellow-billed Parrots; Jamaican Woodpeckers at 16 of our 20 birding stops (62 individuals tallied, topped only by the huge flock of Laughing Gulls at Port Royal); plus an amazing list of other endemics: 26 Jamaican Todies, 23 Jamaican Euphonias, 38 Jamaican Spindalises, and 52 Orangequits. Jamaica performed well for us, and we look forward to our return.

I would be remiss if I didn’t highlight that fact that Emily and Brett saw their 1000th life birds during our trip: Crested Quail-Dove for Emily and Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo for Brett. Thanks for letting us be a part of your celebration!

Photos by Steve Shunk