

JAMAICA

MARCH 22-29, 2009

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TOUR REPORT
JAMAICA
March 22–29, 2009

By Brennan Mulrooney

Jamaica boasts some of the best birding in all of the Caribbean. No Caribbean island has more endemic birds, and almost all of them are easily seen. Our 2009 tour once again succeeded in seeing all of the known extant endemic species of Jamaica, all 27 or 28 of them, depending on which checklist you subscribe to. We saw an additional 9 species endemic to the Caribbean and many subspecies endemic to Jamaica. And while endemic species are often the focus of island birding, there were certainly numerous highlights during our birding week that involved widespread birds like Northern Potoo and White-tailed Tropicbird.

As I mentioned before, most of Jamaica's endemic species are fairly easy to see. White-chinned Thrush, much like the American Robin, is a garden bird and we saw it every day. The absolutely splendid Jamaican Tody is delightfully common, though not terribly conspicuous. We saw many during the week and were often clued into their presence by their quiet wheezing calls. This gem of a bird was once again voted favorite of the trip. And what's not to like about a confiding little bird with a moss-green back, yellow belly, pink flanks, a baby-blue malar, bright red throat, and an outlandishly large bill that looks like it belongs on a much bigger bird? There's nothing not to like—that's why it's on our checklist cover.

Another fantastic endemic that isn't hard to find is the Jamaican Spindalis. Such a stunning bird; we were feeling guilty by the end of the week when we started saying, "Oh, it's just another Spindalis." Of course, you have to mention the hummingbirds. The streamertails are so common and remarkably beautiful that they are the national bird, and their image can be found throughout the country. We saw both Red-billed and Black-billed streamertails, in addition to the Jamaican Mango and the near-endemic Vervain Hummingbird, the second smallest bird in the world.

But then there are a few that aren't so easy to find. Every year it seems like a different species decides to be difficult, and this year it was (fittingly) the rarest of the endemics, the Jamaican Blackbird. This bird has a fairly small range and a predictable habit of feeding in bromeliads, so we knew that we could narrow our search and, given enough patience, we had good odds of success. Well, as our stomachs started to grumble, our patience started to fade, but right before we had to leave for lunch at the chalet in the Blue Mountains, Brandon found our bird. We had brief, but good looks that we were able to improve upon the next day when Brandon conjured another for us in the scenic John Crow Mountains.

So enough about all the wonderful endemics; they're certainly not the only show in town. In fact, the second favorite bird of the trip was the Northern Potoo. This species can be found throughout Mexico and Central America, but it is rarely seen as well as we saw

ours at Marshall's Pen. We usually settle for night views by spot light, but sometimes we are lucky and find one on a day roost. Never have I seen one at eye level only five feet away in broad daylight! I'm not sure our cameras will ever be the same. Totally confident in its camouflage, the bird patiently indulged the beeps and clicks of our cameras and the oohs and aahs from our gaping mouths. It was certainly a sighting to remember. Another non-endemic that tried to steal the show was White-tailed Tropicbird. These birds nest in cliffs on Jamaica's eastern shore, and several pairs put on a fine show for us as we watched from atop the cliff with the incredibly blue Caribbean Sea providing the backdrop. It's not often that you can get such great views of a pelagic bird with your feet on dry land!

In addition to the fantastic birding, we were constantly impressed by the natural beauty of Jamaica and relished our time at historic Marshall's Pen. We sampled Jamaica's famous jerk style cooking and many of us had our lifer "Ackee and Saltfish," the national breakfast of Jamaica. Once again our local guide, Brandon Hay, did a splendid job of putting us on the birds and sharing his wealth of local knowledge, and we were grateful for Anne Sutton's hospitality and her sharing the fascinating history of Marshall's Pen. I can't wait to go back!

ITINERARY

22 Mar – Arrival in Montego Bay followed by tour orientation and dinner at the hotel.

23 Mar – Morning visit to the fabulous Rocklands Bird Sanctuary for hand-feeding of hummingbirds and intro to Jamaican birds, then a drive to Marshall's Pen for lunch, stopping on the way at Spring Pond; afternoon and evening birding at Marshall's Pen.

12 ENDEMICS

24 Mar – Morning walks at Marshall's Pen, then afternoon drive to Great Pedro Pond in Treasure Beach, Parottee Pond, and the Black River, Upper Morass.

18 ENDEMICS, 20 TOTAL

25 Mar – Early morning departure for Cockpit Country (Burnt Hill Rd) returning to Marshall's Pen for Lunch, afternoon tour of the Great House and birding around Marshall's Pen.

21 ENDEMICS, 25 TOTAL

26 Mar – Pre-breakfast birding at Marshall's Pen then departure. Stop in Lionel Town for a visit to Brandon's office before birding on Portland Ridge at the PWD Gun Club; late afternoon arrival at our hotel in Kingston.

18 ENDEMICS, 25 TOTAL

27 Mar – Early morning departure for the Blue (Port Royal) Mountains; roadside birding primarily in the vicinity of Hardwar Gap, esp. Woodside Dr; lunch at the Starlight Chalet, then a visit to Twyman Estates Coffee before returning to Kingston to learn of a freaky goat affair.

20 ENDEMICS, 27 TOTAL

28 Mar – Early morning departure for the John Crow Mountains with morning birding in the Drivers River Valley followed by a visit to Boston Bay for an authentic Jamaican Jerk lunch; post-lunch return to the cliffs at Hector’s River for a better light on the T-birds; afternoon birding at Kingston Harbor before returning to the hotel for our farewell dinner.
21 ENDEMIC, 28 TOTAL (That’s all of them!)

29 Mar - Departures for home

BIRD LIST

NOTE: This Checklist follows the The A.O.U. Check-list of North American Birds, Seventh Edition, 48th supplement. Species appearing in bold print indicate Jamaican endemics or Caribbean endemics and near-endemics.

Abbreviations:

E - Endemic species

e - Endemic subspecies

H - Heard only

BRUM - Black River, Upper Morass

CC - Cockpit Country

JCM - John Crow Mountains

KH – Kingston Harbor

MP - Marshall’s Pen

PRM - Port Royal Mountains

PP - Parottee Ponds

PR - Portland Ridge

TB - Treasure Beach including Great Pedro Pond

WATERFOWL

West Indian Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna arborea*) - They were very accommodating again this year, we got great views of this rare Caribbean endemic duck at BRUM. Birdlife International lists this species as vulnerable with the following justification: “This species is listed as Vulnerable because it has a small and severely fragmented occupied range within which the area, extent and quality of remaining habitat is undergoing a continuing decline, with some sites disappearing altogether.”

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) - on most of the ponds, a huge number at PP

Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) - a single female at TB

Masked Duck (*Nomonyx dominicus*) - We found one female at Spring Pond

GREBES

Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus d. dominicus*) - Several at Spring Pond, a Caribbean subspecies

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps antillarum*) - Spring Pond and TB, another Caribbean subspecies

TROPICBIRDS

White-tailed Tropicbird – at least six at Hector’s River allowed some fantastic views as they flew into their nest sites along the cliffs

PELICANS

Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) – widespread on the coast

FRIGATEBIRDS

Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*) – good looks at several costal locations

HERONS

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) - great looks at a couple at BRUM

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*)

Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*)

Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*)

Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*) – two white morph birds at PR

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)

Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)

Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) - several at PP

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*) - an adult at PP

IBISES AND SPOONBILLS

Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – good looks at a few flocks

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) - AKA John Crow, including one “Parson John Crow” near Hector’s River

HAWKS AND EAGLES

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) – we saw several including a few apparent migrants over the interior of the island

[Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*)] – a single bird soaring over our hotel in Montego Bay (a couple hours before actual tour start time) was only seen by Valerie and me. This is a very rarely seen bird in Jamaica.

Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis jamaicensis*) - Notice the scientific name, this species, like Ruddy Duck, was described from a specimen taken from Jamaica. This subspecies is a Caribbean endemic.

FALCONS

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius sparveroides*) - The Kestrels we saw were quite distinctive with bright white breasts. This was the light morph of a subspecies that only occurs in Cuba, the Bahamas, and Jamaica.

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) – we saw a few including scope views of two

RAILS AND COOTS

Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris*) - outstanding looks at Portland Ridge

Sora (*Porzana carolina*) - good looks at TB

Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinica*) - mostly immatures, but at least one adult at TB

Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*)

American Coot (*Fulica Americana*)

Caribbean Coot (*Fulica caribaea*) we had good looks at one at TB adjacent to American Coots allowing for comparison of their bills.

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – a couple at KH

Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – several at PP

AVOCETS AND STILTS

Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) – a few at PR and PP

JACANAS

Northern Jacana (*Jacana spinosa violacea*) - good looks at Spring Pond and BRUM; this subspecies is a Greater Antilles endemic

SANDPIPERS

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*)

Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*) – side by side with Lesser at PP

Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) – a responsive bird at PR was probably an “Eastern Willet”
T. s. semipalmata

Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) - convenient comparison views with Greater at PP

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) – several at KH

Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) – a single bird at KH

Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*) – a single bird in the Least flock at PP

Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*) – a large flock at PP and one at KH

GULLS AND TERNS

Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) – PP and KH

Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*) – widespread along the coast

Sandwich Tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – several with the Royal Tern flock at KH

PIGEONS AND DOVES

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)

White-crowned Pigeon (*Patagioenas leucocephala*) - a Caribbean near-endemic,
many great views

Ring-tailed Pigeon (*Patagioenas caribaea*) - E – oddly absent from CC again this year,
but we had fine looks at Hardwar Gap and in JCM

White-winged Dove (*Zenaida asiatica*) – common and widespread

Zenaida Dove (*Zenaida aurita*) - A Caribbean near-endemic, they were fairly common
and widespread. We had many good looks, best at MP.

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida m. macroura*) – a few in the lowlands, this subspecies breeds in the FL Keys, but is otherwise confined to the Greater Antilles

Common Ground-Dove (*Columbina passerina jamaicensis*) - e - widespread

Caribbean Dove (*Leptotila j. jamaicensis*) - e - great looks at Marshall's Pen where they were visiting the feeder

Crested Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon versicolor*) - E - We were lucky to stumble onto one at MP the first day, then we found three at Hardwar gap that gave great views

Ruddy Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon montana*) - we had a couple fly-bys and a few distant birds flushing off the road

PARROTS AND PARAKEETS

Olive-throated Parakeet (*Aratinga n. nana*) - e - Sometimes referred to as Jamaican Parakeet, these were seen almost daily and we had some excellent scope views.

Yellow-billed Parrot (*Amazona collaria*) - E - seen both in CC and the JCM, great looks at a perched bird in CC

Black-billed Parrot (*Amazona agilis*) - E – like the former, seen well in both CC and JCM, best in CC

CUCKOOS

Mangrove Cuckoo (*Coccyzus minor*) - great views at MP

Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo (*Saurothera vetula*) - E – very cooperative at MP where we had a few great looks

Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo (*Hyetornis pluvialis*) - E – right in the garden at MP, a huge imposing cuckoo with a voice to match

Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*) - common and widespread

OWLS

Jamaican Owl (*Pseudoscops grammicus*) - E – unbeatable looks at a bird perched only 20 ft away at MP

POTOOS

Northern Potoo (*Nyctibius j. jamaicensis*) - e – voted second favorite bird of the trip, a bird on a day roost at MP was so close we could almost touch it, what an amazing experience!

SWIFTS

White-collared Swift (*Streptoprocne zonaris*) - great views at MP

Antillean Palm-Swift (*Tachornis phoenicobia*) - A Caribbean endemic restricted to Cuba, Hispaniola, and Jamaica, we saw them on several days.

HUMMINGBIRDS

Jamaican Mango (*Anthracothorax mango*) - E - Hand-feeding these amazing hummingbirds at Rockands was an unforgettable experience.

“Red-billed” Streamertail (*Trochilus polytmus polytmus*) - E - Another spectacular bird that came close enough to touch, it is the national bird of Jamaica and is commonly known as “Doctor Bird.”

“Black-billed” Streamertail (*Trochilus polytmus scitulus*) - E - Confined to the extreme eastern portion of the island we only saw it in the JCM, but we enjoyed lengthy close-range scope views. The two streamertails are considered one species by the AOU, but are split by other authorities including Clements.

Vervain Hummingbird (*Mellisuga minima minima*) - e - A Caribbean endemic confined to Jamaica and Hispaniola, it is the second smallest bird in the world. We saw several, but heard more than we saw.

TODIES

Jamaican Tody (*Todus todus*) - E – Voted favorite bird of the trip by our expert panel, what can you say about such a fantastic little bird? We had several opportunities to study these little sprites at length and at close-range. The genus *Todus* is a Caribbean endemic and these birds certainly are unique, that huge bill, those outlandish colors, their confiding behavior, all of this adds up to make them a perennial favorite.

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher (*Ceryle alcyon*) – a few flybys

WOODPECKERS

Jamaican Woodpecker (*Melanerpes radiolatus*) - E - seen daily, we had many great views, best at Rocklands and MP.

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Jamaican Elaenia (*Myiopagis cotta*) - E – we found a responsive bird right away at MP and had more looks in the Blue Mtns.

Jamaican Pewee (*Contopus pallidus*) - E - great looks at MP and Blue Mtns.

Sad Flycatcher (*Myiarchus barbirostris*) - E - Fairly common and widespread, we had good looks on most days, though we never figured out why it was sad...

Rufous-tailed Flycatcher (*Myiarchus validus*) - E – a bigger cousin of the former, we had multiple good looks on several days

Stolid Flycatcher (*Myiarchus s. stolidus*) - e - A Caribbean endemic, this was the least common of the three *Myiarchus* flycatchers. We were surprised to see one at MP and only had a brief glimpse at PR

Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*) – seen in Montego Bay and along the road on our last day

Loggerhead Kingbird (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus jamaicensis*) - e - Another Caribbean endemic, we saw them on every day of the tour.

Genus incertae sedis

Jamaican Becard (*Pachyramphus niger*) - E - the only becard in the Caribbean, we had great looks at males and females, easier this year than most

VIREOS

Jamaican Vireo (*Vireo modestus*) - E - Common and widespread, but not always easy to see, it was also the most vocal Jamaican bird during our trip.

Blue Mountain Vireo (*Vireo osburni*) - E - Different enough to be classified in its own genus for some time, we had a wonderful experience with one in CC as it sat as sang for us on a branch only 10' away.

Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo a. altiloquus*) – a different subspecies than we see in FL, we heard several and had good views of one or two

CROWS

Jamaican Crow (*Corvus jamaicensis*) - E - Known locally as Jabbering Crow, these birds have some really outlandish vocalizations! We had several opportunities to appreciate just how distinctive this species is.

SWALLOWS

Cave Swallow (*Petrochelidon fulva poeciloma*) - e - We saw them well at MP.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) – several at scattered locations

THRUSHES

Rufous-throated Solitaire (*Myadestes genibarbis solitarius*) - e - A Caribbean endemic, these gorgeous birds treated us to their ethereal song all morning in the PRM, a couple also perched close by for good views; also heard in JCM

White-eyed Thrush (*Turdus jamaicensis*) - E - Much more stealthy than the latter, but we still managed several good views.

White-chinned Thrush (*Turdus aurantius*) - E - Common and fairly conspicuous, usually seen hopping on the ground in open areas; we saw many on a daily basis.

MOCKINGBIRDS AND ALLIES

Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*)

Bahama Mockingbird (*Mimus gundlachii hillii*) - e - A Caribbean endemic, in Jamaica this species is confined to the dry forest in the area of Portland Bight; this bird led us on quite an adventure, all the way up to the gun club on top of Portland Ridge; we eventually had good scope views and one that snuck up right next to us.

STARLINGS

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

WOOD WARBLERS

Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) - seen daily

Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia eoa*) - The resident breeders of the Caribbean are sometimes referred to as “Golden Warbler”, the *eo*a subspecies is confined to Jamaica and the Caymans.

Chestnut-sided Warbler – one in the JCM was a first for Brandon in Jamaica

Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Dendroica caerulescens*) - A common wintering species in the Greater Antilles, we saw several of these handsome warblers everyday.

Black-throated Green Warbler (*Dendroica virens*) - at MP and PRM
Prairie Warbler (*Dendroica discolor*) – seen almost daily
Arrowhead Warbler (*Dendroica pharetra*) - E - “Arrow-headed Warbler” on some checklists, including Clements; we had several excellent views of this denizen of dense tangles.
Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*) - seen daily
American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*) - seen daily, lots of flashy males
Worm-eating Warbler (*Helmitheros vermivorus*) - seen by most at MP and PRM
Swainson’s Warbler (*Limnothlypis swainsonii*) – only seen by a couple of us, this sneaky warbler was true to form and mostly only heard in PRM
Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) - Betsy Kick-up, seen best at Hardwar Gap
Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*) – seen most days

Genus incertae sedis

Bananaquit (*Coereba f. flaveola*) - e - we saw many every day

TANAGERS

Jamaican Spindalis (*Spindalis nigricephala*) - E - We had repeated fantastic views of these absolutely stunning birds. The females are almost as snazzy as the males!

SPARROWS AND ALLIES

Yellow-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris o. olivaceus*) - a Caribbean endemic subspecies, they were absolutely covering the feeder at MP
Black-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris bicolor marchii*) - A Caribbean near-endemic, this subspecies only occurs in Jamaica and Hispaniola.
Yellow-shouldered Grassquit (*Loxipasser anoxanthus*) - E – our timing was good for this species as they were practically invisible just a week earlier; we had several good views, best at MP
Greater Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla violacea ruficollis*) - e - a Caribbean endemic, we had our best looks at a nesting pair in the garden at MP
Orangequit (*Euneornis campestris*) - E - Fairly common and seen daily; they are named for their fondness for fruit, but their local name, Bluequit, refers to the wonderful blue-gray color of the males which also show a contrasting orange throat.
Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus s. savannarum*) - e – unbeatable looks at a singing bird only 10’ away from us along the road on the way back from CC

SALTATORS, CARDINALS AND ALLIES

Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) - a single male at PRM

BLACKBIRDS AND ALLIES

Jamaican Blackbird (*Nesospar nigerrimus*) - E - Probably the rarest of the extant endemics and often the biggest challenge to find. Brandon found two for us that gave us great looks, one in PRM and another in JCM. The only member of its genus, some authorities think it is most closely related to the *Icterus* orioles.
Greater Antillean Grackle (*Quiscalus niger crassirostris*) - e - A Caribbean endemic, the “Cling-Cling” was fairly common and widespread; seen daily.

Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*) – a female seen by some at Rocklands
Jamaican Oriole (*Icterus l. leucopteryx*) - e - A Jamaican near-endemic,
it can only be found in Jamaica and on the tiny Columbian-controlled island of
San Andres off the coast of Nicaragua.

FINCHES AND ALLIES

Jamaican Euphonia (*Euphonia jamaica*) - E – good looks at males and females,
probably seen best at MP

BUTTERFLIES

Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)
Dirce (*Colobura dirce avinoffi*)
Bahamian (Citrus) Swallowtail (*Papilio andraemon*)
Julia Heliconian (*Dryas iulia delila*)
White Peacock (*Anartia jatrophae jamaicensis*)
West Indian Buckeye (*Junonia evarete zonalis*)
Antillean Malachite (*Siproeta stelenes stelenes*)
Cadmus (*Historis acheronta cadmus*)
Jamaican Checkerspot (*Atlantea pantoni*)

OTHER CRITTERS

Small Indian Mongoose (*Herpestes auropunctatus*)
Bat sp. – there are over twenty species on Jamaica
Jamaican Giant Anole/Garmin's Anole (*Anolis garmani*)
Jamaican Tuquoise Anole/Graham's Anole (*Anolis grahami*)
Jamaican Slider (*Trachemys terrapen*)