

JAMAICA

MARCH 9-16, 2008

**LEADERS:
BRENNAN MULROONEY AND
BRANDON HAY**

**COMPILED BY: BRENNAN
MULROONEY**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

TOUR REPORT
JAMAICA
March 9–16, 2008

By Brennan Mulrooney

“Oh no, you won’t find those up here.” That’s not exactly what we wanted to hear about our last target bird on the last day of our trip. Ring-tailed Pigeons are fairly common birds in Jamaica, if you’re in the right habitat. It has never been a species that’s challenged us in the past. Yet somehow, there we were on our last day and we had still not managed to come across one...anywhere. And now a local, and self-proclaimed birder, was telling us all hope was lost—they just don’t see them there at this time of year. Could he be trusted? We’d seen one last year at this location, though it was a month earlier. There was just something about him that made me think perhaps he didn’t know quite as much as he claimed. I still had hope.

We continued to enjoy that last morning up in the Port Royal Mountains; the views were spectacular, the weather was perfect, and the birding was good. We easily saw the endangered Jamaican Blackbird, usually a challenging bird to find, but not this year—we also saw one in the John Crow Mountains. Yet, this relatively common pigeon was nowhere to be seen. We saw the huge and hulking Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo and heard its haunting call. We had great looks at a singing Yellow-shouldered Grassquit, another bird that was unusually scarce this year. A perched Northern Potoo was a real treat, and we enjoyed lengthy scope views as it slowly turned its head to bask in the morning sun. The ethereal songs of Rufous-throated Solitaires serenaded us throughout the morning, and we had repeated views of Arrowhead Warbler, Jamaican Spindalis, and the truly unique Orangequit. We even had great views of a Swainson’s Warbler—a bird that even when singing on breeding grounds is always hard to get a look at. And yet, we couldn’t buy a glimpse of this darn pigeon.

Though most of our day was gone and we still hadn’t seen our bird, we did our best to enjoy a delicious Jamaican lunch at a spa high in the mountains. The view from the terrace was impressive, and we were treated to eye level views of White-collared Swifts and Antillean Palm-Swifts streaking past on the warm breeze. Black-throated Blue and Prairie warblers frolicked in the garden, and a cooperative pair of Sad Flycatchers posed for pictures. But nobody could deny we were starting to feel the pressure. We were starting to lose faith when Ned called out, “Hey, those are pigeons!” We all looked up to see a small group of pigeons streak across the sky and out of view behind the hillside. They certainly looked like the right species, but it was a far from satisfactory view. Still, it was something. We rode a wave of optimism for the next hour, but that was to be our only sighting. We heard at least two singing far off, but they wouldn’t budge. I knew that we had enough for me to at least put them on the trip list, but that’s not why we were there—we wanted to really see these birds!

We stopped at a family-run coffee plantation so we could all buy some authentic Blue Mountain Coffee and were again told that we had little hope of seeing our bird. “That’s fine,” I told myself, “That’s why he sells coffee and I lead birding tours.” I wasn’t going to give up. I knew we had one last slim opportunity. We were going to be passing the spot where we had seen one last year. Yes, we had been there already this morning, but maybe the birds had been elsewhere. We knew they were in the area now. As we pulled up I announced that we only had 10 minutes to give it one last effort. We piled out and I took off down the steep side road heading for a spot that I knew had a good view. I was half-way there when all of a sudden a large pigeon-like bird flushed from close by and dropped out of sight down the hill. I knew that had to be our bird. I ran back up the hill and got the group and we all marched back down the hill, moving as quietly as possible, hoping to see it without flushing it. No dice. It was nowhere to be seen. We finally got to the spot with the view, and, out of desperation, I tried some tape. To my total shock, it worked! A Ring-tailed Pigeon flew in and landed right in front of us. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It sat for a few seconds, and then, with a burst of loud flapping, it was gone again. Immediately a cheer went up in the group, and we congratulated each other on our good fortune.

The walk back up the hill was (almost) effortless as we gleefully recounted the climactic conclusion of our trip. We had seen all of Jamaica’s known extant endemic birds, if only just barely, and had proven that sometimes local knowledge loses out to dogged determination and maybe just a bit of luck.

ITINERARY

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

10 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.

11 ENDEMICS

11 Mar – Pre-breakfast walk at Marshall’s Pen, then afternoon drive to Treasure Beach, Thatch Field, Parottee Pond, and the Black River, Upper Morass.

16 ENDEMICS, 18 TOTAL

12 Mar – Early morning departure for Cockpit Country returning to Marshall’s Pen for Lunch, afternoon birding at Marshall’s Pen.

22 ENDEMICS, 24 TOTAL

13 Mar – Pre-breakfast birding at Marshall’s Pen; tour of the Great House, then post-lunch departure. Stop in Lionel Town for a visit to Brandon’s Office before birding at Portland Ridge; late afternoon arrival at our hotel in Kingston.

14 ENDEMICS, 25 TOTAL

14 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 birding on the way back to the hotel with stop at Hector’s River, Orca!

19 ENDEMICS, 27 TOTAL

15 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; last ditch effort at Woodside Dr saved our bacon!; late afternoon return to the hotel.

17 ENDEMICS, 28 TOTAL (That’s all of ‘em!)

16 Mar - Departures for home

BIRD LIST

NOTE: This Checklist follows the The A.O.U. Check-list of North American Birds, Seventh Edition, 47th 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

MP - Marshall’s Pen

PRM - Port Royal Mountains

PP - Parottee Ponds

TB - Treasure Beach including Great Pedro Pond

PR - Portland Ridge

WATERFOWL

West Indian Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna arborea*) - They were almost too easy this year! We found a group before we even got out of the bus. We got great views of this rare duck. 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.”

American Wigeon (*Anas americana*) - a few in TB

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) - on most of the ponds

Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) - a few at TB

Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*) - a few at TB

Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) - a flock of about 15 at TB

Masked Duck (*Nomonyx dominica*) - We finally found a few on a small pond hiding in the floating vegetation.

Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) - notice the scientific name, the first specimen was procured in Jamaica.

GREBES

Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus dominicus*) - Several at Spring Pond and TB

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) - Spring Pond and TB

PELICANS

Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

FRIGATEBIRDS

Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*)

HERONS

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) - great looks at several 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 immature white morph birds at PP

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)

Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)

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

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*) - an adult at Anne's beach house

IBISES AND SPOONBILLS

Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*)

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) - AKA John Crow

HAWKS AND EAGLES

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis jamaicensis*) - We only saw a few. Notice the scientific name, the 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. A few folks may have seen a dark morph bird from the van.

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) - a couple brief views

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) - a nice fly-by at the hotel in Montego Bay and another on our wetland circuit

RAILS AND COOTS

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

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

Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinica*) - mostly immatures

Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*)

American Coot (*Fulica Americana*)

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

PLOVERS

Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*)

LIMPKIN

Limpkin (*Aramus guarauna*) - heard only at BRUM at dusk

AVOCETS AND STILTS

Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) - AKA Capt. Lewis or Marsh Poodle

JACANAS

Northern Jacana (*Jacana spinosa violacea*) - good looks at Spring Pond and BRUM

SANDPIPERS

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*)

Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*)

Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) - Portland Bight

Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) - Convenient comparison views with the former at Parrottee Pond.

Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*)

GULLS AND TERNS

Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*)

Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*)

Sandwich Tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*)

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 - Well, this was a bit of a heart stopper.

This species has never been a problem in the past, but this time it took us down to the “10 minute warning”. We finally found one at the last minute, at our last stop, on the last day after everybody and their poodle told us we didn’t have a chance.

White-winged Dove (*Zenaida asiatica*)

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 macroura*) - mostly in the lowlands

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

Caribbean Dove (*Leptotila jamaicensis 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 in Cockpit Country because our stocked spot in the Blue Mountains came up dry!

Ruddy Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon montana*) - we had several fly-bys

PARROTS AND PARAKEETS

Olive-throated Parakeet (*Aratinga nana nana*) - e - Sometimes referred to as Jamaican Parakeet, these were seen daily feeding in the *Erythrina* flowers at MP.

Green-rumped Parrotlet (*Forpus passerinus*) - An introduced species, we had quick looks at a small group at PR.

Yellow-billed Parrot (*Amazona collaria*) - E - seen both in CC and the JCM, though we never found one perched we had good looks in flight

Black-billed Parrot (*Amazona agilis*) - E - more cooperative than the former, we great scope views in CC

CUCKOOS

Mangrove Cuckoo (*Coccyzus minor*) - it took some work, but we eventually had great views at PR.

Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo (*Saurothera vetula*) - E - really tough this year, our only good look was a pair along the road in CC.

Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo (*Hyetornis pluvialis*) - E - several good looks, best at MP

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

OWLS

Barn Owl (*Tyto alba furcata*) – We had great looks on our return drive from BRUM. This subspecies, known as White-winged Barn Owl is restricted to Cuba, the Caymans and Jamaica

Jamaican Owl (*Pseudoscops grammicus*) - E - seen well at dusk at MP in the nest tree

POTOOS

Northern Potoo (*Nyctibius j. jamaicensis*) - e - superb views of birds on day roosts at Rocklands and PRM

SWIFTS

Black Swift (*Cypseloides n. niger*) Caribbean endemic subspecies seen poorly near Hector’s River

White-collared Swift (*Streptoprocne zonaris*) - great views at Starlight Chalet
Antillean Palm-Swift (*Tachornis p. 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 m. 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 - 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*)

WOODPECKERS

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

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Jamaican Elaenia (*Myiopagis cotta*) - E - easier than normal this year, we had several good looks at this cute little flycatcher

Greater Antillean Elaenia (*Elaenia f. fallax*) - e - a mysterious bird in Jamaica, it's range is not well understood; we had fantastic views of one in PRM

Jamaican Pewee (*Contopus pallidus*) - E - great looks at a couple at MP

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 - Not as common as the former, but we managed to get multiple good looks on several days.

Stolid Flycatcher (*Myiarchus stolidus stolidus*) - e - A Caribbean endemic, this was the least common of the three *Myiarchus* flycatchers. We had fantastic looks at Portland Ridge.

Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*) - early arrivals were at Spring Pond and BRUM

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

Jamaican Becard (*Pachyramphus niger*) - E - the only becard in the Caribbean, we had great looks at males and females, including a pair at a nest in CC

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 excellent close-up studies of this great looking bird in CC and again in PRM.

Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo a. altiloquus*) - just back from the winter grounds, 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

Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

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

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

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.

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, we had great scope views at Portland Ridge.

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.

Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*) - only seen by a couple of us at MP

Cape May Warbler (*Dendroica tigrina*) - great views at TB

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

Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata coronata*) - We saw the “Myrtle” race.

Black-throated Green Warbler (*Dendroica virens*) - one at MP

Prairie Warbler (*Dendroica discolor*) - seen daily

Palm Warbler (*Dendroica palmarum palmarum*) - the “Western” subspecies

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, they were everywhere!

Worm-eating Warbler (*Helmitheros vermivorus*) - seen by most at MP

Swainson’s Warbler (*Limnothlypis swainsonii*) - great looks at this skulker in PRM

Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) - Betsy Kick-up, seen most days

Northern Waterthrush (*Seiurus noveboracensis*) - seen best at PR

Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*) - a few skulking about

BANANAQUIT

Bananaquit (*Coereba f. flaveola*) - **e** - we saw many every day, including in hand study of an unfortunate individual at MP.

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

Black-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris bicolor marchii*) - A Caribbean near-endemic, this subspecies only occurs in Jamaica and Hispaniola.

Yellow-shouldered Grassquit (*Loxipasser anoxanthus*) - **E** - This bird made us work a little bit, but we eventually all had good looks on the last morning at PRM. It’s really more of a “shrubquit” and is the only member of its genus, thought to be most closely related to the *Loxigilla* bullfinches.

Greater Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla violacea ruficollis*) - **e** - A Caribbean endemic, they were skulkers, but we had good looks for everybody.

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** - great looks 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 (*Nesospiza nigerrimus*) - E - Probably the scarcest of the endemics and usually the biggest challenge to find, we were quite fortunate to see it easily in JCM and PRM. 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*) - 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 - Another bird that liked to stay hidden in dense foliage, but it was common at MP and we had a few great looks.

BUTTERFLIES

Drought conditions meant that butterflies were in rather low numbers, but we saw a few:

Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)

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*)

Jamaican Admiral (Sister) (*Adelpha abyla*) - the one we pointed out along the road in CC

Orion Cecropian (*Historis odius*)

Jamaican Satyr (*Calisto zangis*)

OTHER CRITTERS

Small Indian Mongoose (*Herpestes auropunctatus*)

Bat sp.

Orca (*Orcinus orca*) - I was totally blown away to see a fast moving pod of Killer Whales offshore at Hector’s River. Unfortunately only a few people in the group were able to get on them in the scope as they would surface only briefly.

Jamaican Giant Anole (*Anolis garmani*)

Jamaican Tuquoise Anole (*Anolis grahami*)