

JAMAICA

Sunday 24th March – Sunday 31st March 2013 (8 days)

Leader: To be confirmed

Group Size Limit: 9

Tour Category: Easy



Red-billed Streamertail (Nik Borrow)

There is something magical about the Caribbean Sea and its scattering of beautiful islands. These tropical wonderlands with their palm-fringed, pearly beaches and ultramarine waters, their wealth of tropical fruits, their swinging reggae and calypso music, their famously relaxed way of life and their attractive mixture of races and cultures conjure up an idea of paradise. Of course this happy vision is only part of what the islands are about, and an aspect of the Caribbean more available to wealthy locals and visitors from more developed lands: life is far from idyllic for many inhabitants of the Caribbean, and Jamaica is no exception.

This very scenic island is mostly rugged and mountainous, but it encompasses a great variety of landscapes, fringed by some of the Caribbean's most classic white-sand beaches and the 'oh-so-inviting' turquoise sea. Eons ago, what is now

Jamaica was a mountain range, connected to what is now Central America by a land bridge, but nowadays its very special, endemic-rich fauna and flora reflect its long isolation from the mainland.

The name Jamaica derives from the word Xaymaca, meaning 'Land of Wood and Water' or perhaps 'Land of Springs', used by its Arawakan-speaking original Taíno inhabitants. Columbus 'discovered' Jamaica in 1494 on his second voyage of exploration to the New World, and in the early 1500s the Spanish conquered the Taíno Indians and colonized the island, which they called Santiago. At times, buccaneers and pirates used the island as a base for their pillaging forays, and eventually the island passed under British control and became known as Jamaica. Huge numbers of slaves were imported from Africa during its colonial past and the resulting blend of different cultures has

profoundly influenced the subsequent history of the island, which has been an independent state since 1962. Ian Fleming, who lived on the island, repeatedly used Jamaica as a setting for his James Bond novels, but Jamaica's most famous son is surely Bob Marley, who is still regarded with reverence by the locals.

With one of the richest concentrations of endemic bird species in the Caribbean (no fewer than 30 endemics occur here if one includes Jamaican Oriole, which is only shared with the remote island of San Andres), and many other more widespread Caribbean specialities, a visit to Jamaica is an attractive proposition for anyone with an interest in the avifauna of this beautiful part of the world. A wide variety of bird families are represented on the island, most notably the tody family, which comprises a small group of species restricted to the largest Caribbean Islands. In addition, the pleasant tropical climate encourages many North American migrants to winter on these islands and even more to rest while on spring migration. With persistence and a modicum of luck we should see all 30 endemics during our stay, as well as many other great birds. Good accommodations and food, and easy travelling conditions, make for a rewarding journey.

We start our journey at Kingston, the capital of Jamaica, and from here we travel westwards to the climatically-perfect hill town of Mandeville. Here we shall explore the

open gardens, pastures and woodland of a working cattle ranch where well over half of Jamaica's endemics can be found, including the splendid Red-billed Streamertail (a supremely elegant hummingbird that is surely the island's signature bird), Jamaican Parakeet, Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Jamaican Owl, Jamaican Mango, the lovely Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Woodpecker, Jamaican Elaenia, Jamaican Pewee, Sad and Rufous-tailed Flycatchers, Jamaican Becard, White-chinned Thrush, Jamaican Vireo, Jamaican Euphonia, Jamaican Stripe-headed Tanager (or Jamaican Spindalis), Yellow-shouldered Grassquit, the attractive Orangequit and Jamaican Oriole. We will also visit the Black River Morass, Jamaica's largest wetland, where we should see Antillean Nighthawk and have a good chance of encountering the uncommon West Indian Whistling-Duck.

We will also spend some time exploring the wild, hilly Cockpit Country in search of four more endemics: Ring-tailed Pigeon, Black-billed and Yellow-billed Parrots, and Jamaican Crow.

During the second part of our stay on the island, we concentrate on the dark evergreen forests of the Blue Mountains and the John Crow Mountains, which dominate the eastern part of this tropical paradise. These ranges are home to the rest of Jamaica's endemics, including Black-billed Streamertail, the very shy Crested Quail-Dove, White-eyed Thrush,





Northern Potoo (Craig Robson)

Blue-Mountain Vireo, Arrow-headed Warbler and Jamaican Blackbird. By the end of our journey there is a good chance we will have seen all of the Jamaican endemics, as well as enjoyed some beautiful Caribbean scenery and soaked up the relaxed atmosphere of this unique island.

Birdquest has operated tours to Jamaica since 1998.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins in the early evening at Kingston airport. From here we will drive to Mandeville for a three nights stay.

Days 2-3 Situated at 2000ft (600m) on a high plateau of the Don Figuerero Mountains overlooking the south coast, Mandeville is a small hill town in the central area of Jamaica. Grand old mahogany trees and flowering yellow poui and mango decorate the country lanes that lead us to a 300-acre (120-hectare) working cattle farm owned by the Sutton family at Marshall's Pen. The centrepiece of the property is the Great White House, which must have been carved out of the wilderness in the early 1700s. It has amazingly survived at least four horrendous hurricanes and still maintains its old grandeur.

The spacious, colourful gardens and belts of pastureland, interrupted

by thickly wooded copses, provide ideal nest sites for many of Jamaica's common bird species and in fact well over half of the island's endemics breed here. The following are all easily found: Jamaican Parakeet (split from the Olive-throated Parakeet of Central America), Jamaican Tody (a exquisite little critter, belonging to a family which is endemic to the Greater Antilles), Jamaican Woodpecker (which has become a 'jack-of-all-trades' filling several ecological niches), Sad Flycatcher (split from Dusky-capped), Rufous-tailed Flycatcher, Jamaican Becard (easily located by its enormous nest high up in mature fruiting trees), Jamaican Vireo, Jamaican Euphonia, Jamaican Oriole (a virtual endemic, also occurring on the island of San Andres), Jamaican Stripe-headed Tanager (or Jamaican Spindalis) and the handsome Orangequit. One of the major highlights at Marshall's Pen is watching the endemic Red-billed Streamertails at the feeders. This amazing hummingbird shines emerald green in shafts of sunlight as it fiercely defends its sugar solution from duller and more normal-tailed females and from the larger endemic Jamaican Mangoes. Its tail streamers are elongated to three times its body length, and are scalloped and fluted on the inside so that they create a high whining hum

as the bird flies. Nicknamed 'Doctorbird' by local people, it is actually a status symbol for a family to attract streamertails to flowers in their garden. The name 'Doctorbird' comes from its practise of puncturing the base or sides of flowers with its bill to draw out the nectar, an act which resembles the 17th century doctor poking around with his lancet.

Whilst creeping along the wide trails we will be listening for the raucous accelerating tones of a cuckoo. Both the elegant, endemic, yellow-bellied Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo and the larger endemic Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo inhabit the shady thick understorey of this dense woodland. In the forest glades, endemic Jamaican Elaenias and Jamaican Pewees sit motionless on their perches and occasionally explode into action to pick insects off leaves or twigs or to acrobatically catch them in mid air. The easiest birding is in the gardens where an endemic White-chinned Thrush may hop on the lawns or an endemic Yellow-shouldered Grassquit may be seen unsuccessfully looking for a camouflaged background amongst the multi-coloured array of flowers. Biologists have opted out of making a decision as to whether this delightful black and yellow, berry- and seed-eating bird is a grassquit or a finch and have pronounced it to be another endemic genus. Greater Antillean Bullfinch and the local race of Bananaquit also flit around the gardens.

As dusk approaches we will listen for the hoarse throaty 'whow' that signals the waking up of a Jamaican Owl and human 'wows' may be heard as we find him hiding under a bromeliad or amongst the tangled vines that envelop most of the trees here! Another nocturnal delight is the Northern Potoo (a recent split from Common Potoo). The birds of northern Central

America and the Caribbean have a different call and do not perch with beaks held vertically above the body.

Other interesting species that we should find here include such Caribbean specialities as White-crowned Pigeon, the smart Caribbean Dove (normally a shy forest floor species, but not here), the gorgeous Zenaïda Dove, Antillean Palm-Swift, Gray and Loggerhead Kingbirds, Black-whiskered Vireo, Black-faced Grassquit and Greater Antillean Grackle.

More widespread species include Turkey Vulture, American Kestrel, White-winged Dove, Common Ground-Dove, Ruddy Quail-Dove, the introduced Green-rumped Parrotlet, Mangrove Cuckoo, Smooth-billed Ani, Cave Swallow, Northern Mockingbird, Northern Parula, Black-throated Blue and Prairie Warblers, American Redstart and Yellow-faced Grassquit.

During our sojourn at Marshall's Pen we will also visit the Black River Morass, the most extensive wetland in Jamaica. Here we will explore slow-moving, mangrove-fringed channels, enjoying the variety of waterbirds and raptors. Purple Gallinules and Northern Jacanas seem to be everywhere, and we will hope to find the diminutive Least Bittern crouched along a reedy edge. The uncommon West Indian Whistling-Duck is mainly a nocturnal feeder, but small parties are regularly found here in the quieter stretches of marsh. Ospreys and Red-tailed Hawks perch on exposed boughs, while Caribbean and American Coots pose an identification challenge. As dusk approaches, Antillean Nighthawks float high over the open expanses.

Amongst the many other species we may well see amongst the channels or at some saline lagoons



White-tailed Tropicbirds (Tony Disley)

are Least and Pied-billed Grebes, Brown Pelican, Magnificent Frigatebird, Black-crowned and perhaps Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Green, Tricolored, Little Blue and Great Blue Herons, Great, Snowy, Reddish and Western Cattle Egrets, Glossy Ibis, Blue-winged Teal (and possibly other lingering ducks), the dashing Merlin, Sora, Common Gallinule (now treated as distinct from Common Moorhen), Black-necked Stilt, Black-bellied (or Grey), Snowy, Semipalmated and Wilson's Plovers, Killdeer, Solitary, Spotted, Semipalmated, Least and Stilt Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Laughing Gull, Royal and Sandwich Terns, Mourning Dove, Belted Kingfisher, Caribbean Martin, Barn Swallow (and perhaps other swallow species), Golden Warbler (split from Yellow), Northern Waterthrush and Common Yellowthroat.

Day 4 This morning we will explore the only wilderness area left on Jamaica, the Cockpit Country. A karst limestone region of caves, sinkholes and 'haystack' terrain, the 'Cockpit' is

basically a plateau that, over the eons, has been eroded by rainfall whose carbonic acid content has gradually dissolved the rock and left behind a jumble of steep conical hills separated by deep depressions or 'cockpits'. The tops and vertical hillsides have little or no soil to support vegetation, but the cockpits, in which the eroded minerals have been deposited, usually have very fertile soil and when undisturbed support thick vegetation and enormous trees. No fewer than a hundred plant species are endemic to the area.

Ramsgoat Caves in the heart of the Cockpit Country is the roosting haunt of Jamaica's two endangered endemic parrots. In the early morning small squawking flocks of both Yellow-billed and Black-billed Parrots noisily transfer from their roosting sites, situated on dead emergent branches of the highest trees, to the fruiting trees where they will gorge themselves all day. We will also be listening out for the jabbering and squabbling of endemic Jamaican Crows, which are still quite easily found in this area, and we will likely encounter the aptly-named Stolid Flycatcher. We

should hear the soft cooing of the rare endemic Ring-tailed Pigeon which, although officially fully protected, is still shot by hungry locals and so one of Jamaica's harder birds to see. With persistence we have a good chance of locating one.

During the afternoon we will drive eastwards to the Kingston area for a two nights stay. We will make an extended stop in the Hellshire Hills on the Portland peninsula to try and locate the shy Bahama Mockingbird. With a bit of luck we will see one displaying from a favourite bush. Migrant wood-warblers are usually about and may include Palm, Magnolia and Black-throated Green Warblers, and Ovenbird, and possibly one or two of the scarcer species such as Worm-eating, Yellow-throated and Cape May Warblers. In the nearby mangroves we may come across the skulking Clapper Rail or even a Prothonotary Warbler. White-tailed Tropicbird is also a possibility along the coast at this season.

Day 5 Today we will explore the slopes of the lofty Blue Mountains, overlooking the city of Kingston. These scenic mountains frame Jamaica's capital and dominate the eastern third of the island, rising up to 7200ft (2200m). They are covered with forests and dotted with plantations of Caribbean Pine and the famous Blue Mountain Coffee, the most expensive in the world. Alas, its fame and price have reached such heights that precious soil-conserving woodlands are being cleared for plantations at an alarming rate. However, on the cool, steep and often cloudy slopes some good evergreen montane forest remains. The highest point that we will reach is 4000ft (1220m) at Hardwar Gap, a thickly wooded mountain pass, where clouds move through the forest daily, creating a cool and damp environment which will be a

welcome change from the hot humid lowlands.

The woods are dense with tree ferns, mahogany and Blue Mahoe and luxuriant with huge bromeliads and epiphytes, whose flowers attract the tiny Vervain Hummingbird (endemic to Jamaica and Hispaniola). Blue Mahoe is Jamaica's national tree and the blossoms gradually change colour from yellow to orange to red. Mixed feeding flocks forage tirelessly through the dark montane evergreen forest, and include specialities like Greater Antillean Elaenia, the endemic Blue-Mountain Vireo and the endemic Arrow-headed Warbler, joined by migrant parulids. It is a fascinating challenge to pick out the Arrow-headed Warblers from amongst the very similar and more numerous Black-and-white Warblers. The retiring endemic White-eyed Thrush feeds unobtrusively under shady shrubs. Experienced Neotropical birders will recognize the flutelike whistles and trills emanating from the canopy as coming from a solitaire, but few will be prepared for the shock of seeing a positively gaudy Rufous-throated Solitaire in its gray, chestnut, rufous and white plumage. The bird is usually easy to find as it sings from leafless branches instead of from inside thick canopy. More time, however, will have to be spent on locating two much less conspicuous endemics. The scarce endemic Jamaican Blackbird is, unlike most other New World blackbirds, arboreal and does not flock. It forages silently for insects in bromeliads and moss or at the base of tree-fern fronds where it tosses out dead leaves. The most difficult Jamaican endemic, however, is the Crested Quail-Dove, which is no easier to see than any other quail-dove. Our best chance will be to spot one turning over the leaf litter at the side of the road soon after dawn, before the sun makes it retreat into the shady parts of

the forest. We may also see White-collared Swift here and perhaps Black Swift.

Day 6 After another morning in the Blue Mountains, just in case Crested Quail-Dove plays hard to get, we will travel north to Port Antonio for an overnight stay.

Day 7 This morning we will explore the ornithologically and touristically neglected John Crow Mountains at the eastern end of the island in search of the endemic Black-billed Streamertail. This isolated range, situated

in the extreme northeast of the island, receives more rain than the rest of Jamaica and is covered in fertile plantations at the base and the lower slopes, while the upper reaches are clothed in virtually inaccessible lush forest. The two streamertails used to be treated as conspecific as earlier scientific investigations suggested that there was an overlap zone where some individuals had red and black bills, but these biologists failed to realize that it is the immature Red-billed Streamertails which show

this two-tone bill colour! Black-billed Streamertails are, in fact, more blue-green in colour, have completely black bills and are only found in the humid eastern section of Jamaica. An excellent selection of other Jamaican endemics occur in the area. By the end of our Jamaican birding today, we may well have completed the full tally of the 28 species confined to this one island. During the afternoon we will return to the Kingston area for an overnight stay.

Day 8 The tour ends at

Kingston airport this morning.

Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Transport is by small coach and roads are mostly good.

Walking etc: The walking effort is easy throughout.

Climate: Mostly warm or hot, dry and sunny, but it is sometimes cool and overcast. It may rain at times.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are quite good.