

Birding Jamaica: Island endemics galore

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Derb Carter, Will Cook, Matt Daw, and Mike McCloy

Written by Mike McCloy

With 27 endemic bird species, Jamaica is high on many birder's lists of places to visit and is a quick, easy flight from the US. Driving is on the left side of the road and the infrastructure is relatively poor, as well as the driving habits of most of the locals. Crime rates can be high in certain areas so basic safety precautions are recommended. Other than incidents with an overly aggressive panhandler and a speeding driver who was fleeing from the police we didn't have any alarming safety issues. It turned out to be a very successful trip overall, with us finding all 27 of the endemics in under two days. Additionally, it was great to get a taste of Jamaican jerk and authentic local culture. Now on to the trip and the birds-

March 9 (Thursday)

Derb got used to driving on the left pretty quickly as he took us through Kingston in our rental SUV from the airport to our hotel. After passing through some rough-looking neighborhoods and a wrong turn down a dead end street we arrived at our destination. Thanks to Matt's stash of hotel rewards points we were able to enjoy the comfortable accommodations of the local Courtyard Marriott. Derb spotted our first bird for the trip, a Zenaida Dove, roosting under the overhang of our room balcony while we enjoyed a Red Stripe. After talking birds for a bit we hit the sack for a good night's sleep in preparation for an early start the next day.

March 10 (Friday)

Our first destination today was Hardwar Gap in the Blue Mountains where we were hoping to find a variety of the more widespread endemics, but in particular we were in search of the Blue Mountain Vireo. This species is more range-restricted than most other Jamaican endemics and this would likely be our only chance for it. Our first endemic of the morning was a Jamaican Vireo followed very quickly by a Rufous-tailed Flycatcher. Other endemics that we found relatively quickly at several random roadside stops in the Blue Mountains included Jamaican Woodpecker, Ring-tailed Pigeon, and White-chinned Thrush. The thrushes were abundantly scattered along the road shoulders, flushing as our car approached. A stop just south of Hardwar Gap added Arrowhead Warbler, Jamaican Euphonia, Yellow-shouldered Grassquit, and much to our delight a pair of the unreliable Jamaican Blackbirds. This species was one that we were worried about finding as they're uncommon, secretive, and tend to wander. These two were feeding in bromeliads below eye level about twenty-five meters downslope, and with a little patience we were able to get some extremely satisfying looks and photos. We got very lucky with these guys, as it would turn out these would be our only ones of the entire trip.



Arrowhead Warbler

Jamaican Blackbird

We moved a short distance up the road to the Woodside track where we parked and took a short walk down the hill along the trail. We were hoping to add more endemics here, particularly some of the flycatchers. We found “Red-billed” Streamertail, White-eyed Thrush, and Jamaican Pewee pretty quickly. As we were walking in we passed Ricardo Miller (Arrowhead Tours) and a client of his walking out, and he clued us into a Jamaican Becard nest that was a little ways farther down. The nest was large and obvious and we found it pretty easily, and shortly thereafter we spotted the pair of becards as well. Will’s sharp eyes picked out a Jamaican Elaenia feeding in the tree canopy across a small clearing, yet another endemic that we could check off. On the walk out, a couple of us got very brief looks at a secretive Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo that flew across the trail. Not to worry though, we’d end up getting much better looks at this species at our next stop up the road between Hardwar and Silver Hill Gaps.

It was here that we finally were able to find a Blue Mountain Vireo, the one endemic that we knew we pretty much had to get here in the Blue Mountains. We also got much better looks at a Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo and found our first Jamaican Tody of the trip. It was getting to be late in the morning and we decided to continue north towards our final destination for the day, Green Castle Estate. A little ways up the road we found another endemic, Sad Flycatcher, sallying forth along the road shoulder in a small coffee farm.



Blue Mountain Vireo



Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo

By this time we had already seen close to twenty of the endemics and were pleased with our progress- ahead of schedule. On the way to Green Castle from the Blue Mountains we stopped for a late lunch at a roadside jerk restaurant just west of Buff Bay where the jerk pork and yams were delicious, especially when paired with a Red Stripe. Another 30 minute drive brought us to Green Castle, where we initially had a little trouble finding somebody to let us into the locked gate at the main office. We ended up at a place marked as “Estate House” on the map, which turned out to be residence on a hilltop with a beautiful view overlooking the Caribbean Sea. While talking to the owner (Susan) in the driveway we had another new endemic for the trip, Jamaican Mango, perch on a powerline. A large, dark hummingbird these guys seemed quite aggressive and were unafraid to take on a bird many times their size. We’d see a handful more of these before our trip was over.

Once we were able to finally get settled in to our rooms at Green Castle we took a stroll down to the reservoir with the hopes of finding some of the West Indian Whistling-Ducks reported from there in the previous days. Along with numerous Ring-necked Ducks, Ruddy Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, American Coots, and Common Gallinules we managed to find three whistling-ducks. One of which was perched atop a dead snag by water’s edge, appropriate for their taxonomic classification (“tree ducks”). Northern Jacanas walked atop the aquatic vegetation at waters edge. Shortly before sunset we hiked out, finally managing to find Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo on the walk back up to the lodge. We then drove down to the beginning of the entrance road where a grassy pool apparently had been hosting multiple Yellow-breasted Crakes. Despite half an hour of walking around the perimeter of the marsh and extensive playback we came up empty. As we would later learn, early morning provides the best chance of success with these guys.



Green Castle Estate's beautiful poolside view over the Caribbean Sea

We got dinner at a small restaurant in Robin's Bay adjacent to Strawberry Fields Together, an oddly-named village about a ten minute drive from Green Castle. It used to be a major backpacker haven and "hippie hangout" in the 70's, hence the interesting name. Fried chicken with rice and beans and a couple Red Stripes hit the spot. Chatting with a couple locals over dinner provided us with some local insights, and a ganja-smoking young man named Kesser (pronounced "Kay-Sar") sold us each some of his homemade crafts consisting primarily of necklaces, bracelets, and earrings that he made from beads and local plant seeds. A self-proclaimed Rastafarian, he opened up to us about his general mindset and outlook on life which made for one of the more interesting dining experiences that any of us had experienced in a while.

On the drive back into Green Castle after dark we had a flyover Northern Potoo and several heard-only Jamaican Owls. After well over an hour of trying to score a look at one, we caught a fleeting glimpse of a silhouette overhead. We had better luck getting a good look at a Northern Potoo, which was feeding from a bare treetop right outside our apartment at the lodge.

March 11 (Saturday)

We were up early today to drive east to Ecclesdown Road, widely regarded as perhaps the premier birding spot in Jamaica. With only four endemics left to find (plus the "Black-billed" Streamertail), we were optimistic about cleaning up on these this morning. Our morning got off to a good start when a Barn Owl flew in front of our car at dawn. After a short passing rain shower, we quickly had both Black-billed and Yellow-billed Parrots flying overhead when we arrived at Ecclesdown Road. A pair of Black-billed Parrots perched in a treetop about twenty feet over our heads, looking wet and bedraggled from the rain. A little ways further down the road we started to enter some agricultural areas, where we found two Jamaican Crows feeding in the treetops as well as our first "Black-billed" Streamertail. Chestnut-bellied Cuckoos seemed more common in this fragmented landscape and kept us entertained with their raucous demeanor.

Our only target left now was Crested Quail-Dove, one of the toughest Jamaican endemics to find. We retraced our steps north to where the road passed through a stretch of moist, dense forest and started walking the road. In the process, we found an active Streamertail nest which the female was in the process of finishing constructing. After about half an hour, we heard a Crested-Quail Dove calling and were able to tempt it in closer with playback. This was about two hundred meters south of the “One Lane Road Ahead” sign. Much to our delight, it perched in the open about twenty feet off the ground near the forest edge and let us each shoot off dozens of photos. Our work here was done, and some leisurely birding on the way back up to the car produced Jamaican Todies, Jamaican Elaenia, Cape May Warbler (new for the trip), Rufous-tailed Flycatcher, and a heard-only Rufous-throated Solitaire.



Crested Quail-Dove

Arriving back at Green Castle about mid-afternoon we relaxed for a bit in the pool with a celebratory Red Stripe before hiking back down to the reservoir to catch some late afternoon birding. After dark, we hiked back up to the lodge while trying for better looks at Jamaican Owl. After much frustration, we were finally able to get a solid look at one that came into a tape. We also heard what we decided were two juvenile/fledgling owls begging and snagged a few recordings for future reference and upload to Xeno-canto. Dinner again tonight was at Robin’s Bay where we tried the Jamaican national dish, ackee and saltfish. Ackee fruit reminded us of sweetened scrambled eggs, and whole dish provide a delicious experience.

March 12 (Sunday)

With all the endemics in the bag we had an easy-going morning of birding around the grounds of the lodge and photographing the friendly resident Streamtails. Three of us hiked a trail down to the waterfall on the property, along which we added Gray Catbird and Prothonotary Warbler to the trip list and got better looks at Jamaican Becard and Ruddy Quail-Dove.

Afterwards we packed up and headed towards the Hellshire Hills and Kingston with plans of finding the regionally endemic Bahama Mockingbird and Stolid Flycatcher. After close to an hour of working our way up a path through the arid scrub, we were successful with both our targets. Stolid Flycatcher first, and then immediately afterwards Bahama Mockingbird. The

subspecies of both of these that we saw are endemic to Jamaica (*Mimus gundlachii hillii* and *Myiarchus stolidus stolidus*).



Bahama Mockingbird

Stolid Flycatcher

On our way back to Kingston we stopped at the Greater Portmore Sewage Ponds where we found five Yellow-crowned Bishops, a localized introduced species native to Africa. What's a trip to a new country without a stop at the local sewage facility? We also found a variety of new waterbirds and shorebirds for the trip here including Least Sandpiper, Glossy Ibis, Killdeer, several dozen Lesser Yellowlegs, and a Least Grebe. American Crocodiles were also common, with a variety of sizes present. We ended our day across town at the Hope Botanical Gardens where we enjoyed a nice stroll and added Tricolored Heron, European Starling, and Northern Rough-winged Swallow to our trip list. Yellow-billed Parrot and Antillean Palm-Swift gave us much better looks here than at any other location during the trip.



A fierce-looking crocodile from Greater Portmore

Back at the hotel Matt and I ran three laps around the track (0.5km) at the adjacent Emancipation Park because, why not? It was nice to stretch out legs a bit and it also provided a very interesting people-watching experience. For dinner we drove a short distance up the road to Marketplace Food Court, which offered several options. We settled on a Mediterranean/Middle Eastern restaurant which was one of the more upscale options available and provided us with a delicious dinner. Back at the hotel we drank some more Red Stripe and looked over all the Ebird checklists from the trip before going to bed.

March 13 (Monday)

Derb's flight left an hour and a half earlier than the one Matt, Will, and I were on so after dropping him off at the airport we ventured out the causeway between the airport and Port Royal for a bit of final birding. We were treated to a beautiful sunrise over Kingston with a backdrop of the Blue Mountains and were able to add six more birds to the trip list- Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, White Ibis, Ruddy Turnstone, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Semipalmated Plover.

The birding in Jamaica is really clustered in just a few main spots, and we were able to find all of the Jamaican endemics in only three different locations. Therefore we didn't really feel at much of a disadvantage by our decision to not hire a local guide, but a few inside tips and a little bit of luck admittedly helped our case. Our total trip list came to 113 species, of which 27 were Jamaican endemics. We also saw an additional 13 endemic subspecies which included those of Common Ground-Dove, Caribbean Dove, Northern Potoo (a possible future split), Vervain Hummingbird, Olive-throated Parakeet (also potential for a future split), Stolid Flycatcher, Loggerhead Kingbird, Cave Swallow, Rufous-throated Solitaire (heard-only), Bahama Mockingbird, Greater Antillean Bullfinch, Greater Antillean Grackle, and Jamaican Oriole. Our worst miss for the trip was Greater Antillean Eleania (endemic subspecies) and not being able to lay eyes on a Rufous-throated Solitaire (heard-only). We also missed seeing the endemic subspecies of Plain Pigeon and Grasshopper Sparrow. Overall, the birding is great on this small Caribbean island and it's a perfect destination for an extended weekend. I'd highly encourage other birders to make the trip!



The lush, mountainous forest along Ecclesdown Road