

Jamaica – An Island of Endemics

Naturetrek Tour Report

29 February - 8 March 2016



Jamaican Woodpecker



Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo



Jamaican Tody



Black-billed Parrot

Report and images by Tom Mabbett



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Tour participants: Tom Mabbett (leader) with nine Naturetrek clients

Summary

We enjoyed a really superb week with all 28 of the Island's endemic birds seen! We managed to find the elusive Crested Quail Dove in the Blue Mountains and a Jamaican Owl on the final night; these were a few of the many highlights. A nice range of American wood warblers provided another treat, and over the week exactly 100 bird species were recorded across many different families. We were treated very well by the Green Castle staff, ate some fantastic local food and had lots of fun along the way with plenty of opportunities to relax by the pool and enjoy the grounds.

Day 1

Monday 29th February

Group members met at Gatwick airport and boarded our direct flight to Kingston, Jamaica.

After landing at Kingston airport, we were picked up and made the two-hour journey to Green Castle Estate. The first birds of the week were four Barn Owls as we journeyed along the final track leading to the lodge. We were shown to our rooms and then sat down for a late dinner before some much needed sleep!

Day 2

Tuesday 1st March

We had a slow start today. Following an 8.30am breakfast we met Roger, our guide, and headed out from the lodge to walk along part of the waterfall trail. Straightaway we were seeing some of the Island's endemic birds. After looking at the most obvious inhabitants, the Greater Antillean Grackles and Loggerhead Kingbirds, we were soon marvelling at a superb Red-billed Streamertail posing perfectly for us. Moving along the trail we enjoyed a range of species including Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Woodpecker, the tiny Vervain Hummingbird and Northern Parula. We put in some effort to all get views of a female Jamaican Becard, and a Jamaican Oriole was also seen well.

After a couple of hours we made our way back to the lodge for some lunch. We saw many species in the gardens including Yellow-faced Grassquit and our first views of Jamaican Mango. After lunch we went out again on a trail opposite the lodge entrance to search for more birds. We couldn't help but watch the streamertail once more, and further views of Jamaican Tody: a little gem of a bird. A Black-throated Blue Warbler was seen briefly and Jamaican Vireo showed for us. With the day really warming up we didn't stay out too long and returned to spend some time around the lodge, where some chose to relax and go for a swim in the pool.

Before dinner, whilst checking out the new trail down to the reservoir, we had wonderful views of a Northern Potoo. It was calling loudly at first, and then was using a light to hunt moths and other insects, giving us a brilliant display! In the evening we all sat down to a lovely meal. Plans for the following day were outlined and the checklist duly filled in.

Day 3

Wednesday 2nd March

Today we had an early breakfast and were on our way to the Blue Mountains by 6am. It was a journey of around two hours and on the final narrow roads winding up into the mountains we paused next to the river to watch our only Belted Kingfishers of the tour. On arrival we started walking a quiet road and the birding was really superb. The endemics encountered really started to rack up here! On stepping out of the vehicle we were almost immediately watching a very smart and showy Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo which was very close to us, and Jamaican Spindalis was nearby. Walking slowly along the road we watched Greater Antillean Bullfinches, Arrowhead Warbler, Blue Mountain Vireo and American Redstarts to name just a few. A Jamaican Elaenia was found fairly high in the trees, and Jamaican Pewee and Yellow-shouldered Grassquit were also new for us. It really was one great bird after the next in some super habitat. We had hoped to find the trickiest of all the endemics, Crested Quail Dove, but it was not to be so we went back to the vehicle for refreshments. The Blue Mountains are world famous for their coffee production and we sampled some in a local coffee house. A Vervain Hummingbird was showing very well here, feeding low down on tiny flowers, and was duly photographed.

Following lunch we continued along another section known as the Hardwar Gap and after some careful searching we located a single Jamaican Blackbird. It was flicking leaves out of a large bromeliad and was yet another star species we had managed to find. We carried on along the road and watched a smart Black-and-white Warbler, and we still hoping for the dove! With time running out we tried one more side road. After a short walk down a steep drive a dove flew up from the ground into the forest. We waited and scanned, hoping it would re-appear. As we watched, Roger walked a short way ahead and amazingly found the Crested Quail Dove perched around six feet off the ground on a low branch! It posed there for a while and most of us got good views and even a record photograph or two. It then flew to another tree not too far away before finally melting away into the forest. A superb bird and a brilliant end to the day with all the key species seen!

We then journeyed back to Green Castle, arriving with time to get ready for dinner. We enjoyed another great meal and had an early night.

Day 4

Thursday 3rd March

Today was our second day away from Green Castle and we journeyed to a famous birding destination known as Ecclesdown Road. After around two and a half hours we stopped to look over the sea. A Little Blue Heron and some intriguing tiny hermit crabs were seen. After taking in the views, we continued to Ecclesdown and started birding along the road.

It was a really superb walk with fantastic views over the forest. This is the very best area to find Black-billed Streamertail and we had really superb views of a stunning male bird perched very close to us. A few intermittent showers really helped us here and we went on to enjoy many Ring-tailed Pigeons and a flock of Yellow-billed Parrots landing in the tree tops, allowing great telescope views. Shortly after this we watched five Jamaican Crows flying over the forest. Despite only seeing them in flight it was clear what they were, and yet another endemic species had been seen. A local person was harvesting coconuts which were enjoyed by John and Roger. We headed on and had superb views of a Sad Flycatcher and White-eyed Thrush. It had been a superb walk so far. Continuing on, a few calls alerted our attentions to two splendid Black-billed Parrots high in a Cecropia tree. This species is becoming more and more difficult to find and we were thrilled to have had such superb telescope

views as they fed and preened high above us. It had been a brilliant few hours! We had added five new endemic species to our list and had some amazing views too.

Next, we headed for Boston Bay where we enjoyed some jerk pork and chicken for lunch, and got a taste of local life. Following lunch we started our journey back towards Green Castle. We stopped at a hotel garden to try for Jamaican Owl and went on a short walk. No new birds were seen but we had excellent views of White-chinned Thrush. We continued on and stopped one last time at a bridge over the River Swift at Hope Bay. Here we had close views of Snowy Egret, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Green Heron and Pied-billed Grebes including four young birds. It was a super last stop.

We arrived back at Castle Green in plenty of time for dinner. Afterwards went through the checklist and some enjoyed the potoo once more. After just three days birding we had seen an amazing 26 out of 28 endemic species! It was only Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo and Jamaican Owl remaining to complete the set.

Day 5

Friday 4th March

After the last two days away from Green Castle, we had a slower start today and it was just Jon and Tom who went out at 6.30am for some pre-breakfast birding. They walked along the approach road and the highlight was a very confiding Mangrove Cuckoo.

Following breakfast we met Dwayne, our local leader for the remainder of the tour, and went birding on a trail above the estate and part of the tower road. We had great views of Yellow-shouldered Grassquit, and a Black-whiskered Vireo was seen, singing loudly. A Jamaican Woodpecker showed very well and was enjoyed by all. We looked at the impressive Banana Spider and the Giant Anole with a range of other bird species already encountered. American Redstarts were numerous and Bananaquit widespread. We explored the area and again enjoyed the streamertails near the lodge before lunch.

In the afternoon we walked to the waterfall, birding as we went, and a range of species were seen including excellent views of Rufous-tailed Flycatcher. We took some photographs of the waterfall and watched a bathing American Redstart before heading back and watching two Caribbean Doves on the track.

Some decided to relax before dinner whilst others headed down to the reservoir. At the reservoir, which was a short but quite steep walk away, we saw a nice range of species including 26 Ring-necked Ducks, four Lesser Scaup, eight Blue-winged Teal and four American Wigeon, together with many American Coot and a probable Caribbean Coot, but it was just too far away to be certain. A Stolid Flycatcher was a new bird.

Back at the lodge we had an enjoyable dinner and discussed the week so far and future plans.

Day 6

Saturday 5th March

For the benefit of those who had not visited the reservoir yesterday, we headed there on today's pre-breakfast walk. We enjoyed identifying the wildfowl and a smart Northern Jacana was seen well; a new bird. A Green Heron was also seen before we headed back for breakfast. As we were enjoying breakfast, a Stolid Flycatcher was seen in the lodge grounds. Shortly afterwards we set off for the Davey Hill lookout, a little way along the Tower

Road. It was a fantastic view from here, out towards the ocean, and a Magnificent Frigatebird was seen. We also saw Jamaican Spindalis and Dwayne showed us some large land crabs and explained their amazing life cycle and journey from the sea. We enjoyed the superb views and, after further exploration, slowly started walking back. As we were walking back Dwayne heard a Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo. Shortly afterwards we were all watching this very impressive, large cuckoo at close quarters. A really great bird and number 27 of 28 – Superb! We then headed back after a very enjoyable morning, enjoying Olive-throated Parakeets as we went.

After lunch we walked back along the tower road and down to the beach. There are two small pools at the bottom of the path and nearby we had brilliant views of a Mangrove Cuckoo which posed very well for us. On the pools we watched two Killdeers, two Least Sandpipers and some Blue-winged Teal. Wandering along the beach, Semipalmated Plovers were found, and a single Black-necked Stilt flew across the ocean. A surprise here was a very smart Yellow Warbler which showed very well for us. We had a good look out over the sea where a Royal Tern was seen. A mongoose was also watched at close range.

Whilst waiting to be picked up and driven back to the lodge, we looked over the pools again and enjoyed great views of Barn Owls, and a surprise was a Solitary Sandpiper, a rare bird here, which dropped in. An American Purple Gallinule was also seen but was skulking in the long grasses. Before being picked up we enjoyed at least 70 White-collared Swifts feeding low over the pools in the evening light, and an American Kestrel was hunting.

Back at the lodge we enjoyed a beer and another excellent meal, and went over what we had seen so far. Afterwards a few of us went to photograph the Northern Potoo on its favourite perch. A really great bird!

Day 7

Sunday 6th March

Today was our last full day and after breakfast we headed out towards Davey Hill. After watching some very obliging parakeets, we turned off the main path and were soon marvelling at a wonderful roosting Northern Potoo. It was perfectly camouflaged and sat motionless, just turning its head to peer down on us as we walked beneath it: a real treat. We then continued our loop back to Green Castle.

As we were going out night birding this evening, the afternoon was left free. Some enjoyed the swimming pool while others photographed birds around the grounds or relaxed reading, taking in the views from the lodge.

We had an early dinner and afterwards drove to the other side of the estate, to an area known as Newry. It was a beautiful evening with a wonderful night sky and great to be out tracking down our last endemic. We could soon hear a young owl but despite giving it time and searching from different angles, it just wouldn't come out into view. We were close though! After a little while, Dwayne headed up a narrow track on his own and soon beckoned us to join him. The Jamaican Owl was high in a tree above him. We all got there as quickly and as quietly as possible. There it was: the final endemic! A small brown owl was picked out in the darkness. It flew a short distance but to our delight came back into view and the torches were trained on it as it peered down on us, bobbing its head. What a final night!

Delighted, we all crammed into the lodge's 4x4 rather than doing 2 trips again and we made our way back, having a lot of laughter and jokes along the way. We sat and made some notes and recorded our sightings before heading to bed.

Day 8

Monday 7th March

We enjoyed breakfast and had until 11am to pack our things ready for our flight home. Jon, Peter and Joan went to nearby Firefly with Richard from the estate, whilst others relaxed, soaked up the views and took some last minute photographs before leaving.

We had lunch at noon and then, after saying our farewells, we were on our way. We stopped to briefly look over the pools, watching a Least Grebe and a Killdeer again, and carried on winding up into the hills before stopping for a short walk at some botanical gardens. Many Ring-tailed Pigeons were here and a Jamaican Woodpecker was seen too. After a short walk we continued on and before reaching the airport, we stopped at Kingston Market which is right on the shoreline.

Around the port and quay were around 200 Laughing Gulls, 50 Royal Terns and 25 Sandwich Terns. We enjoyed great views of Brown Pelicans with some diving for fish offshore, whilst Magnificent Frigatebirds flew overhead. Turnstone and a Spotted Sandpiper were also noted here.

It was a great way to end the week and we carried on the short distance to the airport in plenty of time for our flight home.

Day 9

Tuesday 8th March

Our overnight flight landed back in the UK and another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

During the tour we had seen all the island's endemics and many more bird species besides over a fantastic week. We had been blessed with excellent weather and experienced a great country, enjoying traditional food and having a lot of fun as we went! Thanks must go to the Green Castle staff who really couldn't do enough for us.

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Species Lists

Birds

- American Wigeon** *Anas Americana*: 4 drakes seen on the reservoir.
- Blue-winged Teal** *Anas discors*: 8 on the reservoir and 6 on coastal pool.
- Ring-necked duck** *Aythya collaris*: 26 on the reservoir.
- Lesser Scaup** *Aythya affinis*: 4 on the reservoir.
- Ruddy Duck** *Oxyura jamaicensis*: 4 on the reservoir.
- Least Grebe** *Tachybaptus dominicus*: 1 on the pool near the beach.
- Pied-billed Grebe** *Podilymbus podiceps*: 2 on the reservoir and seen at Hope Bay.
- Magnificent Frigatebird** *Fregata magnificens*: c5 seen at sea.
- Brown Pelican** *Pelecanus occidentalis*: c15 seen in Kingston on final day.
- Great Egret** *Ardea alba*: Seen frequently while driving.
- Snowy Egret** *Egretta thula*: c5 seen at Hope Bay.
- Little Blue Heron** *Egretta caerulea*: A few seen while driving and at Hope Bay.
- Western Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis*: Commonly seen.
- Green Heron** *Butorides virescens*: Singles seen at reservoir, Hope Bay and coastal pool.
- Yellow-crowned Night Heron** *Nyctanassa violacea bancrofti*: 4 at Hope Bay, 1 at coastal roost.
- Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura*: Commonly seen.
- Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus carolinensis*: 1 seen very well over the lodge.
- Red-tailed Hawk** *Buteo jamaicensis*: c5 seen with 1 showing well perched in open fields near coast.
- American Kestrel** *Falco sparverius*: a few seen. 1 or 2 very pale breasted birds.
- American Purple Gallinule** *Porphyrio martinica*: 2 on coastal pool.
- Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus cerceris*: c10 on reservoir and at hope bay.
- American Coot** *Fulica Americana*: c15 on reservoir.
- Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*: 1 seen on beach.
- Semipalmated Plover** *Charadrius semipalmatus*: 2 on the beach.
- Killdeer** *Charadrius vociferous ternominatus*: 2 on coastal pool.
- Black-necked Stilt** *Himantopus mexicanus*: 1 seen at the beach.
- Northern Jacana** *Jacana spinose violacea*: 1 at reservoir and 1 at coastal pool.
- Spotted Sandpiper** *Actitis macularius*: 1 in Kingston on final day.
- Solitary Sandpiper** *Tringa solitaria*: 1 on the coastal pool (rare for Jamaica).
- Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*: 1 seen in Kingston on final day.
- Least Sandpiper** *Calidris minutilla*: 2 seen at coastal pool.
- Laughing Gull** *Larus atricilla*: c200 in Kingston on final day; only gull there.
- Royal Tern** *Thalassus maximus maximus*: c50 in Kingston.
- Sandwich Tern** *Thalassus sandvicensis aculavidus*: c20 in Kingston.
- Rock (feral) Pigeon** *Columba livia*: A few small flocks seen.
- White-crowned Pigeon** *Patagioenas leucocephala*: Commonly seen around lodge.
- Ring-tailed Pigeon** *Patagioenas caribaea*: c10 in Ecclesdown and 6 in gardens on final day.
- White-winged Dove** *Zenaida asiatica*: Common around the lodge.
- Zenaida Dove** *Zenaida aurita zenaida*: Fairly common around the lodge.
- Mourning Dove** *Zenaida macroura*: 1 seen on road and trail.

- Common Ground Dove** *Columbina passerina jamaicensis*: 2-3 pairs seen on trails.
- Caribbean Dove** *Leptotila jamaicensis jamaicensis*: c6 seen with a pair walking on the waterfall trail.
- Crested Quail Dove** *Geotrygon versicolor*: 1 superb bird seen well on the Hardwar Gap in Blue Mountains.
- Ruddy Quail Dove** *Geotrygon montana montana*: Seen frequently flying up from trails.
- Olive-throated Parakeet** *Aratinga nana nana*: Seen in small flocks c6 around the lodge
- Yellow-billed Parrot** *Amazona collaria*: c20 in a flock from Ecclesdown Road and seen well.
- Black-billed Parrot** *Amazona agilis*: 4 from Ecclesdown Road and seen very well indeed.
- Mangrove Cuckoo** *Coccyzus minor*: 3 seen over week all along tower road. Superb views.
- Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo** *Coccyzus pluvialis*: 1 seen very well along the tower road.
- Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo** *Coccyzus vetula*: 1 seen very well in Blue Mountains.
- Smooth-billed Ani** *Crotophaga ani*: small flock c6 seen around the grounds.
- Barn Owl** *Tyto alba furcata*: 4 seen on first night and again in daylight in tower road fields.
- Jamaican Owl** *Pseudoscops grammicus*: 1 seen on the final night. Super bird to finish with.
- Northern Potoo** *Nyctibius jamaicensis jamaicensis*: Superb views each evening at the lodge on same telegraph pole. Hunting moths using outside light. Also one at roost. Fantastic views.
- White-collared Swift** *Streptoprocne zonaris pallidifrons*: Fairly regular in small numbers, c70 over coastal pools in evening.
- Antillean Palm-Swift** *Tachornis phoenicobia phoenicobia*: Seen on way to Blue Mountains.
- Jamaican Mango** *Anthracothorax mango*: Seen around lodge frequently but not common; feeding on cactus.
- Vervain Hummingbird** *Mellisuga minima*: This tiny gem was common throughout. Very confiding when perched in garden, particularly after rain.
- Red-billed Streamertail** *Trochilus polytmus*: Common in grounds. Fantastic views by gate to grounds.
- Black-billed Streamertail** *Trochilus scitulus*: A superb male from Ecclesdown road.
- Jamaican Tody** *Todus Todus*: Seen frequently throughout but tiny and unobtrusive.
- Belted Kingfisher** *Ceryle alcyon*: 2 seen over river on way to Blue Mountains.
- Jamaican Woodpecker** *Melanerpes radiolatus*: Common throughout and very vocal.
- Jamaican Elaenia** *Myiopagis cotta*: 1 seen in Blue Mountains.
- Jamaican Pewee** *Contopus pallidus*: c3 and very good views in Blue Mountains.
- Sad Flycatcher** *Myiarchus barbirostris*: Fairly common c5 seen at various sites.
- Rufous-tailed Flycatcher** *Myiarchus validus*: 1 seen very well in Blue Mountains and on waterfall trail.
- Stolid Flycatcher** *Myiarchus stolidus*: 1 seen at reservoir and outside lodge.
- Loggerhead Kingbird** *Tyrannus caudifasciatus jamaicensis*: Common around grounds.
- Jamaican Becard** *Pachyramphus niger*: 3 females seen well on trails.
- Jamaican Vireo** *Vireo modestus*: Fairly common throughout and very vocal.
- Blue Mountain Vireo** *Vireo osburni*: 1 seen very well in Blue Mountains.
- Black-whiskered Vireo** *Vireo altiloquus altiloquus*: Seen well on trails, very vocal.
- Jamaican Crow** *Corvus jamaicensis*: 5 seen flying over forest from Ecclesdown Road.
- Cave Swallow** *Petrochelidon fulva poeciloma*: Common over coastal pools.
- Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica erythrogaster*: A few over coastal pools.
- White-eyed Thrush** *Turdus jamaicensis*: A few seen in Blue Mountains and Ecclesdown.
- White-chinned Thrush** *Turdus aurantius*: Seen throughout and around lodge but quite shy.
- Northern Mockingbird** *Mimus polyglottos*: Common in grounds.
- Black-and-white Warbler** *Mniotilta varia*: c6 seen throughout week. Distinctive behaviour hugging tree limbs almost nuthatch like.

- Common Yellowthroat** *Geothlypis trichas*: 3 seen. Always quite skulking.
- Arrowhead Warbler** *Dendroica pharetra*: 2 seen very well in the Blue Mountains.
- American Redstart** *Setophaga ruticilla*: Commonly seen throughout with some stunning males seen. Often sallying for insects.
- Northern Parula** *Parula americana*: Commonly seen throughout.
- Yellow Warbler** *Dendroica petechia eoa*: 1 seen very well near beach in coastal mangrove area.
- Black-throated Blue Warbler** *Dendroica caerulescens*: 3 or 4 seen around grounds.
- Prairie Warbler** *Dendroica discolor*: Quite common and seen frequently.
- Yellow-throated Warbler** *Setophaga dominica*: 2 seen on the waterfall trail.
- Bananaquit** *Coereba flaveola flaveola*: Common throughout.
- Jamaican Spindalis** *Spindalis nigricephala*: Seen frequently on trails and in mountains.
- Yellow-faced Grassquit** *Tiaris olivaceus*: Seen well just outside the lodge.
- Black-faced Grassquit** *Tiaris bicolor*: Seen a few times but unobtrusive.
- Yellow-shouldered Grassquit** *Loxipasser anoxanthus*: Seen in Blue Mountains and better from lodge trail.
- Greater Antillean Bullfinch** *Loxigilla violacea ruficollis*: 4 seen well in Blue Mountains.
- Orangequit** *Eucoerba campestris*: Seen frequently including around the lodge.
- Jamaican Blackbird** *Nesopsar nigerrimus*: Just 1 bird flicking leaves from a bromeliad in Blue Mountains.
- Greater Antillean Grackle** *Quiscalus niger crassirostris*: Very common and noisy in grounds.
- Shiny Cowbird** *Molothrus bonariensis*: 1 seen from the lodge.
- Jamaican Oriole** *Icterus leucopteryx*: Seen frequently and in garden.
- Jamaican Euphonia** *Euphonia jamaica*: Seen in the garden, trails and mountains. Quite common.

Heard Only: **Rufous-throated Solitaire** *Myadestes genibarbis*

Other wildlife:

Small Indian Mongoose *Herpestes javanicus*: Seen frequently, introduced and a problem.

Cane Toad *Bufo marinus*: Seen in the garden of lodge, introduced and a problem.

Jamaican Giant Anole *Anolis garmani* – Seen frequently. The largest anole seen. Bright yellow throat fan.

Jamaican Grey Anole *Anolis lineatopus*: Smaller and grey with paler throat fan.

Soldier Crab (Caribbean Hermit Crab) *Coenobita clypeatus*: Seen a few times and we learned about their amazing life cycle.

Praying Mantis – 2 seen.

Many stunning butterflies seen and those identified were:

Malachite Butterfly *Siproeta stelenes*

Jamaican White Peacock *Anartia jatrophae jamaicensis*

Gulf Fritillary *Agraulis vanillae*

The Andraemon Swallowtail *Papilio andraemon*



Red-billed Streamertail



Black-billed Streamertail



Orangequit



Brown Pelican and Laughing Gulls



American Yellow Warbler