

Jamaica – An Island of Endemics

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 - 11 February 2020



Northern Potoo



Reservoir at Green Castle



Terrestrial Hermit Crab

Report & Images by Andy Smith



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Tour participants: Andy Smith (Leader), Dwayne & Roger (local guides) with 15 Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Monday 3rd February

We arrived at Norman Manley Airport, Kingston in the late afternoon and after negotiating airport formalities we emerged into the warm Jamaican evening, meeting our driver Trevor and began the drive to Green Castle. The journey took us around Kingston Harbour (the seventh largest natural harbour in the world according to Trevor), through parts of the city itself and then up and across the hills towards the north coast. We arrived at Green Castle at about 9pm to a warm and efficient welcome. We quickly settled in and ate a delicious late dinner before retiring for the night full of anticipation for the days ahead.

Day 2

Tuesday 4th February

Rain early morning then overcast with some sunny breaks; humid, warm and breezy.

It was a rainy dawn after a wet and windy night. We assembled at first light for a cup of coffee and watched for a while from the terrace. The first visible birds were Jamaican Mangos and Red-billed Streamertails coming into the sugar feeders. At first they were just fleeting dark shapes but as the light improved, we began to see them more clearly. Soon other birds began to appear in the garden too: first some Greater Antillean Grackles and a White-crowned Pigeon, then a couple of Zenaida Dove and an American Kestrel.

After a short while, the rain eased off and with local guide Dwayne, we set off for a short introductory stroll. Birds began to appear thick and fast and in a short space of time we enjoyed good views of Northern Mockingbird, Jamaican Spindalis, Loggerhead Kingbird, American Redstart, Northern Parula, two superb Jamaican Todies and the ubiquitous Bananaquit (here with a black throat). Also very notable was an impressive Northern Potoo roosting in a dead tree right by the track (it was to become a regular feature of the week) and a couple of huge black and yellow hooped Frangipani Sphinx Moth caterpillars trundling around the lawn.

After breakfast back at the house and further views of the hummingbirds visiting the feeders we set off again for another walk. We soon saw a couple more Jamaican Spindalis, (striking birds indeed!) and then a handsome Jamaican Oriole, two Jamaican Woodpeckers and some Olive-throated Parakeets. Continuing further we added Sad Flycatcher, Prairie Warbler, White-chinned Thrush and Orangequit to the list and some of the group got brief views of a Jamaican Vireo.

We were back at the house about noon and after lunch and a siesta, we set off again down the main entrance track. A tiny Vervain Hummingbird visiting flowers in the front garden started things off well and although the forest was much quieter than in the morning we eventually hit a jackpot of sorts with close and prolonged views of a stunning Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo, a special bird indeed and a great finale to a thoroughly enjoyable first day!

Day 3

Wednesday 5th February

Sunny with scattered cloud in the morning, more overcast in the afternoon; warm and breezy.

We left Green Castle at 5am we drove up into the scenic Blue Mountains. At just after 7am we arrived at a spot called Pack House where we met up with Roger our guide for the day. There was some nice forest here and in an hour or so birding from the road we saw Jamaican Pewee, Rufous-tailed Flycatcher, Jamaican Elaenia, White-

eyed Thrush, Red-billed Streamertail, Jamaican Tody and lots more. One of the stars of the show was a lone Jamaican Blackbird which was a striking iridescent blue-black in colour and which spent its time hanging onto vertical tree trunks peeling off bark in its search for insect prey.

From Pack House, we drove a little higher to a place called Section where a short walk to allow the bus to negotiate a particularly steep stretch of road brought us excellent views of a pair of Jamaican Spindalis, several Jamaican Euphonias, a Prairie Warbler and a Jamaican Oriole. We ate our picnic breakfast at an overlook where a Louisiana Waterthrush and a Jamaican Woodpecker kept the birding interest going and then took a lengthy stroll along the road through another lovely area of forest with extensive views of the mountains and valleys around us. Exciting birds continued to appear and highlights as we walked included a male Orangequit hopping around in the road ahead of us, a series of neat little Arrowhead Warblers, several handsome Ring-tailed Pigeons, a couple of unobtrusive Blue Mountain Vireos and a stunning Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo. Meanwhile, an impressive Giant Anole loafing on a mossy tree branch reminded us that there was more to these forests than just birds.

At the end of the morning we drove on further up to the pass of Hardwar Gap where we could see Kingston far below to the south. Here we ate a tasty lunch brought out to us from a nearby restaurant and then began our journey back out of the mountains. One bird we had missed during the morning was the elusive Crested Quail Dove, so we made another stop at Pack House on the way back down. Acting on his excellent local knowledge, Roger led us a short way up a steep path to a squatter's hut in the forest where, sure enough, there were two Crested Quail Doves feeding unobtrusively in the yard on rice discarded from the kitchen. We approached them carefully and were rewarded with fantastic close-up views of these very beautifully marked pigeons. Happy indeed with this wonderful finale to a great day's birding we scrambled back down to the road and the waiting bus.

Day 4

Thursday 6th February

Sunny at first with scattered cloud building up during the morning; breezy and very warm.

We awoke to a beautiful clear, sunny dawn and after an early coffee we took a pre-breakfast walk along the trails close to the house. Activity was good and we saw a wide range of the local familiar species plus another Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo, a Shiny Cowbird and our first good views of the pretty little endemic Yellow-shouldered Grassquit.

After breakfast back at the house we set out again. White-collared Swifts swooped around overhead, a male Vervain Hummingbird sang from an exposed perch in the garden and a pair of Green-rumped Parrotlets played hide and seek with us in the tree-tops. It was hotter now and the trails were quieter than earlier but as we progressed we saw a couple of Black-faced Grassquits, a Jamaican Elaenia, a pair of Common Ground Doves and a smart Mangrove Cuckoo which showed very well for everyone.

In the mid-afternoon, after lunch and a siesta, we headed off to the reservoir which is in fact a very pretty forest fringed lake about a half hours walk from the lodge. We spent a good bit of time here soaking up the scene and enjoying the various birds which included several Ruddy Ducks, a pair of Blue-winged Teals, a female Ring-necked Duck, a Pied-billed Grebe and a couple of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. Several vocal Smooth-billed

Anis and a flock of Scaly-breasted Munias added further interest whilst a Common Yellowthroat chipped away noisily in the waterside vegetation but remained unseen for most.

On the way back to the lodge some of us saw a female Red-billed Streamertail flying rather oddly. She was bobbing around from side to side in front of a patch of vegetation about three metres above the ground. Close inspection showed that she was mobbing a Giant Anole which was sitting very unobtrusively in amongst the leaves. When she approached him closely he snapped at her! It was a great little interaction to watch; presumably the Anole is a nest predator of the Streamertail.

Day 5

Friday 7th February

Sunny with scattered cloud; warm, humid and breezy

Away in the bus at 5am again, we headed eastwards along the north coast through Annotto Bay and Buff Bay to Port Antonio where we made a brief comfort stop at a beachside petrol station just after first light and saw a couple of Magnificent Frigatebirds, a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and a Little Blue Heron. Picking up Roger en-route, we continued on our way and some little distance beyond Boston Bay we turned up and inland along the Ecclesdown Road and into the John Crow Mountains.

It was certainly a beautiful area with some extensive patches of forest and some lovely views and in the course of the morning's exploration walking stretches of the road, we encountered an excellent range of birds. Top of the bill were the two parrot species and whilst we only saw them in flight, during the course of the morning we eventually managed to get reasonable views of both Yellow-billed and the less numerous Black-billed. Other highlights included two Chestnut-bellied Cuckoos, a pair of Jamaican Becards, a very confiding Jamaican Pewee, a series of Greater Antillean Bullfinches and several delightful Black-billed Streamertails. Warblers were much in evidence too and alongside the usual American Redstarts and Northern Parulas we saw Cape May, Black-throated Blue and Yellow-throated Warblers.

At the end of the morning, we headed back to Boston Bay for a delicious Jerk Chicken lunch and then began the journey back towards Green Castle. We made a couple of stops along the way, first at San San, where a brief walk along a road through the forest produced White-eyed Thrush, Jamaican Tody and a smart Caribbean Dove and then a stop at the Spanish River Bridge a little before Buff Bay. Here we were treated to a lovely views of an excellent variety of waterbirds including five Glossy Ibis, several Common Gallinules and Blue-winged Teals, four Black-necked Stilts, two Greater Yellowlegs and a very handsome Tri-coloured Heron. A group of Royal Terns on a sandbank at the river mouth and a couple of Magnificent Frigatebirds overhead completed the picture and concluded another enjoyable day.

Day 6

Saturday 8th February

Sunny with scattered cloud; warm, humid and breezy with one brief rain shower mid-am.

We were away from the lodge at 6am and drove a short distance through Robin's Bay to a place called Strawberry Fields and took a walk out to a rocky headland overlooking the sea. The morning was just getting going. Northern Mockingbirds sang from the scrub, Loggerhead Kingbirds and Kestrels perched up on the trackside wires, a few White-crowned Pigeons flew overhead and Bananaquits twittered in the trees.

Our quarry was White-tailed Tropicbird and scanning from the cliff-top we soon found some; tern-like white specks far off-shore. Everyone saw them but they were really too distant to fully appreciate. Then, as we watched, they began coming closer. After a while you could see their amazing tail streamers and the black markings on their wings, then their orange-yellow bills, then finally their neat black masks and then they were right in front of us at eye-level just beyond the cliff edge. What gloriously beautiful birds! There were eight in all, paired up and for five minutes or so they cruised around executing the most beautiful aerial ballet before breaking up and drifting out to sea again. Wow! What a treat!

Elated, we headed back towards the bus noting a pair of Yellow-faced Grassquits and a Vervain Hummingbird en-route and then drove back through Robin's Bay to Jack's Bay beach where we ate our packed breakfast whilst a couple of Brown Pelicans cruised over the surf. We sat out a brief rain shower in the shelter of a dilapidated wooden beach structure and then took a look at a pool amongst the mangroves behind the beach. Here we had good, if brief, views of six West-Indian Whistling Ducks before they disappeared into the vegetation and noted good numbers of Blue-winged Teals plus a couple of Northern Shovelers, two Least Grebes, several Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and a couple of smart Yellow Warblers. We finished the morning at a nearby stone tower dating from Spanish colonial days where a roosting Barn Owl peered out at us from its regular day-time roost.

Post lunch and a siesta, some of us took a walk back down to Jack's Bay beach, ostensibly for a bit of snorkelling. The walk produced a number of the now familiar birds plus notably, a Belted Kingfisher along the seashore. After dinner, we headed out for a night walk with Dwayne and after some little effort we all succeeded in getting excellent views of Jamaican Owls! We saw two different individuals and heard three more including a juvenile. Fantastic!

Day 7

Sunday 9th February

Sunny with scattered cloud; warm, humid and breezy.

Out before breakfast as usual we walked up past the roosting Potoo and this morning he had his eye open! He was alive! A little further on we found a Greater Antillean Bullfinch, a Mangrove Cuckoo, a Rufous-tailed Flycatcher, a Jamaican Vireo and a wonderfully confiding Tody.

With breakfast eaten and more close encounters with the Jamaican Mango coming into the dining room sugar feeder, we headed out again for our last walk with Dwayne. We paused first to enjoy the Vervain Hummingbirds and Red-billed Streamertails in the garden then made our way to an area of scrubby forest where Dwayne had recently seen a pair of Stolid Flycatchers. Our luck was in and after a short search we found them and had some lovely views during which we could appreciate how they differed from the more common Sad Flycatcher.

In the late afternoon some of the group went out with Andy for a walk along the Waterfall Trail. A satisfying tally of birds during a very pleasant stroll included a couple of Caribbean Doves, a pair of Jamaican Euphonias, a Prairie Warbler, a Sad Flycatcher, a Jamaican Elaenia a female Yellow-shouldered Grassquit and an all too brief Swainson's Warbler.

Day 8

Monday 10th February

Sunny with scattered cloud; warm, humid and breezy.

Most of us headed out for a pre-breakfast walk down to the Reservoir. The light was perfect from our vantage point and we enjoyed lovely views of Ring-necked and Ruddy Ducks, Pied-billed and Least Grebes, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Spotted Sandpiper and a surprise Osprey. The Yellowthroat was still around and showed beautifully in the shoreline vegetation and on the way back to the lodge we found another Stolid Flycatcher to add to yesterday's sighting.

The rest of the morning was given over to packing up and preparing to leave and after an early lunch we said our goodbyes and thankyou's and boarded the bus for the journey to Kingston airport. The route took us along the scenic Wag River Valley and about halfway we stopped at the very pleasant Castleton Botanic Gardens. Our hope here was to see Jamaican Crow, the last of the island's endemic bird species. We were in luck; a short stroll into the gardens and there they were, two smart Jamaican Crows; it was almost as if they were waiting for us! Content, we returned to the bus and continued on our way.

A little later, we arrived at the airport. Mourning Doves in the car park provided a last new bird for the list and then we were into the airport buildings. The check-in and other formalities were quick, friendly and efficient and after a short delay due to bad weather in Europe we got away and arrived safely back at Gatwick more or less on time the following morning.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Richard and his staff at Green Castle for making our stay there so comfortable; to Dwayne and Roger for their expert, friendly and enthusiastic guiding and to Trevor for his driving. Thanks also to the various members of the group for their part in what was a very enjoyable trip!

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; h = heard only; E = endemic; N = near endemic; I = introduced)

	Common name	Scientific name	May						
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>			2	7	40		4
2	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					2		
3	Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>			1				4
4	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>			10				11
5	West Indian Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna arborea</i>					8		
6	Least Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus dominicus</i>					2		1
7	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>			1				2
8	White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus catesbyi</i>					8		
9	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				5			
10	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea bancrofti</i>			2	1	10		2
11	Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>				1			
12	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		100	1	30+	5		50+
13	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>				1			
14	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				3			3
15	Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>				1			
16	Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>				3			1
17	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>		1		2			2
18	Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>					4		6
19	Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>				10	2		3
20	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	20	30	15	30	12	10	25
21	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>							1
22	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis jamaicensis</i>	1	2	1	4		1	2
23	Common Gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata cerceris</i>				18	1		2
24	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>			4	4			2
25	Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>				4	1		
26	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>							1
27	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>					7		1
28	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>							1
29	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>					1		1

	Common name	Scientific name	May							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
30	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>		1	1			2		2
31	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>				2				
32	Laughing Gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>								12
33	Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>				9	2			75
34	Cabot's Tern	<i>Thalasseus acufflavidus</i>								15
35	Feral Rock Dove I	<i>Columba livia</i>				2				5
36	White-crowned Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas leucocephala</i>	6		1	3	10			
37	Ring-tailed Pigeon - E	<i>Patagioenas caribaea</i>		10		2				2
38	Common Ground Dove - E	<i>Columbina passerina jamaicensis</i>		3	4	1	10	5		5
39	Crested Quail-Dove - E	<i>Geotrygon versicolor</i>		2						
40	Ruddy Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon montana montana</i>	1		3	1	4	5		
41	Caribbean Dove - E	<i>Leptotila jamaicensis jamaicensis</i>			2	1	2	5		3
42	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>								5
43	Zenaida Dove	<i>Zenaida aurita zenaida</i>	8	10	2	3	5	5		8
44	White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>	1		6	2	5			3
45	Smooth-billed Ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>		5	5	15	10			10
46	Mangrove Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus minor</i>	1h		1		1	1		
47	Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo - E	<i>Coccyzus pluvialis</i>		1		2				
48	Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo - E	<i>Coccyzus vetula</i>	1	1	1			1		
49	American Barn Owl	<i>Tyto furcata</i>					1			
50	Jamaican Owl - E	<i>Pseudoscops grammicus</i>					2+3h			
51	Northern Potoo - E	<i>Nyctibius jamaicensis jamaicensis</i>	1	1	1	1h	1	1		1
52	White-collared Swift	<i>Streptoprocne zonaris</i>		40	25		1			
53	Antillean Palm Swift	<i>Tachornis phoenicobia</i>		1						
54	Jamaican Mango - E	<i>Anthracothorax mango</i>	6	2	3	1	2	3		1
55	Red-billed Streamertail - E	<i>Trochilus polytmus</i>	10	15	25	2	6	10		5
56	Black-billed Streamertail - E	<i>Trochilus scitulus</i>				12				
57	Vervain Hummingbird - N	<i>Mellisuga minima</i>	3	2	4	2	2	2		2
58	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>					1			1
59	Jamaican Tody - E	<i>Todus todus</i>	4	4	1	2		3		3
60	Jamaican Woodpecker - E	<i>Melanerpes radiolatus</i>	2	4+2h	1+2h	1+2h	2+2h	4+3h		3h
61	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	2	3	1	4	7	1		1

	Common name	Scientific name	May						
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10
62	Black-billed Amazon - E	<i>Amazona agilis</i>				10			
63	Yellow-billed Amazon - E	<i>Amazona collaria</i>				40			
64	Green-rumped Parrotlet - I	<i>Forpus passerinus</i>		2	2		1		
65	Olive-throated Parakeet - E	<i>Eupsittula nana nana</i>	12		8	8	4	5	5
66	Jamaican Elaenia - E	<i>Myiopagis cotta</i>		1	1+1h			1	
67	Jamaican Pewee - E	<i>Contopus pallidus</i>		4		1			
68	Loggerhead Kingbird - E	<i>Tyrannus caudifasciatus jamaicensis</i>	6	4	2	10	8	1	4
69	Sad Flycatcher - E	<i>Myiarchus barbirostris</i>	3	1	1	2	2	1	2
70	Rufous-tailed Flycatcher - E	<i>Myiarchus validus</i>		5	1		1	2	1
71	Stolid Flycatcher - N	<i>Myiarchus stolidus</i>						2	1
72	Jamaican Becard - E	<i>Pachyramphus niger</i>		1		2			
73	Jamaican Vireo - E	<i>Vireo modestus</i>	2+2h	2	2+3h	3h	1+4h	3+5h	2+3h
74	Blue Mountain Vireo - E	<i>Vireo osburni</i>		3					
75	Jamaican Crow - E	<i>Corvus jamaicensis</i>							2
76	Cave Swallow - E	<i>Petrochelidon fulva poeciloma</i>					50		
77	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	5	1	2	6	4	2	3
78	Common Starling - I	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>							2
79	Rufous-throated Solitaire	<i>Myadestes genibarbis</i>		1+4h		1h			
80	White-eyed Thrush - E	<i>Turdus jamaicensis</i>		4		1			
81	White-chinned Thrush - E	<i>Turdus aurantius</i>	3	35	3	4	5	4	2
82	Scaly-breasted Munia - I	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>			10				
83	Jamaican Euphonia - E	<i>Euphonia jamaica</i>	h	3	1	4		2	1
84	Jamaican Spindalis - E	<i>Spindalis nigricephala</i>	8	12	4	2	1		
85	Jamaican Oriole - N	<i>Icterus leucopteryx</i>	2	2	5	2	3	2	2
86	Jamaican Blackbird - E	<i>Nesopsar nigerrimus</i>		2					
87	Shiny Cowbird	<i>Molothrus bonariensis</i>			1		5		
88	Greater Antillean Grackle - E	<i>Quiscalus niger crassirostris</i>	20	15	15	20	15	5	6
89	Ovenbird	<i>Seiurus aurocapilla</i>			1	1	1		1
90	Worm-eating Warbler	<i>Helmintheros vermivorum</i>							1
91	Louisiana Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia motacilla</i>		1					
92	Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>		3	1	1	1	3	
93	Swainson's Warbler	<i>Limnothlypis swainsonii</i>						1	

	Common name	Scientific name	May						
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10
94	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>			1				1
95	Arrowhead Warbler - E	<i>Setophaga pharetra</i>		6					
96	American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	8	10	12	10	8	5	8
97	Cape May Warbler	<i>Setophaga tigrina</i>				1		1	
98	Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>	4	2	5	3	3	5	5
99	Mangrove Warbler - N	<i>Setophaga petechia eoa</i>					5		
100	Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>	1	4	1	6			2
101	Myrtle Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>				1			
102	Yellow-throated Warbler	<i>Setophaga dominica</i>				1			
103	Prairie Warbler	<i>Setophaga discolor</i>	1	1	2			1	1
104	Bananaquit - E	<i>Coereba flaveola flaveola</i>	15	25	30	30	30	35	30
105	Yellow-faced Grassquit	<i>Tiaris olivaceus</i>					10	2	1
106	Black-faced Grassquit	<i>Tiaris bicolor</i>	3	1	2		2		2
107	Yellow-shouldered Grassquit - E	<i>Loxipasser anoxanthus</i>	h	1	4	2		1	2
108	Greater Antillean Bullfinch	<i>Loxigilla violacea ruficollis</i>		3		2		2	
109	Orangequit - E	<i>Euneornis campestris</i>	6	25	8	10	6	1	3

Reptiles & amphibians,

Jamaica Giant Anole - E, *Anolis garmani*Cane Toad - I, *Rhinella marina*

Butterflies (included)

Goldrim Swallowtail, *Battus polydamus*Bahaman Swallowtail, *Papilio andraemon*Jamaican White Peacock, *Anartia jatrophae*Gulf Fritillary, *Agraulis vanilla*Julia, *Dryas Julia*Apricot Sulphur, *Phoebé argente*Lyside Sulphur, *Kircogonia lyside*Jamaican Silverdrop, *Epargyreus anteus*Jamaican Zebra Longwing, *Heliconius charathonia*.

Other notable sightings included:

Javan Mongoose, *Herpestes javanicus*Jamaican Giant Anole, *Anolis garmani*Cane Toad, *Rhinella marina*

Terrestrial Hermit Crab sp.

Frangipani Sphinx Moth, *Pseudosphinx tetrio*.