# Jamaica - An Island of Endemics!

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th - 20th February 2024



Jamaican Owl by Nigel Erlynne



Yellow-billed Amazon by Andy Smith



Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo by Andy Smith



Jamaican Woodpecker by Andy Smith

Tour report and photos by Andy Smith



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

**GU34 3HJ** 

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

Tour participants: Andy Smith (Naturetrek leader), Dwayne Swaby (local leader), Raymond (driver) with 15 Naturetrek clients.

## **Summary**

During an action-packed week on the beautiful island of Jamaica we explored forest, farmland and coasts, visited the Blue Mountains and the John Crow Mountains in the east, touched on the edge of the remote Cockpit Country in the west and experienced a wonderful cross-section of Jamaica's scenery and wildlife. The 28 currently-recognised endemic bird species were high on most peoples' target lists and in the end we saw all of them, from streamertails, todies and vireos to Crested Quail Dove, Jamaican Woodpecker, both species of parrot and the dinky little Arrowhead Warbler. Some played harder to get than others, and the excitement at finally finding the subtle Jamaican Pewee was out of all proportion to the glamour of the bird itself. Others, however, were just plain thrilling to encounter, including the mighty Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, the extraordinary Lizard Cuckoo and the wonderful Jamaican Owl.

Beyond the endemics, tiny Vervain Hummingbirds, noisy Olive-throated Parakeets, enigmatic Northern Potoos and bizarre Smooth-billed Anis were just some of the birds that added further spice to our explorations, and we all enjoyed the various colourful North American warblers that illuminated every forest excursion. Along the coast we encountered a variety of herons, waders and other wetland species, along with Brown Pelicans, occasional White-tailed Tropicbirds and the ever-present Magnificent Frigatebirds hanging effortlessly in the air above. With the climate and the lushness of the vegetation came a host of colourful butterflies too and a few good reptiles, topped by the bright green Jamaican Giant Anole.

All of this, along with the rich and laid-back Jamaican culture that we found ourselves immersed in, made for a very memorable and highly enjoyable week.

#### Day 1

# **Monday 12th February**

After a day in the air, we arrived at Kingston Airport at sunset, met with our driver Raymond and drove through Kingston and over the mountains to our hotel on the north coast. We arrived at about 9.30pm and as it had been a long day, everyone sensibly retired to their beds.

#### Day 2

# **Tuesday 13th February**

Sunny with scattered cloud in the morning; overcast, wet and breezy in the afternoon; warm and humid throughout. Northern Mockingbirds, Greater Antillean Grackles and Cave Swallows greeting the dawn at our sea-view hotel made for a good start to the day and after breakfast on the terrace, during which a White-tailed Tropicbird flew past offshore, we set out for the morning. We drove a short distance eastwards along the coast through the small town of Port Maria to a place called Llanrumney, an area of forest, scrub, grassy paddocks and old ruins. It was all very pleasant and interesting and gave us an excellent introduction to birding in Jamaica. During an action-packed morning, we saw a lovely selection of birds. Highlights included Jamaican Woodpecker, Jamaican Crow, Jamaican Oriole, Jamaican Euphonia, Greater Antillean Bullfinch, White-collared Swift, Mangrove Cuckoo, Common Ground Dove and a quartet of colourful American warblers: American Redstart, Northern Parula, Prairie Warbler and Black-and-white Warbler. Happy and satisfied we returned to the hotel for lunch.

After a siesta, we set out again back to Llanrumney to walk a different trail. En route we checked out a stretch of shore at Port Maria and found 14 Royal Terns roosting on some old wooden pilings, and enjoyed great views of Magnificent Frigatebirds cruising around effortlessly overhead. In typical tropical fashion, cloud had built up through the course of the day, and as we arrived at Llanrumney it began to rain. This inevitably reduced activity, but nevertheless we added Zenaida Dove, American Kestrel, Orangequit, Jamaican Vireo and the stunning Jamaican Spindalis to our lists and concluded an excellent first day.

#### Day 3

## Wednesday 14th February

Sunny with scattered cloud; warm and breezy.

Away before dawn, we drove eastwards along the coast through Annotto Bay and Buff Bay and then up into the Blue Mountains. A short roadside comfort stop brought sightings of a Merlin and a male Black-throated Blue Warbler, and then a little after dawn we reached our first destination at Padhouse. During an action-packed hour and a half here, walking along the road through a fine stand of forest, we saw an excellent range of birds including Jamaican Tody, Red-billed Streamertail, Jamaican Spindalis, Orangequit and both White-chinned and the less common White-eyed Thrush. Top targets here were Jamaican Blackbird and Crested Quail Dove and we found both, the Blackbird clambering around on tree trunks investigating epiphytic bromeliads and ferns in typical fashion, and the Quail Doves (four of them) feeding on discarded rice around a squatter's shack. The Quail Doves were striking and beautiful-looking creatures, and it was a real treat to be able to watch them at such close range. An Ovenbird and a smart male Black-throated Blue Warbler added further class here.

A little further up the road, near the settlement of Section, we stopped for our packed breakfast (very welcome!) and then took another walk along the road through some more excellent quality forest, with occasional views out across the beautiful Blue Mountains. Birds here included Jamaican Vireos and Jamaican Euphonias, a pair of Jamaican Becards, our first neat little Arrowhead Warblers, a few fleeting Ring-tailed Pigeons and an amazing Lizard Cuckoo. Eventually we reached Hardwar Gap and stopped for a delicious pre-ordered lunch, brought out to us by a man on a motorbike. We ate at the roadside sitting on a high curb and admired the views all the way down to Kingston far below. Post lunch, we explored a little further and added a Black-throated Green Warbler to the list (the only one of the trip) and finally found our last big target of the day in the form of a Blue Mountain Vireo, a subtle little fellow which eventually showed really well for everyone.

From here we began the journey back to Gallina. A roadside Crested Quail Dove to add to this morning's ones was a bonus as we wound down out of the mountains. At a comfort break at Buff Bay we enjoyed good views of White-crowned Pigeons and a White-winged Dove, before finishing the day as we arrived back at the hotel with a quartet of Brown Pelicans flying in formation low overhead.

## Day 4

# **Thursday 15th February**

Sunny with scattered cloud; hot, humid and breezy.

Another early start found us, after a very beautiful sunrise, down the coast at a place called Strawberry Fields. We walked through the village, past gardens and though grassland, scrub and patches of forest out to a headland where we hoped to see some White-tailed Tropicbirds. With these we were out of luck: we couldn't see any near or far,

but the walk to the headland and back was very pleasant and produced a good range of other birds. These included some great views of Loggerhead Kingbirds, Smooth-billed Anis, Yellow-faced Grassquits and Bananaquits, plus a Jamaican Woodpecker enjoying a patriotic breakfast of Ackee, the national fruit. We ate our own breakfast back in the village in a garden of a friend of Dawyne's where a Prairie Warbler, a pair of Orangequits and a flock of Olive-throated Parakeets put in appearances, and Turkey Vultures jinked close overhead.

Post breakfast we explored a couple of areas at nearby Jack's Bay. On one marshy pool we found 45 Blue-winged Teals, a Least Grebe with a juvenile, a Glossy Ibis, a Common Gallinule and a very handsome Northern Jacana (fantastic toes!). At another pool in amongst some mangroves we added sightings of Yellow-crowned Night Herons, Least and Spotted Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts, a Northern Waterthrush and a gorgeous male Mangrove Warbler.

We finished the morning by the shore at Annotto Bay, where some old concrete pilings out in the water hosted 50-odd Royal Terns, five Magnificent Frigatebirds, eight Sanderlings, a Ruddy Turnstone and a lone Brown Pelican. Back at Galina it was lunch and then a welcome afternoon at leisure. Then, after an early dinner, we headed over to Llanrumney to try to find a Jamaican Owl. We put in a good bit of effort at a couple of spots but apart from a few bats and some fireflies we were out of luck. We'd have to try again.

### Day 5

## Friday 16th February

Sunny with scattered cloud; hot and humid; breezy in the afternoon.

Away before dawn again, we drove along the coast to Fair Prospect in the far east of the island and then up the famous Ecclesdown Road into the John Crow Mountains. At around 8.00am, at a good spot deep in the forested hills, we stopped for breakfast. It was hard to concentrate on food, however, as exciting birds kept popping up. First came some nicely-perched Black-billed Parrots, resplendent in their emerald green, then a Jamaican Elaenia and a couple of Todies, next both Sad and Rufous-tailed Flycatchers more or less together, and then two diminutive Vervain Hummingbirds feeding at close range on some *Lantana* flowers. Meanwhile, more Parrots flew over, plus several flocks of Ring-tailed Pigeons. It was all great fun and led to a protracted meal.

Finally we set off walking up the road to see what else we could find. It was really top-quality forest that we were in, and during the course of the morning we enjoyed a number of notable sightings, including a mighty Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, a brief Lizard Cuckoo, several stunning Black-billed Streamertails, a flock of 35 or so Yellow-bellied Parrots (including some perched), a male Jamaican Becard, a Jamaican Mango (hummingbird not fruit!), a few Arrowhead Warblers and a variety of other now-familiar species.

At the end of the morning, as the heat rose and the activity fell, we dropped back down to the coast and ate lunch at a jerk restaurant in Boston Bay. After this we returned to Gallina, stopping at a place called San-San where we had a short walk though some tall lowland forest and saw a couple of Caribbean Doves, a Ruddy Quail Dove, a perched Ring-tailed Pigeon and both White-chinned and White-eyed Thrushes. Our last stop was at Spanish Bridge near Port Antonio. Despite being on the main coast road and consequently busy with vehicle traffic, the bridge provided a good view up and down the river, and here we found a couple of Belted Kingfishers, a Green Heron, a Snowy Egret, a few Little Blue Herons, some Great Egrets and a Spotted Sandpiper.

#### Day 6

## Saturday 17th February

Sunny with scattered cloud; hot and humid; breezy in the afternoon.

A more leisurely start this morning, during which several White-tailed Tropicbirds were seen offshore. Post breakfast we set off, westwards this time into new territory. Our destination was a national forest reserve at Murphy Hill. During a good stroll here through forest and clearings, we saw an Arrowhead Warbler dispatching a large green caterpillar, an Ovenbird, a Yellow-throated Warbler, a Ruddy Quail Dove which zoomed past us at breakneck speed, both Sad and Rufous-tailed Flycatchers and a pair of Chestnut-billed Cuckoos skulking in the treetops. In one clearing an immaculate male American Kestrel perched on a wire, allowing us some lovely views of it - a really handsome little falcon!

On our way back to Gallina we stopped briefly at Ochos Rios where we found a collection of Little Blue Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets and Brown Pelicans along the shore plus 20 or more tiny Antillean Palm Swifts zooming around the tops of some palm trees in a roadside park.

After lunch and a siesta we drove the short distance to Llanrumney to see what we could find. For the first half an hour or so we covered no distance, as the trees around us held a wonderful collection of warblers which included a male Black-throated Blue, a couple of Cape Mays, a Black-and-white, two Palms and a Prairie, plus the ubiquitous Northern Parulas and American Redstarts. Not bad! Walking on we added sightings of a Tody, a Jamaican Woodpecker, some Olive-throated Parakeets, two brief Green-rumped Parrotlets, a perched Vervain Hummingbird and various other bits and pieces, and concluded a satisfying day.

#### Day 7

# Sunday 18th February

Sunny with scattered cloud; hot and humid; breezy in the afternoon.

Another pre-dawn start saw us heading west again, first to a clearing in the forest above the settlement of Prospect. Under a star-twinkling sky we continued our quest for Jamaican Owls. A little playback brought responses from three, with one coming in very close. Frustratingly, it stayed hidden in deep foliage, and as the dawn advanced we reluctantly took our leave. Continuing west along the coast and then inland, our destination was Stewart Town on the edge of the Cockpit Country. We ate breakfast at the quiet crossroads in the town centre, nestled in among forest hills. Parrots were all around and as we ate we enjoyed good views of both Black-billed and Yellow-billed, perched and in flight. A Ring-tailed Pigeon sat in plain sight too, while a Grey Kingbird (the only one of the trip) hawked from the roadside wires and a superb male Black-throated Blue Warbler foraged in the police station yard. With breakfast finished, we set off for a lengthy walk. Our route was along a track through a patchwork of forest, scrub and pastureland, with extensive views of the surrounding forested hills. It was a lovely place and the birding was great. A rich range of species encountered during the course of the morning included Olive-fronted Parakeet, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Vervain Hummingbird, Red-billed Streamertail, Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Becard, Stolid Flycatcher, Worm-eating Warbler, Greater Antillean Bullfinch and Jamaican Oriole. Top highlights, though, were a male Yellow-shouldered Grassquit perched up on a low shrub, a Jamaican Pewee that finally showed itself after some extensive searching, and a Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo which foraged in the foliage only metres from us: an amazing-looking creature! Other than birds, another notable sight was a superb, bright green, Giant Anole basking on a tree trunk: Jamaica's own little green dragon!

We ate lunch back in Ochos Rios and then reached Gallina in the mid-afternoon. In the evening we drove over to Llanrumney for a very pleasant al fresco dinner among the ruins, and then did a bit more owling. This time we were in luck, and enjoyed some fabulous views of a Jamaican Owl at close range. Another superb bird and the last of Jamaica's 28 currently recognised endemics for us. This wasn't quite the end of the day though, as back at Gallina we finished things in grand style with a mighty Northern Potoo sitting atop one of the palm trees in the garden: fantastic!

#### Day 8

## **Monday 19th February**

Sunny, hot and breezy up north in the morning; overcast, warm and humid (after rain) in Kingston.

After a leisurely morning and an early lunch, we left Gallina and headed back over the hills towards Kingston. We made good time, drove past Bob Marley's house, and then visited the Kingston Botanic Gardens. Here, once again, Dwayne demonstrated the value of expert local knowledge and found us two roosting Northern Potoos and a Jamaican Owl: pretty good! Other last birds included our quartet of familiar warblers (Redstart, Parula, Black-and-white and Prairie), a lovely male Red-billed Streamertail, several smart Zenaida Doves, lots of Mockingbirds and Grackles, a pair of Saffron Finches and an introduced Yellow-naped Amazon in with a flock of Yellow-billed Parrots. Cabot's Terns and Laughing Gulls along the harbour shore on the way out to the airport were the last new birds of the trip, and then it was goodbye and thank you to Dwayne and Raymond, and into the terminal to check-in for our flight.

Everything went smoothly, our flight departed more or less on time, and we all arrived safely back at Gatwick the following morning. It had been a great trip!

Thanks to Raymond and Dawyne and the staff at Gallina Breeze for all that they did to make our visit to Jamaica so enjoyable and successful.

P.S. A quick poll at the end of the tour established Jamaican Owl as the bird of the trip, closely followed by Jamaican Tody and Lizard Cuckoo: a worthy trio!





The Blue Mountains and Jamaican Giant Anole

#### Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit <a href="https://www.naturetrek.co.uk">www.naturetrek.co.uk</a> to sign up.

#### **Social Media**

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays

www.twitter.com/naturetrektours

Instagram

www.instagram.com/naturetrek wildlife holidays

## **Species lists**

Birds (H = Heard only)

		February 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
Blue-winged Teal	Spatula discors			50					
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata			2					
Northern Potoo - E	Nyctibius jamaicensis jamaicensis	1	1	1			2	2	
White-collared Swift	Streptoprocne zonaris pallidifrons	1							
Antillean Palm Swift	Tachornis phoenicobia phoenicobia					20	8	12	
Jamaican Mango - E	Anthracothorax mango	4			1	2	1		
Vervain Hummingbird - E	Mellisuga minima minima	3	2	2	5	1	1		
Red-billed Streamertail - E	Trochilus polytmus	3	8	2		2	2	3	
Black-billed Streamertail - E	Trochilus scitulus				10				
Smooth-billed Ani	Crotophaga ani	Crotophaga ani		10		3	1		
Mangrove Cuckoo	Coccyzus minor 1								
Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo - E	Coccyzus pluvialis				1	2	1		
Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo - E	Coccyzus vetula		1		1		2		
Rock Dove - I	Columba livia domestica	10	2	2	3	20	3	20	
White-crowned Pigeon	Patagioenas leucocephala	2	4	2	2	6	3	5	
Ring-tailed Pigeon - E	Patagioenas caribaea		3		30		5		
Common Ground Dove - E	Columbina passerina jamaicensis	2	2	8	2		1		
Crested Quail-Dove - E	Geotrygon versicolor		5						
Ruddy Quail-Dove	Geotrygon montana montana				1	1			
Caribbean Dove - E	Leptotila jamaicensis jamaicensis			1	3		1h		
Zenaida Dove	Zenaida aurita zenaida	10	12	1	2	6	5	12	
White-winged Dove	Zenaida asiatica asiatica	10	1	2		2	1	15	
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto					3			
Common Gallinule	Gallinula galeata cerceris			1	1				
Least Grebe	Tachybaptus dominicus			2					
Black-necked Stilt	Himantopus mexicanus			4					
Northern Jacana	Jacana spinosa			1					

		February 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres			1				2	
Sanderling	Calidris alba rubida			8					
Least Sandpiper	Calidris minutilla			1					
Spotted Sandpiper	Actitis macularius			1	1				
Laughing Gull	Leucophaeus atricilla							30	
Royal Tern	Thalasseus maximus	14		55	10			30	
Cabot's Tern	Thalasseus acuflavidus							40	
White-tailed Tropicbird	Phaethon lepturus catesbyi	1				4		1	
Magnificent Frigatebird	Fregata magnificens	11	2	12	12	1	3	1	
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus		8	9	8		1	1	
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	Nyctanassa violacea bancrofti		3	1		1h			
Green Heron	Butorides virescens			1				1	
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	20	20	15	40	10	60	30	
Great Blue Heron	Ardea herodias		1			1	1		
Great Egret	Ardea alba egretta	2	1		4	1		1	
Little Blue Heron	Egretta caerulea	2	8	2	2	18		1	
Snowy Egret	Egretta thula thula		2		1	6		1	
Brown Pelican	Pelecanus occidentalis		4	1		6	4	6	
Turkey Vulture	Cathartes aura aura		5	20	40	12	30	10	
Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus			1					
Red-tailed Hawk	Buteo jamaicensis jamaicensis		4			2	2	1	
American Barn Owl - N	Tyto furcata furcata		1						
Jamaican Owl - E	Asio grammicus						2+3 h	1	
Belted Kingfisher	Megaceryle alcyon			1	2				
Jamaican Tody - E	Todus todus	2	5		6	2	2	2	
Jamaican Woodpecker - E	Melanerpes radiolatus	2	h	2	2	5	3	2	
American Kestrel	Falco sparverius	2	1	1	1	1	1		
Merlin	Falco columbarius		2		1				
Black-billed Amazon - E	Amazona agilis				15		15		
Yellow-billed Amazon - E	Amazona collaria				35		20	20	
Yellow-naped Amazon - I	Amazona auropalliata							1	
Green-rumped Parrotlet - I	Forpus passerinus viridissimus					4	2		
Olive-throated Parakeet - E	Eupsittula nana nana	6		8		2	12	2	
Jamaican Elaenia - E	Myiopagis cotta				3	1h			
Jamaican Pewee - E	Contopus pallidus				1		1		
Loggerhead Kingbird - E	Tyrannus caudifasciatus jamaicensis	3	1	4	8	4	6	2	
Grey Kingbird	Tyrannus dominicensis						1		
Sad Flycatcher - E	Myiarchus barbirostris			2	2	6	1		
Rufous-tailed Flycatcher - E	Myiarchus validus				2	4	1		
Stolid Flycatcher - E	Myiarchus stolidus stolidus						1		
Jamaican Becard - E	Pachyramphus niger		3		1		1		
Blue Mountain Vireo - E	Vireo osburni		2				1h		
Jamaican Vireo - E	Vireo modestus	3	4			1h	2		
Jamaican Crow - E	Corvus jamaicensis	2			h	10	15		
Cave Swallow - E	Petrochelidon fulva poeciloma	15	7	6		15	4	2	
Grey Catbird	Dumetella carolinensis	1		_			<u> </u>	<u> </u>	

		February 2024						
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Northern Mockingbird	Mimus polyglottos orpheus	5	3	8	10	6	3	10
Common Starling - I	Sturnus vulgaris							1
Rufous-throated Solitaire - E	Myadestes genibarbis solitarius		1h		1h			
White-chinned Thrush - E	Turdus aurantius	3	15		5	4	4	4
White-eyed Thrush - E	Turdus jamaicensis		2		1			
House Sparrow - I	Passer domesticus					1	3	
Jamaican Euphonia - E	Euphonia jamaica	10	4	4	2		2	
Jamaican Spindalis - E	Spindalis nigricephala	2	12	4	6	2	1	
Jamaican Oriole - E	Icterus leucopteryx leucopteryx	4	6	1			2	
Jamaican Blackbird - E	Nesopsar nigerrimus		1					
Shiny Cowbird	Molothrus bonariensis minimus	3		10		2	5	
Greater Antillean Grackle - E	Quiscalus niger crassirostris	20	20	30	15	50	200	50
Great-tailed Grackle	Quiscalus mexicanus							2
Ovenbird	Seiurus aurocapilla	1	1			1		
Worm-eating Warbler	Helmitheros vermivorum						1	
Northern Waterthrush	Parkesia noveboracensis			2	1			1
Black-and-white Warbler	Mniotilta varia	2	1			1	2	2
Arrowhead Warbler - E	Setophaga pharetra		4		4	1	1	
American Redstart	Setophaga ruticilla	10	6	3	7	8	5	4
Cape May Warbler	Setophaga tigrina					2		
Northern Parula	Setophaga americana	8	3	2	6	6	4	3
Mangrove Warbler - N	Setophaga petechia eoa			1				
Black-throated Blue Warbler	Setophaga caerulescens		4			2	1	
Black-throated Green Waebler	Setophaga virens		1					
Palm Warbler	Setophaga palmarum					2		
Yellow-throated Warbler	Setophaga dominica					1	1	
Prairie Warbler	Setophaga discolor	1		2		1	1	2
Bananaquit - E	Coereba flaveola flaveola	20	12	12	20	15	15	10
Yellow-faced Grassquit	Tiaris olivaceus olivaceus			15				
Orangequit - E	Euneornis campestris	2	10	2	5	6	2	
Greater Antillean Bullfinch	Melopyrrha violacea ruficollis	1	3		1		2	
Saffron Finch - I	Sicalis flaveola							2
Yellow-shouldered Grassquit - E	Loxipasser anoxanthus			1			3	
Black-faced Grassquit	Melanospiza bicolor marchii		1					
					1			

## Others

Common name	Scientific name			
Mammals				
Small Indian Mongoose	Herpestes auropunctata			
Jamaican Fruit Bat	Artibeus jamaicensis			
Reptiles				
Jamaican Giant Anole	Anolis garmani			
Brown Anole sp.	Anolis sp.			
Butterflies				
Skipper sp.	Rhinthon cubana			
Cassius Blue	Leptrotes cassius theonus			
Dirce Beauty	Colobura dirce			
Gulf Fritillary	Dione vanillae			
Jamaican White Peacock	Anartia jatrophae jamaicensis			
Julia Heliconian	Dryas iulia delila			
Lime Swallowtail	Papilio demoleus			
Little Sulphur	Eurema lisa eutespe			
Mimosa Yellow	Pyrisitia nise			
Proterpia Orange	Eurema proterpia			

With thanks to Phil and Alison Hanmer for the butterfly list.