

St. Lucia

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 February - 3 March 2007



Green-throated Carib



St Lucia Whiptail



View toward Petit Piton



Sunset at Anse Chastanet



Royal Tern

Images and report compiled by Toby Abrehart



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Day 1

Friday 23rd February

Hewanorra Airport to Soufrière

After a late arriving flight, six arrived on the Virgin Atlantic flight from Gatwick. Once through customs and into the afternoon sun, we were all given some cold water, put in the minibus and set off to the Hummingbird Beach Hotel in Soufrière. The hour long drive passed by the two dramatic Pitons, one of which was to be climbed a couple of days later. Along the drive we started seeing our first birds with the very common Carib Grackle and Grey Kingbirds.

As we dropped into Soufrière the group got their first taste of the Caribbean as the busy town was preparing for their Independence Day celebrations that night.

Once settled into our rooms with fabulous views of Petit Piton, the sea, and our gardens, several had a dip in the pool or sea or opted for a quick sleep, and then we met up for a rum punch before heading to supper. The gardens lived up to the hotel name with lots of two species of Hummingbird - the Antillean crested and the Purple-throated Carib - together with the ever present Lesser Antillean Bullfinch. A good buffet was laid on for us and, with everyone wilting, we headed off to bed. Later on the Martins turned up after their long trip from Manchester, they were settled in, fed and then bed.

Day 2

Saturday 24th February

Hot, humid with some cloud

A nice late start with breakfast at 7am we headed out and enjoyed the hummingbirds and bannanaquits busy all around the garden with our fabulous view of the Piton. With Carshina and the driver Nigel waiting for us we set off into the mountains picking up Rhikie our guide on the way. Once we entered Edmond Forest Reserve we got on with the walk which was a steady wander down through the secondary and into the primary rain forest. It was along here we started to see our first of the endemics with very close views of the St Lucian Pewee. Much of the island has a large introduced flora and fauna, the secondary forest having many trees like the African Tulip (*Spathodea campanulata*) and the Screw Pine (*Pandanus utilis*) in it. Further on we found a St Lucia Warbler (recently split from the Adelaide's Warbler) showing well in the undergrowth. Around the area was the Lesser Antillean

Bullfinch and high in the trees calling, but not showing was a Rufous-throated Solitaire, (also known as the Forest Whistler) - Rhikkie tried called it closer but it never did show.

After the walk back up the hill we set off for the longish drive back to the hotel for lunch, very good food and great service, with the fabulous views over the bay. We enjoyed watching the Frigate-birds accosting the Laughing Gulls in the bay.

Feeling replete from lunch some of us headed down to the beach to look at our first coral and reef fish. The steeply shelving beach and nearby cliffs gave us some great views of many fish including Needlefish, Sergeant Major, Yellowtail Damselfish, Blue Chromis, Spotlight Parrotfish, Redlip Blenny, Sand Diver, Yellow Goatfish and many goby, to name but a few. Along the wall there was a series of bubbling vents that on closer inspection had very hot water coming from them.

Once refreshed and clean, supper at the hotel was all very nice.

Day 3

Sunday 25th February

Hot, humid and a little cloudy

An early breakfast this morning starting at 6am for a 6.30am departure and then off to Fon's de Libre (meaning Valley of the Free). We were prepared for our big walking day, climbing Gros Piton at 798m in the heat is not an easy undertaking. We arrived and were met by Francis Alexander who explained what the walk entailed, basically up to the halfway point then the climb really starts. Prepared for this, we set off, walking through the village we were shown many of the local crops with Calabash (*Crescentia cujete*), Breadfruit (*Artocarpus communis*) and Soursop (*Annona muricata*).

Once through the village the walk really started with a brief detour to see a cave in a rock, from then on it was up all the way. Birds were mainly on the dry side of the Piton with Black-whiskered Vireo and a brief St Lucia Oriole. Mavis decided to walk back to the village after a way with her glamorous helper Carshina who I'm sure was glad not to be carrying on. Higher up the slopes we found a Lesser Antillean Pewee and a very obliging St Lucia Warbler. A black Rat gave us a respite as even the guides had not seen this before. As the heat built we just carried on to the half way point. Wonderful views towards Petit Piton and over the sea, a very welcome breeze and some refreshments.

Leaving Bob with the second guide the rest of us set off up the steeper section to the two peaks. We all made it to the top and found the views stunning looking first to the east and on to the airport, then a little clamber later we reached the view towards Petit Piton - truly spectacular to us all. The view showed us how steep a climb it really had been. These views certainly rewarded the steep climb. Once recovered it was the inevitable climb back down.

Once at the bottom we all regrouped and were certainly ready for our lunch at the Fond Doux Plantation.

Next it was off to the warm mineral baths and a soak in a thermally heated waterfall in the forests below Petit Piton. A very welcome and refreshing time was had and I think it helped soothe anything that might be aching.

Back at the hotel in time for a snorkel and relax before the early evening drink and then supper.

Day 4

Monday 26th February

Hot, humid and slightly cloudy

A very relaxing breakfast this morning with a late start of 10am and then off to the Sulphur Springs or the “drive in volcano”. A gentle walk along the side of the sulphurous smelling caldera, it is now called a Solfatara, meaning it emits gases and vapours rather than lava and hot ash. In the undergrowth was a Scaly-breasted Thrasher and we had a good view of a Broad-winged Hawk circling around the barren slopes. We enjoyed the seven acres of bubbling mud and gases and then wandered down to the hot mud river and small waterfall.

Before lunch we headed near to the base of Petit Piton for a walk to see what we might find and were rewarded with good views of some bathing Black-faced Grasswits and an obliging St Lucia Oriole. Butterflies were plentiful with Buckeye (*Juonia coenia*), White Peacock (*Anartia amathea*) and Hanno Blues (*Hemiargus hanna*).

We lunched at Ladhera with wonderful views out over the sea with a Piton at each side of us. After a large and lengthy lunch we needed to get on and so off to Anse Chastanet for a session of snorkelling over the best reef on the island. Here we enjoyed a whole manor of reef fish with nearly everyone going out to the reef. One particular fish of interest was a Flying Gurnard (*Dactylopterus volitans*) displaying a fascinating feeding technique in the sand.

After this we set off on a boat around the headland to start a walk at Anse Marin, a disused plantation a truly fascinating area with little moving, very still and tranquil. We then clambered back onto the boat for the short ride to Anse Chastanet for a drink watching the sun set over the Caribbean. Then back to the hotel for supper.

Day 5

Tuesday 27th February

Hot, humid and slightly cloudy

Maria Island

Another leisurely breakfast as we were leaving at 9am this morning as we set off for the hour long drive to the airport. Once at the St Lucia National Trust offices situated near the airport we went to get the boat for the ride over to Maria Island. This was not an easy option as the Atlantic side of the island is rough and the boat was bobbing about somewhat. This made getting out of the boat a challenge too.

Maria Major is a small island but it had some wonderful rarities, all reptiles. Soon into the walk was a St Lucian Whiptail showing very well and feeding busily just in front of us. Nearby were two Geckos (*Sphaerodactylus vincenti*) on a tree blending in with the bark and the ever present Anole Lizards (*Anolis luciae*) in a range of colours including a near black male. We continued up to the top of the island enjoying the views and having to be careful not to reach out to grab any vegetation to steady us as it was pretty much all Organ Pipe cactus! Once down at the shore again we had our cake and ate it.

The getting on and off the boat was a bit tricky but once back onshore we were ready to get on with our lunch. With great views and a refreshing breeze we tucked into our provided lunch watching at the guys trying to kite surf. Once we were all fed we headed up to Savannes Bay to look at the mangroves in this area where the fishermen had just brought in their catch. On our way back to the hotel we stopped briefly at the bridge and watched the Cattle Egret colony with supporting cast of Blue-winged Teal and Smooth-billed Ani. Out to sea were some Brown Boobies feeding close to shore, a flyby fishing Osprey and a very distant Red-billed Tropicbird.

Back at the hotel some of us went snorkeling, finding Golden-spotted Eel, Brown Garden Eels and a Porcupine Fish. Some stayed and recouped with a cold beer and the stunning view. Supper as always was very good.

Day 6

Wednesday 28th February

Hot, humid and slightly cloudy

Very early morning coffee before our walk to Quillesse Forest Reserve leaving the hotel at 5am - we picked up Carshina and the Rhikkie before getting going on the walk. Arriving while it was still dark, we had to wait a short while so we could see where we were walking! We all enjoyed listening to the forest, waking up with the odd call of the St Lucian Parrots high in the forest canopy. We walked on for an hour and a half before stopping to wait for the Parrots to pass through. They were seen immediately on arrival and then were slow to show, but we did see at least 10 in the area. Once we had a rest we set off back in the rain for most of the way. Unfortunately most birds were quiet in the rain, but the liquid sunshine didn't really stop until we were back at the hotel.

Lunch back at Hummingbird was lovely as the sun started to come out so we enjoyed watching the Frigatebirds and Pomerine Skuas out in the Soufriere Bay.

The afternoon was spent on a nice walk to the botanical gardens and the Diamond Falls which was a very attractive place to have a wander, enjoying the Purple-throated Caribs flitting around. Later wandering along the trail to the Plantation House and the water wheel we came across a small party of Brown Tremblers.

Once back at the hotel we took a boat evening trip out to the "bat cave", which exceeded our expectation with 75% of the island's bats roosting in there. Many were getting close to flying out but seemed a little nervous as a Broad-winged Hawk and American Kestrel were nearby. There were at least three species in the cave but unfortunately we were not able to identify any. Once we left the site and moored up we watched the bats emerge slowly and in no real rush, still quite a spectacle.

Supper as ever was very good.

Day 7

Thursday 1st March

Hot, humid and slightly cloudy

This morning consisted of an early breakfast and departure by 7am to Castries to pick up our boat for the whale watching with Captain Mikes. We set off out to sea and dodging the rain bursts in the north of the island we

headed south, enjoying the mini spectacle of the Flying fish achieving some fantastic distances over the water. The Royal Terns and the odd Pomerine Skua following the boat would be diverted into diving for the fish once they had re-entered the water.

After about an hour we found some Dolphins, which then kept us amused for some while - they were in feeding mode often diving very deep rather than playing as we all hoped for. Both Common and Spotted Dolphins stayed around the boat with the careful driving of our skipper. After this we set off to the coast off Soufriere to get yet another view of the fabulous Pitons. As we entered Castries harbour the boat used in the Pirates of the Caribbean film cruised in behind us, somewhat more pleasant than the "Cruise ship" moored.

We had a good lunch at the Hotel Serapine, a plush place to enjoy ourselves with a view towards a Cattle Egret colony. We made a quick visit to the Serapine duty free shopping area and then up and off back to the hotel. Once back some of us went snorkelling again and then got ready for another trip out to the "bat cave" - this time a bit later in the evening to see if there was a mass exodus or not, not as it turned out.

Supper consisted of a barbeque by the pool.

Day 8

Friday 2nd March

Hot, humid and slightly cloudy

A relaxing morning as nothing was planned so after breakfast some had our last Snorkel and then packed for our return journey. The Martins were taken off to catch their flight from Castries at about 10.30am

Lunch at the hotel was spent looking out at Petit Piton for the last time before loading up the bus and driving to the airport. One last stop on the way was at the bridge where we heard, and some of saw, a Yellow Warbler. A little further on a Solitary Sandpiper flew along the side of the bus before we arrived at the airport. Once checked in we all went through and waited then on the plane and home.

Day 9

Saturday 3rd March

Cold, wet and windy

Arrived at Gatwick early in the morning after another successful and enjoyable Naturetrek tour!

Bird list

Common name	February 2007					March 2007		
	23	24	25	26	27	23	1	2
Red-billed Tropicbird					2			
Brown Booby					6			
Magnificent Frigatebird	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Great blue Heron						+		
Little Blue Heron			2	1	1	2	1	
Great White Egret					1			
Snowy Egret					2			
Cattle Egret	+		2	2	+		100+	
Green Heron	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Blue-winged Teal					1pair			
Broad-winged Hawk		+	+	+	+	+	+	+
American Kestrel	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Osprey		1			2	1	1	
St Lucia Moorhen (endemic race)	2							1
Purple Gallinule					1			
Spotted Sandpiper		2	2		4			
Solitary Sandpiper								
Royal Tern	+				30		8	
Laughing Gull	30	30	30	60	60	60	60	60
Pomarine Skua				3	2	2	6	1
Red-necked Pigeon						1		
Violet-eared Dove						1		
Zenaida Dove	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Common Ground Dove	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
St Lucia Parrot						10		
Mangroove Cuckoo						1		
Smooth-billed Ani					1			
Lesser Antillean Swift					1	40+		
Purple-throated Carib			+	+	+	+	+	
Green-throated Carib	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Antillean crested Hummingbird	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Belted Kingfisher			2	1	1		1	
Grey Kingbird	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Lesser Antillean Flycatcher			4					
St Lucia Pewee		2				2		
Caribbean Elaenia			4					
Caribbean Martin			1					
House Wren (St Lucia sub-species)		h	h	h	h	h		
Tropical Mockingbird	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Common name	February 2007					March 2007		
	23	24	25	26	27	23	1	2
Scaly-breasted Thrasher			2		2	5		
Pearly-eyed Thrasher			4			10		
Brown Trembler						4		
Bare-eyed Thrush				1				
Rufous-throated Solitaire			h			h		
Black-whiskered Vireo			3					
Yellow Warbler								1
St Lucia Warbler			2	3	2		2	
Bananaquit	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Lesser Antillean Bullfinch	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
St Lucia Oriole		1		2	2			
Black-faced Grasswit			2	5	5	+	+	
Streaked Saltator				1				

Mammals

Common name	February 2007					March 2007		
	23	24	25	26	27	23	1	2
Common Dolphin							50	
Spotted Dolphin							20	
Opossum							1	
Common Mongoose							6	
Black Rat							1	
A Fruit Bat							2	
Other Bats							1000's	

Lizards

St Lucia Whiptail *Cnemidophorus vanzoi*

Anolis luciae

Sphaerodactylus vincenti