St Lucia

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th - 19th January 2024



Grey Trembler by Chris Cooper



White-breasted Thrasher by Chris Cooper



St Lucia Warbler by Chris Cooper



St Lucia Pewee by Dave Jackson

Tour report by Dave Jackson



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Tour participants: Dave Jackson (leader) with nine Naturetrek Clients.

Summary

The first of two Naturetrek groups left the UK for the warmth of the Caribbean, arriving on 12th January, some leaving on the same plane that brought the second group a week later, while others stayed on for an extended break.

Daily excursions included birdwatching with local guides, a visit to an extinct volcano followed by an amazing culinary experience at the hotel's Emerald Farm, where we had our lunch prepared as we sampled craft beers brewed on the premises.

We had excellent views of all five endemics including St Lucia Warbler, St Lucia Oriole & St Lucia Pewee. Other highlights included Rufous-throated Solitaire, White-breasted, Scaly-breasted and Pearly-eyed Thrashers. St. Lucia Parrots were seen from Des Cartiers viewpoint and from the Millet Bird Sanctuary Trail where St Lucia Black Finches were observed feeding on coconuts.

Pods of Fraser's Dolphins fed close to the surface during our cetacean-watching cruise, with the same catamaran crew taking us up the coast to Castries for an aerial tram ride through the rainforest, where all three hummingbird species were seen.

We enjoyed exceptional hospitality at the award-winning Anse Chastanet Resort with evening entertainment provided by several artists including homegrown country singer, L.M. Stone, a steel band and a jazz guitarist playing the songs of George Benson and Dave Brubeck.

There were plenty of activities during leisure time including snorkeling, yoga, exploring the surroundings or watching the comings and goings of tame Lesser Antillean Bullfinches, Bananaquits and Grey Tremblers from our rooms.

Day 1

Friday 12th January

Gatwick 7°C - Hewanorra

28°C

Our 10.00am flight to St. Lucia was slightly delayed, although we made up the time, landing at 2.50pm local time and were through customs and onto the waiting bus to take us to our luxury accommodation, Anse Chastanet, in good time.

A daytime flight allowed us to get the list off to a good start with several common birds seen on the way, including Carib Grackle, Grey Kingbird and Cattle Egrets by the roadside. Collared Doves alighted on telegraph wires while an Eared Dove gave brief views as the bus passed.

We made our way through Soufrière with St. Lucia's famous landmarks, Gros Piton and Petit Piton, rising majestically from the forest, and 16 Magnificent Frigatebirds circled over the bay while a small flock of Black-faced Grassquits fed around cemetery gravestones.

We were greeted at reception by Henri and Rajesh and offered their special 'Bentley' alcohol-free cocktail made with grenadine and lime as we filled in the necessary arrival forms. A pair of Lesser Antillean Bullfinches gave tantalising views, although they were to become very familiar over the next few days, while a pair of Scaly-breasted Thrashers fed close-by at head height.

Chef Frank talked us though the dining options and made note of our dietary requirements as we contemplated our first meal in the Treehouse Restaurant. We chose from a wide variety of dishes and discussed plans for the coming days, serenaded by Lesser Antillean Whistling Frogs and other unfamiliar sounds before retiring to our rooms for the night.

Day 2

Saturday 13th January

Anse Chastanet, Anse Mamin and surrounding woodland

29 °C rain showers.

A magnificent rainbow formed over the sea as we gathered for breakfast: Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Carib Grackles and Zenaida Doves showed well from the breakfast table and our first Grey Trembler waited for its chance to descend on the food put out to distract them from guests' tables.

Our scheduled walk began with local bird guide, Meno, or 'Father Nature' as he likes to be known. Lesser Antillean Saltator, with its olive plumage, flew from branch to branch in front of us as we made our way down to the beach. Brown Boobies, Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans patrolled off-shore, and as Meno pointed out a hummingbird nest made from cobwebs and other organic material we continued towards Anse Mamin.

Meno shared his in-depth knowledge of the forest plants and trees and explained how his grandmother used certain plants as medicine. He explained that Soursop is a fruit with healing powers and used in the restaurant in sorbets along with mango and passion fruit.

St. Lucia Warbler was the first endemic of the day and it gave good views as it flitted above our heads catching insects, Green-throated Carib and Antillean Crested Hummingbirds fed high on the flowering trees against the blue sky and a Spectacled Thrush remained motionless, allowing 'scope views as it rested in the canopy. A Mangrove Cuckoo, with its peachy underparts and barred tailed, also gave protracted views from below.

Meno pointed out various trees including Silk-cotton, or 'ouch-ouch' tree as he calls them, and explained that if they had elephants they'd be scratching themselves on the sharp spines that grow out of the (tree) trunk. Tiger, the gardener's cat, escorted us safely through the forest up to the reservoir where butterflies included White Peacock, Little Yellow and Orcus Checkered Skipper were very active, challenging the photographers to get shots in the short time they were stationary.

The morning had flown by and we arrived at the beach restaurant to be given an orientation talk by Janelle before refreshments and lunch in the pleasant sea breeze as we watched the world go by.

With temperatures hitting 29°C, we returned to our rooms for a while before meeting again for a pre-dinner walk. We strolled up to higher ground where a St. Lucia Warbler, with its bright yellow underparts, actively fed and a Scaly-naped Pigeon allowed distant photos across a disused quarry. Lesser Antillean Swifts appeared as the sun was setting as we met to complete the checklist and order drinks ready for dinner.

Day 3

Sunday 14th January

Dennery Bay, Quilesse Rainforest Reserve, Vieux Fort Wetlands

28 °C mostly sunny, strong breeze.

We gathered for our 5.30am start as Youvani arrived in his minibus and lunch boxes were loaded into the vehicle. We arrived at our meeting site near Dennery after about 2 hours where our local guides, Adams and Nesta were waiting. We checked from the roadside and several other sites searching for the elusive White-breasted Thrasher, a species restricted to two small regions in St. Lucia and one area on the island of Martinique. Recent research suggests they could be separate species.

Caribbean Eleania, Lesser Antillean Saltator, St. Lucia Warblers and Bananaquits called around us but the thrasher remained elusive. Tantalisingly brief views were had as it tossed up leaf litter but only small parts of the bird could be seen through the vegetation.

As we continued along the track, butterflies including the bright orange Julia, Caribbean Buckeye and several whites nectared on the flowering shrubs as the sun broke through the clouds.

After almost two hours searching we returned to the bus for refreshments while Adams and Nesta continued to look for the thrasher. One eventually appeared, and everyone was summoned to the track where it showed remarkably well for such a skulking species. Purple-throated Caribs chased each other across the track and St. Lucia Oriole observed us from the dark undergrowth. Satisfied with our views of the thrasher we left for our next destination, Des Cartiers Rainforest Trail.

A St. Lucia Parrot flew over calling before we had a chance to raise our optics, the target species acquired within minutes of our arrival! We followed the ancient trail through the forest until we came to the watchpoint where a Pearly-eyed thrasher fed on berries while Rufous-throated Solitaire could be heard giving its flute-like whistles before appearing in the same fruiting tree. It then dropped down and perched very close giving stunning views of its blue-grey upperparts, rusty throat and yellow feet before a fly-by parrot averted our attention. Purple-throated Caribs and Antillean Crested Hummingbirds chased off rivals as more parrots alerted us to their imminent showing with raucous calls as they flew across the valley and into the dense forest across the valley.

Nesta pointed out various large trees including Magnolia, Gommier (which was used by local people to make canoes) and Blue Maho, the national tree of Jamaica. This forest is an essential roosting area for the endangered parrot, which may now number 2500 individuals, slowly increasing from a few hundred birds in the 1970s. Nearly

50 years ago, an education programme was launched to inform the people of St. Lucia about the plight of their national bird, and today's population of these long-lived birds is still small, but greatly enhanced thanks to the efforts of conservationists of the time.

We had lunch on the picnic tables accompanied by a male bullfinch before it was time to leave for Vieux Fort Wetlands. This large lake attracts a wide range of water birds with many North American-breeding species, including good numbers of Blue-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Great and Snowy Egrets. The water level was high and the track was flooded and as we found somewhere to park, the first bird seen was Greater Yellowlegs wading up to its belly at the side of the lake.

The wind was strong and made difficult viewing through a telescope though several Ring-necked Ducks could be picked out among the teals. Two ducks with bright pink bills were superficially similar to Blue-winged Teal and possibly hybrids with Bahama Pintail, an interesting one for Adams to discuss with his North American birding contacts, though they remain a mystery in the meantime.

Little Blue Herons fed at the water's edge while a Great Blue Heron landed briefly before taking flight. Common Gallinules, similar to our Moorhen, mixed with American Coots, while two or three American Wigeon stayed tucked into vegetation at the edge of the lake. An adult female Magnificent Frigatebird flew overhead but didn't stop to feed, unlike the Osprey which circled a few times before plunging into the lake and rising with a fish in its talons. Adams informed us that it was the Caribbean sub-species (*Pandion haliaetus ridgwayi*) which doesn't migrate. It certainly appeared smaller than the "western" Osprey that breeds in the UK and North America: a future elevation to species level perhaps?

We'd had had a full day's birding and it was time to say our goodbyes to Adams and Nesta and to return to Anse Chastanet after a long and fulfilling day out, across three very different birding habitats, arriving back in time for a quick shower before another fine dinner in Treetops Restaurant.

Day 4

Monday 15th January

Dolphin watching off the coast of Anse Chastanet and Anse Mamin

26-28 °C, rain showers.

A later start today and time for a leisurely breakfast before boarding Mystic Man's catamaran with Jonathan and crew. A Spotted Sandpiper fed along the shoreline as we prepared for a wet boarding for our dolphin-watching cruise off the coast.

A booby appeared close to the boat which was identified as Red-footed with its white rump and tail: they're uncommon in these waters and far outnumbered by their Brown cousins. Flying Fish leapt ahead of the boat and a Brown Booby used the bow waves to chase fish, skimming the surface as it caught its meals much to the delight of the photographers.

A few spots of rain cooled the air as we navigated away from the coast with Les Pitons always in sight but we had had no sign of any cetaceans after two hours at sea. A distant boat alerted Miguel and Erika to cetacean activity

and as we approached, a feeding frenzy of Fraser's Dolphins in two distinct shoals fed on the surface. These dolphins have a wide distribution but remain poorly-known; a skull was found on a Sarawak beach in 1895 and it wasn't until 1971 that a full specimen was washed up. The species is named after Scottish zoologist, Francis Fraser, who studied the skull in 1956: the worldwide population of Fraser's dolphins remains unknown.

We'd been out for three hours (thanks to the crew for persevering), although we'd run out of time to visit the bat cave as we made our way back for lunch. Coconut and sweet potato soup was a popular and tasty choice.

Whilst our appetite for dolphins had been satiated, our desire to see more birds remained, so it was back down to the pier for our scheduled 3.30pm water taxi to Anse Marmin for those wishing for more birding activity. There were noisy grackles on the beach and a Grey Trembler crept around a tree near the barbecue hoping to scavenge some burnt offerings. Adult and juvenile Little Blue Herons fed along the stream and a St. Lucia Pewee caught flying insects in the dark understory. A dove at the top of a tall tree had us head-scratching until we narrowed it down to the only likely candidate – Common Ground Dove. It obviously hadn't read its field guide description!

We headed back along the beach and met to complete the checklist before dinner at 7pm whilst listening to live music coming from the bar area.

Day 5

Tuesday 16th January

Millet Bird Sanctuary Trail

24-28 °C, sun and heavy showers

We assembled at 6.00am with packed lunches ready for our excursion to Millet trail by bus, passing through Anse Le Raye before climbing to a high point where we were met by Kenwin, our guide for the morning. His introduction was cut short by a very showy Lesser Antillean Flycatcher which appeared behind him. Smaller than Grey Kingbird and with a yellow belly, Ken said he hadn't seen it so well before and never in the open like this bird!

We signed in and began to walk along the open trail, reaching the end and having seen only bullfinches, when calls of parrots alerted us to their presence. One pair followed by two singles and perhaps another or the same pair: quite a start. Hummingbirds darted by as a Pearly-eyed Thrashers appeared on a coconut feeder. They are known locally as 'the king of the forest': Kenwin explained that they'll fight off any birds to get to the coconuts, originally supplied after Hurricane Tomas in 2010 destroyed much of the forest.

A Mangrove Cuckoo plucked a stick insect, colloquially known as 'walking stick' right above our heads and began to disassemble it in the shade of a tree. The breeze was increasing as we returned to reception and took another path into the forest. A large land crab (*Gecarcinus ruricola*) was captured between Kenwin's boots long enough for photographs to be taken before it made its escape across the muddy forest floor and into a stream.

A male St. Lucia Oriole appeared as the rain started, while St. Lucia Black Finches exchanged places with Lesser Antillean Bullfinches on the feeders. The call of St. Lucia Parrot was heard before a pair came into view as we washed off our boots at the end of the walk. We returned to Anse Chastanet in time for a late lunch after a very

successful morning out with four endemic bird species seen including St. Lucia Black Finch and St. Lucia Pewee while the fifth, St. Lucia Warbler, was only heard.

The lounge area commands a high position that looks out over the wooded valley and out to sea where Brown Pelicans, not recorded on Naturetrek tours in the bay prior to 2022, could be seen coming into roost on the cliffs. It's not known if they're part of a range expansion or possibly a natural disaster or development where they previously bred, but they find it to their liking, and numbers are increasing each year.

On Tuesday evenings a beach reception is held where management and chefs mingle with the guests offering canapés and rum punch before a delicious and varied buffet meal. We had our own table set in a marquee on the beach where the sound of calypso music blended with the rolling waves. Paradise found!

Day 6

Wednesday 17th January

Sulphur Springs and Emerald Farm

Humid 29°C, light rain showers

The bus arrived at 8.45am for our visit to Sulphur Springs, known as 'the world's only drive-in volcano', lying just outside the main town of Soufrière. Our guide Suzzette, described the volcanic origins of the island as we watched the thermal activity of gurgling mud and steam as the smell of sulphur filled the air. She explained that the volcano last erupted in 1766 and is constantly monitored for unusual activity, as an eruption is long overdue, but not likely during our visit, which was nice to know.

A male Black-faced Grassquit fed on seeds next to the wooded steps that leads to the viewing area oblivious to people walking by. Suzzette told us that tourists were once able to walk among the pools of boiling mud until a guide had an unfortunate accident and suffered burns from falling through the crust in an area known as Gabriel's Hole in his memory.

A Mangrove Cuckoo gave unobstructed views above us and a small flock of Shiny Cowbirds alighted on wires before dropping down to feed, the lone male with its blue and purple sheen being outnumbered by the immatures and females.

We were met by Martin at Emerald Farm, an organic farm of 550 acres, where fruit, herbs, vegetables and flowers are grown for Anse Chastanet and sister hotel, Jade Mountain. Two pigs, Poker and Carrie gulped down the cocoa pods after Martin picked one for us to taste and explained that the pigs were pets and wouldn't be slaughtered for food. After an enlightening tour of the grounds we were shown the brewery and invited to taste their own chocolate stout as chefs Salvatore and Kerius prepared the table for our cookery demonstration with different fruit and vegetables laid out on freshly-cut banana leaves.

A Grey Kingbird perched on a stick while the distant mountains disappeared under rain clouds and a Green Heron was seen by one of the group as it wandered into the shelter of a greenhouse. An amazing 3 course meal was created before our eyes, the fusion of so many flavours was mouthwatering, each course washed down with fruit punch or Naked Fisherman IPA straight from the vat.

An afternoon siesta ensued before we met again in the lounge to compare a family party of grackles, some apparent males with dark eyes, young birds and females all interacting with each other. Lesser Antillean Swifts abounded in the low rain clouds, while Caribbean Osprey and Magnificent Frigatebirds patrolled the coast. Little Blue Herons consisting of four immature and one adult bird congregated on the pier as two guests joining the second Naturetrek group arrived to share our sightings.

We were invited to sample various hors d'oeuvres in the vegan restaurant before our main evening meal in Treehouse restaurant. More yummy food - it had been one of those days!

Day 7

Thursday 18th January

Castries, Rainforest Adventures Aerial Tram

28 °C, sun & showers

Jonathan, Erika & Xystus from Mystic Man arrived in their catamaran for our 8.00am departure along the coast to Castries, St. Lucia's capital, for the Rainforest Adventures gondola ride.

Birds of note on the two-hour journey included two Royal Terns as we passed Anse Le Raye, with more perched on a buoy, but no sign of any cetaceans on the choppy sea.

Junior was there waiting to take us on the short journey to Rainforest Adventures, where we were guided on a 30-minute walk around the trails. Samantha and Jean-Claude explained the variety of trees and ferns that grow in the forest and ones used in cooking, and the mature trees planted to replace native trees that had been felled or destroyed by hurricanes.

Our two groups boarded the aerial tram for the hour-plus ride through different stages of the forest, with commentary at each stage. A Green-throated Carib was difficult to see as it perched in its favoured tree, while Purple-throated Caribs made sorties from perches to feed on tree flowers. A Broad-winged Hawk flew at low level hunting lizards, and one appeared over the forest as we made our descent, with magnificent views over the island and across the Caribbean Sea to Martinique through a gap in the forest canopy.

We had lunch as the boat passed gigantic cruise ships in the harbour while 'X' played a selection of music from through the ages. It wasn't long before he upped the tempo and dancing ensued – that was *before* consumption of complimentary rum punch and beer!

The return journey seemed quicker with all the joviality on board as Jonathan steered the boat into Soufrière bay in an attempt to allow views inside the bat cave, a vertical crevice where approximately 5000 Antillean Fruit Bats roost. We could see the bats flying around inside but the swell meant we couldn't stay in position for long and made our way back to Anse Chastanet for a relaxing afternoon.

Day 8

Friday 19th January

Anse Mamin

29°C rain showers, sun.

While some of the group were fortunate to be staying in St. Lucia after the Naturetrek tour, others would be returning to the UK on an evening flight. A water taxi was booked to take us to Anse Mamin for some last morning birding, while others caught up on the activities they'd been planning to do during the stay.

A Brown Booby perched up on the rocks and on close inspection appeared to have fishing line dangling from its bill: otherwise it seemed to be in good health. A Green Heron hid among the rocks just upstream from the beach and the St. Lucia Pewee showed in its usual place at the edge of the forest. Hummingbirds hovered high up in the African Tulip trees and three Common Ground Doves kept a safe distance ahead of us.

With rain in the air, we opted to take the shuttle back to Anse Chastanet, where we had lunch at the beach restaurant before checking out. We reflected on the wonderful wildlife we'd seen and the different activities we'd enjoyed before taxis arrived and the fabulous staff gathered to say their goodbyes, as a successful and very enjoyable week with pleasant company in paradise came to an end.





Rufous-throated Solitaire by Dave Jackson and Brown Booby by Greg Spencer

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

				January 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19		
Brown Pelican	Pelicanus occidentalis	✓	√	✓	√	✓	√	√	✓		
Red-footed Booby	Sula sula			1							
Brown Booby	Sula leucogaster	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Magnificent Frigatebird	Fregata magnificens	✓	√	✓	√	✓		✓	✓		
Great Egret	Ardea alba	✓		✓	4		✓	1			
Little Blue Heron	Egretta caerulea			2		2	5	✓	✓		
Snowy Egret	Egretta thula	✓		√				√			
Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	✓		√		✓					
Green Heron	Butorides virescens	1					1	1	1		
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax							1	√		
Blue-winged Teal	Anas discors			√							
American Wigeon	Anas americana			√							
Lesser Scaup	Aythya affinis			20							
Ring-necked Duck	Aythya collaris			8							
Osprey	Pandion hallaetus			√			√				
Broad-winged Hawk	Buteo platypterus							√			
American Kestrel	Falco sparverius				1		2	2			
American Coot	Fulica americana			√							
Antillean Common Gallinule	Gallinula galeata cerceris			√	√						
Greater Yellowlegs	Tringa melanoleuca	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	✓		
Spotted Sandpiper	Actitis macularius				1			1			
Royal Tern	Thalasseus maximus							√			
Rock Pigeon	Columba livia	✓		√				√	√		
Scaly-naped Pigeon	Patagioenus squamosa		2								
Eared Dove	Zenaida auriculata	1									
Zenaida Dove	Zenaida aurita	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	√		√		√					
Common Ground Dove	Collumbina passerina			1	1						
St Lucia Parrot	Amazona versicolor			8		6					
Mangrove Cuckoo	Coccyzus minor		2			1	1	1	1		
Lesser Antillean Swift	Chaetura martinica		√		√		√	√			
Purple-throated Carib	Eulampis jugularis		√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Green-throated Carib	Eulampis holosericeus		2					1			
Antillean Crested Hummingbird	Orthorhyncus cristatus	✓	√	√	√	√	√	√	✓		
Lesser Antillean Flycatcher	Myiarchus oberi			1		1					
Caribbean Elaenia	Elaenia martinica		1	2		1					
St Lucia Pewee	Contopus oberi		√	√	√	√			√		
Grey Kingbird	Tyrannus dominicensis	✓	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
House Wren	Troglodytes aedon		1								
Tropical Mockingbird	Mimus gilvus		2	Н			1	√			
Grey Trembler	Cinclocerthia guttaralis	✓	<u> </u>	√	√	√	✓		✓		
Scaly-breasted Thrasher	Allenia fusca	√	√	√	√	✓		√			

		January 2024								
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
Pearly-eyed Thrasher	Margarops fuscata			1						
White-breasted Thrasher	Ramphocinclus brachyurus			3						
Rufous-throated Solitaire	Myadestes genibarbis			1						
Bare-eyed Thrush	Turdus nudigenis		1							
Black-whiskered Vireo	Vireo altoquus			1						
St Lucia Warbler	Dendroica delicata		✓	✓	✓	✓		Н		
Bananaquit	Coereba flaveola	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black-faced Grassquit	Tiaris bicolor	✓					✓	√		
St Lucia Black Finch	Melanospiza richardsoni		2	2		1				
Lesser Antillean Bullfinch	Loxigilla noctis	✓	√	✓	√	√	✓	√	✓	
Lesser Antillean Saltator	Saltator albicollis		✓	✓			✓			
Carib Grackle	Quiscalus lugubris	✓	√							
Shiny Cowbird	Molothrus bonariensis						6			
St Lucia Oriole	Icterus laudabills			2		1				

Others

Common name	Scientific name					
Reptiles						
St Lucia Anole Lizard	Anolis luciae					
Lesser Antillean (Johnstone's Whistling) Frog	Eleutherodactylus johnstonei					
Green Turtle	Chelonia mydas					
Mammals						
Fraser's Dolphin	Lagenodelphis hosei					
Small Asian Mongoose	Herpestes javanicus					
Antillean Fruit Bat	Brachyphylla cavernarum					
Butterflies and Moths						
Long-tailed Skipper	Urbanus proteus					
Great Southern White	Ascia monuste					
Gulf Fritillary	Agraulis vanilla					
Julia (Flambeau)	Dryas iulia					
Little Yellow	Eurema lisa					
White Peacock	Anartia atrophae					
Caribbean Buckeye	Junonia evarete					
Orion Cecropian	Historis odius					
Hanno Blue	Hemiargus hanno					
Large Orange Sulphur	Pheobis agarithe					
Statira Sulphur	Aphrissa statira					
iery Skipper Hylephila phyleus						

Common name	Scientific name
Black Witch Moth	Ascalapha odorata
Fasciolated Graphic	Melipotis fasciolaris
Dragonflies	
Antillean Skimmer	Orthemis macrostigma
Band-winged Dragonlet	Erythrodiplax umbrata
Crustaceans	
Land Crab	Gecarcinus ruricola