

St. Lucia

Naturetrek Tour Report

19th – 27th January 2024



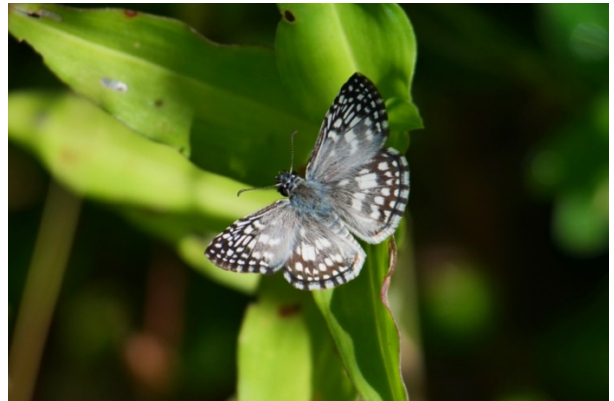
Bannanquit by Dave Jackson



Green Heron by Ian Sowerby



St Lucia Oriole by Dave Jackson



Orcus Chequered Skipper by Ian Sowerby

Tour report by Dave Jackson



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Summary

This was the second of two Naturetrek St. Lucia tours in 2024 to the warmth of this Caribbean island in the Lesser Antilles. We enjoyed daily excursions included birdwatching with local guides, and 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, and 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, LM Stone, a steel band and a jazz guitarist playing 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 19th January

Hewanorra

28°C

With a flight delay and the group arriving at 6.30pm, it was a quick check-in and luggage drop before meeting Chef Frank, when he talked us through the dining options and made note of any allergies and other dietary requirements.

The attentive staff took our dinner orders in the Treehouse Restaurant where we discussed plans for the coming days, as Lesser Antillean Whistling Frogs serenaded us from their hidden territories.

Day 2

Saturday 20th January

Anse Chastanet, Anse Mamin and surrounding area

28 °C rain showers

Carib Grackles and the mournful call of Zenaida Doves relieved the whistling frogs from their night shift as the Caribbean sun rose slowly over the forest. Lesser Antillean Bullfinches greeted new guests who were unaware of their propensity to share breakfast; though staff throw food items onto a roof below to dissuade birds from entering the restaurant, the bullfinches prefer to get up close and personal with human visitors encroaching on their territory.

Local guide, 'Father Nature' Meno, led us down the access road where a pair of Broad-winged Hawks greeted us, one perched and other circling close by; there was so much activity it was a difficult decision knowing which way to look! St. Lucia Warbler and St. Lucia Pewee became the first endemics on the tour, while Lesser Antillean Saltator with its olive plumage and bicoloured bill gave excellent views. There were Purple-throated and Antillean Crested Hummingbirds zipping around as we came to a lily pond where we found two Common Gallinules, similar to our Moorhen, and Green and Little Blue Herons waited patiently for fish to rise.

St. Lucia Wren called very close by and was initially tricky to spot: this bird is currently considered a sub-species of House Wren but is very distinctive and could become a species in its own right following DNA analysis. A Black-whiskered Vireo had a large green insect in its bill which it struggled to eat, and a Mangrove Cuckoo was busy catching prey a little higher than eye-level as we followed Meno into the forest.

He failed to entice a calling Bridled Quail-dove into the open, perhaps unsurprisingly as this endangered species prefers the dark forest floor to the gaze of publicity. We continued through the forest until we came to the beach where Meno showed us an Antillean Crested Hummingbirds' nest hanging from a sparse tree, protected by an overhanging cliff. We rested in a shelter by the pier and looked out to sea as many seabirds, possibly Red-footed Boobies in different colour forms, flocked on the horizon. A fly-by Royal Tern was a welcome and expected addition, though an American Oystercatcher was an unexpected write-in for the list. A Mangrove Cuckoo flew across the path and perched close by as we entered the forest, giving incredible views of its peachy underparts, and was in no hurry to leave.

Rajesh welcomed us to the beach restaurant and gave an orientation talk detailing all the activities we could enjoy whilst staying at Anse Chastanet, as staff filled our glasses with refreshing iced water.

Those who chose to walk up the road after lunch were treated to a trio of birds (Lesser Antillean Saltator, Scaly-breasted Thrashers and Tropical Mockingbird) taking turns to feed on a ripe papyrus fruit, while a female Antillean Crested Hummingbird hovered around flowering shrubs with brief rests in between.

Most of the group spent a restful afternoon catching up after the previous day's travel. We met in the lounge to complete the checklist, before another fine dinner in Treetops Restaurant, with the soothing sounds of live music filling the air.

Day 3

Sunday 21st January

Denner Bay, Quillesse Rainforest Reserve, Vieux Fort Wetlands

28 °C sunny with showers

We had an early start today and made a two-hour drive to the east side of the island, where we met local guides, Adams and Nesta at the entrance to the island's Correctional Centre, to begin our search for the near-endemic White-breasted Thrasher and more of St Lucia's special birds. Adams joked that the centre is easy to get into, but it might take a while to leave.

After a brief search the thrasher perched up on a boulder, looking like an over-sized Dipper, giving good views for those standing right position. We came to a path a little further along the road where another thrasher was perched in full view as if to say "what took you so long?" Photographers among us who hadn't managed a shot earlier were able to make amends after changing camera settings for the low-light.

An Orion Cecropian butterfly, otherwise known as Stinky Leafwing as it gives off a repellant chemical if disturbed, gave glimpses of its bright orange upper-wing as it rested on a branch. These large butterflies are not known to nectar on flowers, and feed on rotting fruit instead.

As we were about to leave, another of the island's endemics, a male St. Lucia Oriole, gave stunning views as it preened and showed its black, orange and yellow plumage. What a beauty!

Satisfied with our successful quest for the thrasher, we left for Des Cartiers Rainforest Trail in the Quillesse Rainforest Reserve. As we followed the ancient trail a Black Witch, a large bat-like moth, flew erratically ahead of us, as raucous calls of parrots resonated through the canopy.

A most sought-after Rufous-throated Solitaire, an attractive bird in the thrush family with its blue-grey upperparts, rusty throat and yellow feet, appeared as we reached the viewing area, giving very good views before it flew and landed on the very structure we were viewing from: remarkable!

Exciting moments ensued with Adams locating a St. Lucia Parrot perched close by, while a pair of Antillean Euphonias landed briefly below us, giving just enough time to fire off a few shots before they were gone. More parrots flew past, while a Purple-throated Carib sunbathed on a tree fern, before we retraced our steps back along the stony path for our picnic lunch.

Vieux Fort Wetlands is situated between the coast and the main highway, not far from the airport, and attracts a wide range of water birds, including Blue-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup and a number of herons and egrets. A small flock of American Wigeon flew in and promptly disappeared into the vegetation while we watched a Great Egret take flight and plunge into the lake, catching a large catfish, which it struggled to swallow.

Adams beckoned us to look through his 'scope at a 'Pied-billed Grebe' which promptly swam up to its American Coot parent. We didn't rib him *too* much: we've all done it I'm sure. He redeemed himself by finding a very elusive pair of grebes as they constantly dived at the far side of the lake.

An Osprey circled a few times before settling on a distant palm stump. Adams informed us that it was the Caribbean sub-species (*Pandion haliaetus ridgwayi*) which doesn't migrate and appeared smaller than Western Osprey that breeds in the UK and North America: it could be elevated to species level sometime in the future.

We'd had a full day's birding and seen many species, so it was time to say our goodbyes to Adams and Nesta and return to base after a fulfilling day birding across three very different habitats, arriving back at Anse Chastanet in good time to relax before dinner.

Day 4

Monday 22nd January

Dolphin & Bat Cave Tour off Anse Chastanet and Anse Mamin

26-28 °C, rain showers

We had time for a leisurely breakfast before our dolphin-watching cruise on Mystic Man's catamaran with Jonathan and his crew, Erika and Tanya.

It wasn't long before a feeding frenzy of Fraser's Dolphins was noticed ahead of the boat, as rain clouds engulfed the Pitons. As we approached, the dolphins surrounded the boat and were almost close enough to touch! 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.

Both Red-footed and Brown Booby flew past the boat as leaping dolphins (later identified as Pantropical Spotted Dolphins) were photographed at a distance. Jonathan asked if we'd seen chicken hawks (known to us as Broad-winged Hawks and slightly smaller than Common Buzzard) and told of times when they were much bigger and preyed on cats and dogs...now they're smaller and only prey on chickens, allegedly.

We left the area as other boats approached and sailed into Soufrière Bay where a cave holds approximately 5000 Antillean Fruit Bats. We could see the bats flying around inside the crevice as Jonathan skillfully positioned the boat to allow good views, before continuing past Jade Mountain, Anse Chastanet's sister hotel. Staff between the resorts outnumber rooms by more than 7:1, giving exceptional service to their guests.

After a thrilling morning, we were dropped at the pier close to Anse Mamin and took the opportunity for an hour's birding before lunch. A Green Heron looked nervous as it flew into a tree and began walking slowly along a branch trying to conceal itself, and a Little Blue Heron was seen grappling with a crab in the rocky stream, before swallowing it whole.

We arranged to meet in the lounge at 4.30pm, where pairs of American Kestrels and Scaly-breasted Thrashers showed very well, though we decided against walking in the rain and returned to our rooms to prepare for dinner.

Famous St. Lucia singer, LM Stone had guests on their feet with a repertoire of Earth Wind & Fire, Neil Diamond and Billy Joel. The tree frogs apparently joined in the chorus of 'YMCA' as we retired for the night.

Day 5

Tuesday 23rd January

Millet Bird Sanctuary Trail

25-28 °C, sun and heavy showers

Kenwin greeted us at the Millet Bird Sanctuary Trail with a St. Lucia Parrot feeding close to the visitor centre. This colourful bird was initially difficult to locate amongst the dense foliage, until it moved, giving prolonged views as it fed on the fruiting tree.

A Pearly-eyed Thrasher appeared on a coconut feeder at the end of the path. These feeders were supplied after Hurricane Tomas destroyed much of the forest in 2010, and help to bring some of the shyer forest birds out into the open. Grey Tremblers and St. Lucia Black Finch take to them very well: a female of the latter species fed on one of the feeders as we headed back along the path.

Umbrellas were at the ready as we returned to the centre – ‘raise them higher again, and if you do we could stay dry against the rain’. We entered the gated area in search of more forest birds as Kenwin halted a large land crab (*Gecarcinus ruricola*) between his boots long enough for photographs to be taken before it made its escape to the safety of a stream.

St. Lucia Black Finch were surprisingly difficult to pick out among the Lesser Antillean Bullfinches as they darted back and forth in the low forest light. A male St. Lucia Oriole showed well as a Bare-eyed Thrush gave just a fleeting glimpse, while Antillean Crested Hummingbirds hovered around orange flowers.

The rainforest had lived up to its name: we left for the return journey to Anse Chastanet in time for a late lunch in the beach restaurant after a very successful morning out. A Zenaida Dove picked and swallowed white petals from the sand as we ordered our meals. Bare-eyed Thrush perched in clear view for those returning to their rooms via the road, and Long-tailed Skipper allowed time for photos as it rested on a leaf in a sunny patch of garden.

We had a free afternoon before joining the management team for generous helpings of rum punch and canapés and a delicious and varied buffet on our own table set in a beach marquee. Luxury!

Day 6

Wednesday 24th January

Castries, Rainforest Adventures Aerial Tram

24-28 °C, breezy, sun & showers

Pelican numbers appeared to be growing daily as we gathered on the beach for our 8.00am departure along the coast to Castries, St. Lucia’s capital, for the Rainforest Adventures gondola ride. Entertainment was provided on Mystic Man’s catamaran by Xystus playing soul ballads, and maybe was it just my imagination, but I’m sure he played The Temptations and a few more classics.

Birds on the way included Royal Terns, but otherwise there was little movement of seabirds or cetaceans on the slightly choppy sea. A Spotted Sandpiper fed along the rocks as we docked in Castries where Junior was waiting to take us on the short journey to Rainforest Adventures. Local guides, Samantha and Irwin gave a commentary on the trees and birds as the aerial tram rose up through different stages of the forest. The view across the Caribbean Sea to Martinique was breathtaking as we came to an opening in the canopy on our decent.

We were encouraged to take it easy to the sound of The Eagles as 'X' upped the tempo and continued to entertain us on the way back south, as Jonathan pointed out an amazing rainbow covering the surface of the sea, more a colourful ray of light than a bow, and that was before the complimentary rum punch!

The Pitons were shrouded in clouds as we arrived back at Anse Chastanet for a restful afternoon. Birds seen from various room balconies included Lesser Antillean Saltator, Lesser Antillean Bullfinches, Bananaquits, Grey Tremblers and a St. Lucia Oriole while the customary late afternoon gathering of Lesser Antillean Swifts included several Caribbean Martins as clouds descended.

Day 7

Thursday 25th January

Sulphur Springs and Emerald Farm

Humid 29°C, light rain showers

A male Black-faced Grassquit appeared as we arrived at Sulphur Springs, known as 'the world's only drive-in volcano', lying just outside the main town of Soufrière, and a small flock of Shiny Cowbirds was happy feeding on food put out by one of the souvenir sellers before our guided tour.

Our guide 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 reassuring.

Martin told us that his father had worked at Emerald Farm before him as he showed us around the organic farm of 550 acres where fruit, herbs, vegetables and flowers are grown for Anse Chastanet and sister hotel, Jade Mountain. He introduced us to his pigs, Poker and Carrie, and explained that the pigs were pets and wouldn't be slaughtered for food. As we tasted freshly picked cocoa pods, the pigs happily accepted the leftovers.

Butterflies, including Fiery and Long-tailed Skippers, were busy taking nectar before our micro-brewery tour, where we were offered Chocolate Stout straight from the vat. We were reluctant to leave the temperature-controlled brewery (nothing to do with the beer of course) which was around 10°C cooler than outdoors.

Kingbirds hawked for insects above the flowerbeds as the chef prepared the table for our cookery demonstration, with different fruit and vegetables laid out on freshly-cut banana leaves. An amazing three-course meal was created as Chef Salvatore showed us how he prepared paste from a clove of garlic to be infused in the marinade for surf and turf and vegetable stir-fry. The aromas were divine, as was the jug of Golden Ale which just seemed mysteriously to evaporate in the heat.

An afternoon siesta ensued for some, while others met in the lounge for a spot of late afternoon birding on the penultimate day (for all but one lucky couple) before the final checklist and dinner.

Day 8

Friday 26th January

Anse Mamin

29°C rain showers

The tropical rain had stopped by 7.00am, in time for breakfast, before meeting 'Father Nature' Meno on the beach at 8.30am, while others caught up on the activities they'd been planning to do during the stay. The usual Spotted Sandpiper that had so far evaded us was feeding in the debris as we reached the path to Anse Mamin and a new bird for the trip, a Yellow-crowned Night Heron replete with plumes, was almost missed as it sheltered under trees close to the coastal path.

A St. Lucia Pewee signaled its presence in the dark understory as it tried to swallow a yellow butterfly, quite a catch for this small flycatcher. Another new bird for the group, Lesser Antillean Flycatcher, sallied for insects from a high tree, while calls of a Bridled Quail-dove had us slowly walking forward as it flew across the path.

Rain persisted as we reached the reservoir where a White Peacock butterfly posed for photos, and Antillean Crested Hummingbird and Green-throated Carib fed as Meno hacked off *Heliconia* leaves to reveal flowers for hummingbirds to pollinate. He demonstrated his magic on *Mimosa* leaves and ordered them to curl up at his touch, a defense strategy developed to avoid being eaten as the rain became heavier and we headed back for lunch, wishing the remaining couple well for their extended stay at Anse Chastanet.

We reflected on the wonderful wildlife we'd seen, the different activities we'd enjoyed and the magnificent surroundings. The wonderful staff gathered to say their goodbyes before Youvani arrived to take us to the airport.

Day 9

Saturday 27th January

Fly to Gatwick

The night-time flight allowed a few hours' sleep after our amazing time at Anse Chastanet. It had been a very enjoyable and successful week 'in paradise', with great company, and I'm sure it will live long in our memories.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	January 2024							
		19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>			2					
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelicanus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-footed Booby	<i>Sula sula</i>		1		✓				
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			✓					
Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>			✓					
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>		1		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax violacea</i>								1
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>			✓					
American Wigeon	<i>Anas americana</i>			3					
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>			✓					
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>			✓					
Osprey	<i>Pandion hallaetus</i>			1					
Broad-winged Hawk	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>		2	1			1	1	
Peregrine	<i>Falcon peregrinus</i>						?		
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>		1		2			2	
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>			✓					
Antillean Common Gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata cercheris</i>		2	✓					
Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>						1		1
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>		✓		✓		✓		

Common name	Scientific name	January 2024							
		19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Scaly-naped Pigeon	<i>Patagioenus squamosa</i>						1		2
Bridled Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon mystacea</i>		H						1
Ruddy Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon montana</i>			1					
Zenaida Dove	<i>Zenaida aurita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓					
Common Ground Dove	<i>Collumbina passerina</i>		3						✓
St Lucia Parrot	<i>Amazona versicolor</i>			✓		2			
Mangrove Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus minor</i>	3	H	H	✓	✓			1
Lesser Antillean Swift	<i>Chaetura martinica</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Purple-throated Carib	<i>Eulampis jugularis</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Green-throated Carib	<i>Eulampis holosericeus</i>		✓		1		1		1
Antillean Crested Hummingbird	<i>Orthorhynchus cristatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Antillean Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus oberi</i>								✓
Caribbean Elaenia	<i>Elaenia martinica</i>		5	✓					
St Lucia Pewee	<i>Contopus oberi</i>		1	1	✓	H	H	✓	✓
Grey Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus dominicensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>		1						
Tropical Mockingbird	<i>Mimus gilvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Trembler	<i>Cinclocerthia gutturalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scaly-breasted Thrasher	<i>Allenia fusca</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Pearly-eyed Thrasher	<i>Margarops fuscata</i>					✓	✓		
White-breasted Thrasher	<i>Ramphocinclus brachyurus</i>			2					
Rufous-throated Solitaire	<i>Myadestes genibarbis</i>			1					
Bare-eyed Thrush	<i>Turdus nudigenis</i>		1			1	✓		H
Black-whiskered Vireo	<i>Vireo altoquus</i>		1	1					
Antillean Euphonia	<i>Euphonia musica</i>			2					
St Lucia Warbler	<i>Dendroica delicata</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Bananaquit	<i>Coereba flaveola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-faced Grassquit	<i>Tiaris bicolor</i>		2			1		✓	
St Lucia Black Finch	<i>Melanospiza richardsoni</i>					✓			
Lesser Antillean Bullfinch	<i>Loxigilla noctis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Antillean Saltator	<i>Saltator albicollis</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Carib Grackle	<i>Quiscalus lugubris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Shiny Cowbird	<i>Molothrus bonariensis</i>			1				✓	
St Lucia Oriole	<i>Icterus laudabills</i>			1		1	1	1	

Others

Common name	Scientific name
Reptiles	
St. Lucia Anole Lizard	<i>Anolis luciae</i>
L. Antillean (Johnstone's Whistling) Frog	<i>Eleutherodactylus johnstonei</i>
Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Mammals	
Fraser's Dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>
Pantropical Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>
Small Asian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes javanicus</i>
Antillean Fruit Bat	<i>Brachyphylla cavernarum</i>
Butterflies and Moths	
Long-tailed Skipper	<i>Urbanus proteus</i>
Orcus Chequered Skipper	<i>Burnsius orcus</i>
Great Southern White	<i>Ascia monuste</i>
Gulf Fritillary	<i>Agraulis vanilla</i>
Julia (Flambeau)	<i>Dryas iulia</i>
Little Yellow	<i>Eurema lisa</i>
White Peacock	<i>Anartia atrophae</i>
Caribbean Buckeye	<i>Junonia evarete</i>
Orion Cecropian	<i>Historis odius</i>
Hanno Blue	<i>Hemiargus hanno</i>
Large Orange Sulphur	<i>Pheobis agarithe</i>
Statira Sulphur	<i>Aphrissa statira</i>
Fiery Skipper	<i>Hylephila phyleus</i>
White-tipped Black Moth	<i>Melanochoia chephise</i>
Black Witch Moth	<i>Ascalapha odorata</i>
Fasciolated Graphis	<i>Melipotis fasciolaris</i>
Dragonflies	
Antillean Skimmer	<i>Orthemis macrostigma</i>
Band-winged Dragonlet	<i>Erythrodiplax umbrata</i>
Other	
Land Crab	<i>Gecarcinus ruricola</i>
Stick Insect sp.	