

JAMAICA

April 24 – 30, 2016

TRIP REPORT

Report by Frank Mantlik



Photos, top to bottom: Jamaican Spindalis, Jamaican Tody, Crested Quail Dove, happy group!



Sunrise Birding LLC

www.sunrisebirding.com

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Leaders: Ricardo Miller and Frank Mantlik
Report & Photos by Frank Mantlik

All 28 Jamaican endemics seen well!

HIGHLIGHTS AND GROUP FAVORITES

- Crested Quail-Dove
- Red-billed Streamertail
- Black-billed Streamertail
- Jamaican Spindalis
- Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo
- Blackburnian Warbler
- Vervain Hummingbird
- Ricardo's "best tour ever", based on quality of birds and views, as well as the people!
- Jamaican Owl
- Jamaican Oriole
- Jamaican Tody
- Yellow-shouldered Grassquit
- Jamaican Blackbird
- Black Swift
- Great food, Firefly evenings

April 24, Day 1 - Arrival Kingston, Jamaica

All participants arrived at our hotel by late afternoon. Those who arrived a bit earlier birded the hotel grounds. The highlight was our first Jamaican endemic, a male Red-billed Streamertail visiting flowers by the pool. Also seen were Antillean Palm-Swifts, Antillean Nighthawks, White-crowned Pigeons, Loggerhead Kingbird, and Black-faced Grassquits. The tour officially began with meeting our local guide Ricardo during a delicious dinner of traditional Jamaican fare.

April 25, Day 2 - Hellshire Hills to the Blue Mountains

After an early breakfast, we promptly travelled by van west to the Hellshire Hills, an arid thorn scrub habitat along the coast. Here we succeeded in seeing several targets: Stolid Flycatcher, **Bahama Mockingbird**, Jamaican Vireo, Jamaican Mango, Yellow (Golden) Warbler, and West Indian Whistling-Duck. Next we made a brief stop at the Portmore Sewage Ponds. Waterbirds here included Northern Jacana, Little Blue Heron, Glossy Ibis, Least Tern, and various shorebirds. Among the Barn Swallows were 2 Bank Swallows, a rare passage migrant and a life bird for Ricardo!

The next stop was lunch in Kingston at Sonia's (superb curried goat, etc.), followed by more birding at Hope Gardens just as a rain shower hit. A stroll here tallied Yellow-billed Parrots, Jamaican Oriole, White-chinned Thrush, Gray Kingbird, Jamaican Woodpecker, Zenaida Dove, White-collared Swift, American Kestrel (white morph), and American Redstarts. In one large tree were 2 roosting Northern Potoos, an adult and a chick.



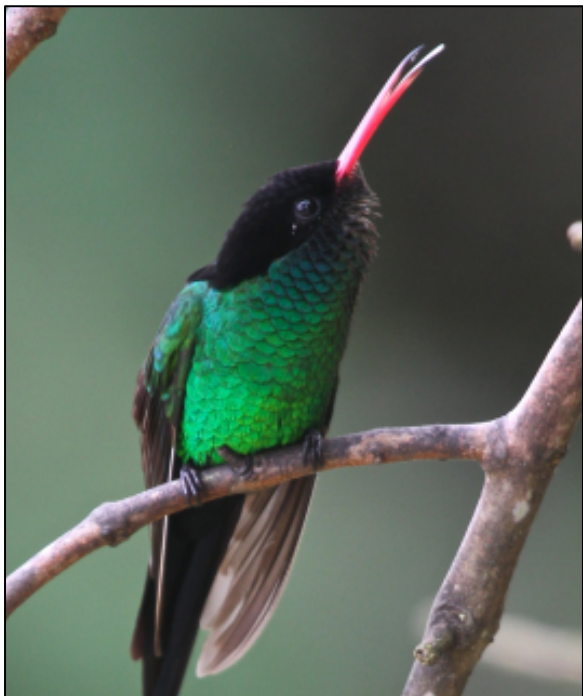
Driving up into the Blue Mountains, our afternoon birding was very productive. Species seen (and/or heard) included Ring-tailed Pigeon, Rufous-throated Solitaire, Jamaican Becard, Jamaican Spindalis, Orangequit, Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, and Arrowhead Warbler. A Jamaican Elaenia flashed its full yellow crown patch. Some in the group were like excited kids in a candy store, thrilled to see new endemic life birds. Several commuters on motorbikes whizzed by and upward we drove, stopping near the road to Woodside tract. Upon exiting the van, Ricardo noticed something on a moss and fern-covered stone wall. **Crested Quail-Dove!** There stood what some had labeled their number one target bird. Scope views were had by all. It was joined by a second, both doves walking down the old road, tails pumping as they did. Steve stealthfully pursued and obtained photos. Wow! A potentially tough bird to see was now in the bag.



By day's end, we checked into Starlight Chalet, our home for three nights. A celebratory drink was followed by a terrific home-cooked meal. Later, an evening try for owls was unsuccessful.

April 26, Day 3 - Blue Mountains: Section, Hardwar Gap

We reconvened on the veranda at first light for coffee, fruit, and morning birds. A Rufous-tailed Flycatcher was picking off insects attracted to a light. Red-billed Streamertails buzzed the feeders. Also noted were Ovenbird, Jamaican Oriole, Orangequit, Black-whiskered Vireo, and Yellow-faced Grassquit. We soon departed to bird along the



mountain road near the village of Section known as Hardwar Gap. It was foggy and calm. A Crested Quail-Dove nervously walked around a hillside water trickle; this would be the first of six seen today, including one close to the road on an open branch that allowed photos. Other species seen were Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Jamaican Pewee, White-eyed Thrush, Black-and-white Warbler, Yellow-shouldered Grassquit, and a Greater Antillean Elaenia. We were treated to watch a Jamaican Tody pair near their mud nest burrow.

Back at the Chalet, happy birders devoured a hearty breakfast of eggs, ackee and saltfish, callaloo, and festival. Casual birding time around the gardens allowed for photographers to work some subjects: **Red-billed Streamertails**, Jamaican Orioles, Bananaquits,

Bluefields Anoles, and more. We noticed a pair of Sad Flycatchers were nesting in a gutter downspout.

A mid-afternoon jaunt back to lower Hardwar Gap started out quiet, bird-wise, perhaps due to the thickening fog/clouds. Ring-tailed Pigeon and Loggerhead Kingbird afforded good views. A few Blue Mountain Vireos were heard and eventually well seen. We chatted with a friendly, interested group of young tourists walking down the road. As we parted, Ricardo spotted a Jamaican Blackbird foraging on tree trunks in the ever thickening fog. Tick!

Next we headed further downslope to Woodside, where we viewed Worm-eating Warbler, Jamaican Becard (and nest), and Rufous-throated Solitaire. The latter's shrill calls in the mountain mist were certainly haunting. Here we waited until sunset to try for Jamaican Owl. Just as it was getting dark, one began to call close by, repeatedly. We were all excited, but none could spot the bird. Finally Steve yelled, "I've got the owl!" The impact of his words were similar to someone announcing that you have won the lottery. The owl was in a tree downslope, so all got to see it well through the scope on its perch before darkness fell. David characterized this afternoon effort as the "foggy triple play", bagging the vireo, blackbird, and owl for our growing list (25/28) of endemic bird species seen.

April 27, Day 4 - Blue Mountains: Section, Hardwar Gap, Silver Hill Gap

The day dawned sunny and clear. Given our rapid success of the past few days, today would be a more leisurely one of trying to get better views (and photos) of some of the endemics. Even so, some were birding the veranda and gardens at first light. We spent a little time for a second cup of coffee, some good conversation, and a glance at the map of Jamaica. After breakfast, we headed out to bird the forest road not far from the lodge. It was very active, with good views of many species, including a male Jamaican Becard, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Jamaican Euphonia, Greater Antillean Bullfinch (pair), Jamaican Spindalis (female), Rufous-tailed Flycatcher (with a twig for the nest), and much more. A Crested Quail-Dove called. Further along, we encountered a perched Merlin, another pair of **Jamaican Todys**, and learned some plants (Blue Mahoe, Wild Ginger, etc.).



Back to the Chalet to unwind a bit before lunch. I announced I would be sharing our many eBird lists for the trip. A bit of down time allowed for catching up on emails, naps, or more photography of the resident birdlife: a stunning male Jamaican Spindalis, Jamaican Oriole, Orangequits, Bananaquits, Jamaican Pewee, and the ever-present, active Red-billed Streamertails.

At 4 pm, most joined Ricardo and me on a walk down the nearby Silver Hill Gap road. The afternoon fog was variable, but we saw numerous White-chinned and White-eyed

Thrushes, and heard Jamaican Blackbird, Caribbean Dove, and Ruddy Quail-Dove (a one-note whistle similar to blowing over a Coke bottle). During the return walk, we heard and glimpsed up to 5 Olive-throated Parakeets. Back at the Chalet, the fog-shrouded hummer feeders were swarming with Red-billed Streamertails, including about 12 males. Amazing!



April 28, Day 4 - Starlight Chalet (Blue Mts.) to Goblin Hill (Port Antonio coast)

Following breakfast, we packed the van to depart. Many thanks were expressed to Rachel and her staff for a delightful stay at this unpretentious mountain retreat. Not far below the Section coffee plantation, we stopped to bird another area of forest en route to the northeast coast. Near the van, Ricardo spotted a lizard on a tree trunk - a **Blue Mountain Anole** - a species none of us had seen before. We birded on foot and obtained nice views of many species, including Blue Mountain Vireo;

but the best was of a Jamaican Blackbird that fed in bromeliads and appeared to be building a nest in a tree along the road. An endangered endemic species nest-building...how cool is that! Then Sally spotted a close Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo (actually two) that rested and preened on a tree limb in the sun. Killer views! The group continued down the mountain, while Ricardo (and Steve) went back to get the van. Frank G. discovered a rare migrant Blackburnian Warbler, his wife Sally relayed word, and we all got to see it well feeding in the same tree for quite some time (with a host of Orangequits, Bananaquits, and American Redstarts). Ricardo got his "requested" life-bird (#213 for Jamaica)!

We hit the Caribbean coast at Buff Bay, and headed east, stopping at the Swift River mouth. Here we saw a Magnificent Frigatebird, 2 Green Herons, Little Blue Heron, Cave Swallows, and families of Pied-billed Grebes and Common Gallinules. Next the Rio Grande River marked the apparent geographic barrier between the two species of Streamertails. As we entered Port Antonio, I pointed out Navy Island, formerly owned by actor Errol Flynn. A quick stop for breakfast provisions was followed by lunch at Woody's Burgers, a unique local eatery. While waiting to be served, we enjoyed great views of



several Olive-throated Parakeets and a spectacular large Orion Cecropia butterfly. While checking in at Goblin Hill lodge, a male Black-billed Streamertail perched for all to see, and a **Jamaican Mango** visited a feeder.

In short order we were driving to nearby Ecclesdown Road, a famous birding area that passes through the lush foothills of the John Crow Mountains. Our targets here were the last two endemic bird species for the trip: Jamaican

Crow and **Black-billed Parrot**. The latter promptly obliged. Within 15 minutes, I had 3-4 Black-billed Parrots in the scope for all to see. Birding was good. Farther along, most of us heard the call of a Jamaican Crow, and some had a brief view of it as it flew down into the forest valley. But it would not cooperate fully this day. Returning “home”, the housekeeping staff had prepared a family-style chicken dinner, served on the patio of our room. The evening ended with the birdlist (99 trip species) and drinks afterwards to celebrate our tallying all 28 endemics.

April 29, Day 5 - Ecclesdown Road, Hector’s River, Goblin Hill

The day dawned warm and humid, typical weather along the lowland coast. Ricardo and I prepared and served a homemade breakfast (Western omelet, fresh fruit, coffee) on the patio. Soon we were back birding Ecclesdown Road. En route, two separate Ruddy Quail-Doves flew up from the road. Exiting the van, we heard two Caribbean Doves calling, and with patience managed several views of them. This forest was alive with a wide variety of birds, and Ricardo found a Loggerhead Kingbird incubating on its nest. Two Green-rumped Parrotlets blasted out of a nearby tree. Numerous Turkey Vultures began to soar overhead. The locals’ name for them is “John Crow”. The warm sun resulted in a variety of butterflies on the wing, including Julia and Zebra Heliconias, Antillean Malachite, and Cassius Blue.



We reached a small clearing that afforded a good view of the forested hillsides and valley. Here we succeeded in seeing and hearing at least two Jamaican Crows. One was perched, affording good scope views. Also here, small flocks of both **Yellow-billed** and Black-billed **Parrots** fed in trees right in front of us! And to top it off, a couple of Black Swifts whizzed overhead (a life-bird for me). That was a great stop! We continued birding along the length of Ecclesdown Road, eventually returning to the coast road.

Our next site was a place called Hector’s River, with coastal limestone cliffs that provide nesting habitat for White-tailed Tropicbirds. We pulled into the school-side park, only to find family crowds enjoying a field day. Despite this, our timing was impeccable. A pair of adult Tropicbirds was flying over inshore waters for ten minutes...long enough for us to enjoy their graceful flight and obtain a photo. Soon they had ventured out to sea. We stopped at a friendly cafe for a classic Jamaican lunch of Boston Jerk Chicken. We returned to the lodge for some casual time off. Steve worked on his bird photography. Others napped. The swimming pool was inviting. Evening celebratory cocktails preceded

another home-cooked (fish) meal on the patio. After dark, we went owling, and succeeded in finding two Jamaican Owls - an adult and a nearby fledged immature.

April 30, Day 6 - Goblin Hill, Green Castle Estates, Kingston

Following breakfast, we checked out, loaded the van, and headed towards Kingston. Along the way, brief birding stops were made at the mouths of the Swift River (Great Blue Heron and Least Bittern, etc.) and the Spanish River (Brown Pelican, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Royal Tern, etc.). Our last birding stop of the tour was at Green Castle Estates. This private area, requiring special permission, includes fields, old farms, forest, and some ponds. Ricardo's colleague, Dwayne (and his 3-yr. old daughter) joined us for the walk to the ponds. Along the way we saw Yellow-billed Cuckoo. The ponds produced several trip birds, including Ruddy Duck, Caribbean Coot (2) among the many American Coots, and Northern Rough-winged Swallow.

Returning to downtown Kingston, a brief stop was made at a well-stocked gift store. The hot item was a small hand-carved wooden Streamertail hummingbird. We lunched on jerk chicken again at the local Scotchies Restaurant, before returning to Knutsford Court Hotel. This concluded the very successful tour. It was truly great meeting and birding with each of you. Many thanks to our Jamaican guide and driver, Ricardo. Fond farewells to all.

Sincerely,
Frank Mantlik
Sunrise Birding LLC



Rufous-tailed Flycatcher



Jamaican Lizard Cuckoo



Jamaican Oriole



Jamaican Spindalis



Sad Flycatcher



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