



Rockjumper Birding Tours

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Island endemics of **Jamaica**

Trip Report: October 13th – 19th 2009 (7 days)



Blue Mountain View, Red-billed Streamertail, and Rafting on the Rio Grande.
All photos by David Shackelford

Top birds as voted by participants:

- 1. Red-billed Streamertail**
- 2. Jamaican Owl**
- 3. Crested Quail-Dove**
- 4. Jamaican Tody**
- 5. Northern Potoo**



Jamaican Mango and Highland Forest Scenery

Tour Summary

Our tour through the mountainous island of Jamaica offered a vast diversity of habitats from the evergreen forests of the Blue Mountains to the beaches and ultramarine waters of the coast. We successfully located all 28 of Jamaica's endemic bird species while allowing time to soak in the unique atmosphere of the personalized lodges and resorts where we stayed, enjoy some fine river-rafting, partake in the tastes of the local cuisine, and immerse ourselves in some wonderful scuba diving.

Perhaps Jamaica is best known as a tropical paradise with its palm-fringed white sand beaches, a wealth of tropical fruits, their swinging meringue and calypso music, and generally relaxed way of life. We found these things to be well-founded during our travels through the island, while we also learned so much more.

After landing in the capital city of Kingston, a busy metropolis supporting one of the largest natural harbors in the world we weaved our way through the city and into the mountain foothills. The verdant forests of the Blue Mountains dominate the eastern part of Jamaica, and we found our first coffee-growing chalet of Forres Park ideally situated on a mountain slope with a garden bursting with colorful flowers. Even from the breakfast table we could watch the delightful antics of the tiny Vervain Hummingbird and the dazzling Red-billed Streamertail, Jamaica's national bird while encountering an impressive number of North American migrants on their wintering grounds such as Black-throated Blue, Cape May, and Prairie Warblers. On our first night while dining on the wooden balcony we managed to coax into view a Jamaican Owl!



The coffee grown in the Blue Mountains is legendary as some of the finest on earth, and we certainly enjoyed our share before setting out towards the Abbey Green plantation via a series of forested dirt roadways. The birding was magnificent and within a short time we were marvelling at endemics such as the cute and confiding Jamaican Tody, flocks of Ring-tailed Pigeon, Jamaican Oriole, a pair of vocal Rufous-tailed Flycatcher, the tiny Jamaican Pewee, and

robust Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo lumbering through the canopy.

The quaint hilltop cottages of Lime Tree Farm offered us spectacular views of the surrounding misty mountains in an intimate setting with our gracious hosts and some outstanding traditional Jamaican cuisine.

Olive-throated Parakeets whizzed by the dining area where we were served local dishes such as callaloo soup and jerk chicken while watching curious White-chinned Thrush and Jamaican Vireo from the terrace. From here we explored the highest reaches of the Blue Mountains at more than 5,000 feet by accessing the narrow trail to the Portland Gap. Hiking through immaculate forest laden with mosses, lichens, orchids, ferns, bamboo and some amazing Tree Ferns, we carefully watched the trail in front of us and were rewarded with perched views of the secretive Ruddy and endemic Crested Quail-Doves. Migrants were no less apparent in this habitat with representatives including the sprightly Northern Parula, terrestrial Ovenbird and stunning views of the tough Swainson's Warbler. The ethereal songs of Rufous-throated Solitaire echoed through the wet gullies and eventually we tracked down a fine specimen as well as the range-restricted Greater Antillean Elaenia, confiding Blue Mountain Vireo, the uncommon White-eyed Thrush, Greater Antillean Bullfinch, and entertaining Arrow-headed Warbler before the falling of debris alerted us to the presence of a Jamaican Blackbird forging in a bromeliad above us, one of the islands trickiest specialties.



Vibrant Jamaican culture such as the 'back to Africa' Rastafarian movement is nowhere better represented than in the rich musical heritage of the country, as was demonstrated to us while visiting the enchanting boutique property of Strawberry Hill. Operated by the much-reputed Island Records label owner, we were able to see just how many artists have launched their music career in Jamaica including celebrated Reggae icon Bob Marley among so many others. We watched Antillean Palm Swift dashing by overhead before winding our way out of the mountains northward towards the coastline, stopping at the Hardwar Gap where we found our only Yellow-shouldered Grassquit of the trip foraging at the forest edge as well as more widespread endemics such as the colorful Jamaican Spindalis and Jamaican Euphonia - a lovely songster.

We next settled into the friendly Greencastle Estate guesthouse on a historic plantation overlooking where the land falls away to the Caribbean. The nearby stone ruins of a 300 year old windmill tower that once processed sugarcane served as a poignant reminder of the islands deep-rooted history. Columbus claimed Jamaica for Spain after landing there in 1494, but the island was later seized by the British to become one of the world's leading sugar-exporting, slave-dependent nations resulting in a blend of cultures that has profoundly influenced the history of the West Indies. The hummingbird feeders outside our patio attracted the charming Jamaican Mango that sparkled lavender in the sunlight, while a short walk through the countryside produced great views of Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo and by twilight a very responsive Northern Potoo.

We warded off the lowland heat with a river trip on the Rio Grande, climbing onto a 30 foot bamboo raft and letting our local boatman navigate us down the river using a long pole to push off the riverbank. The original Arawak and Taino indigenous people from South America first settled the island between 4000 and

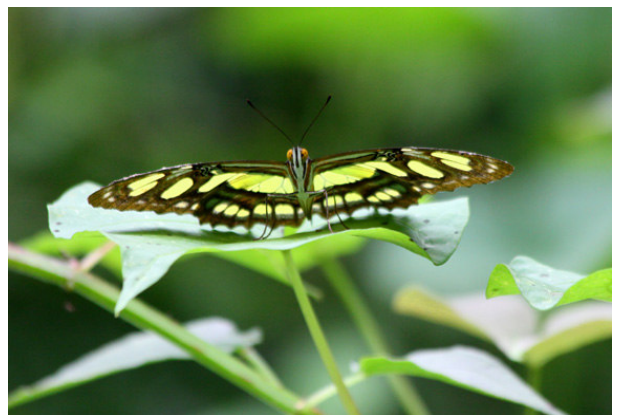
1000 BC and named it Xaymaca, meaning the 'Land of Springs' - rightfully so as the Rio Grande is one of more than 120 rivers that flow through Jamaica from the central mountain region to the coasts. The steep cliffs and forest scenery along our journey was fantastic and we cooled ourselves with an occasional swim in the river.

Our final destination during the trip was the internationally renowned Hotel Mockingbird Hill, and upscale but personalized resort surrounded by manicured indigenous gardens and serving perhaps the finest fusion of European-Caribbean food to be found anywhere! The active escapades of Orangequits and Black-billed Streamertails were entertaining us constantly even as we enjoyed welcome drinks on the veranda overlooking the turquoise Caribbean coast below. There was also a rooftop platform allowing for eye-level views of species such as the lively Sad Flycatcher and Jamaican Woodpecker feeding in the Cecropias. It should be mentioned that not only does Hotel Mockingbird Hill offer an outstanding quality of service, but we also found them to be one of the most eco-friendly resorts we have ever experienced.

In order to locate the remainder of Jamaica's endemic birds we set out into the John Crow Mountains along forested Ecclesdown Road arriving just after dawn. Within a short time we were listening to the raucous morning calls of Yellow-billed and Black-billed Parrots in the facing valley and with a little persistence we gorged ourselves on perched scope views of both species. The equally vocal but localized Jamaican Crow also showed well and by mid-morning we had completed our quest for the island's endemics by finding the diminutive Jamaican Elaenia and a bold Jamaican Becard singing proudly near a globular hanging nest. We celebrated with a visit to the picturesque Reach Falls that cascade down a series of elevated limestone tiers; here we were also fortunate to see the extraordinary, rare Giant Swallowtail, the largest butterfly of the Americas!

The afternoon was spent boating out to sea where we slipped into wetsuits and plunged into the Caribbean where the allure of scuba diving along the coral reefs finally took hold. Besides a profusion of colorful Sea Fans and Giant Barrel Sponges we beheld a menagerie of colorful fish and wildlife such as Barracuda, some massive Reef Crabs, Spiny Lobsters, an especially lovely Spotted Drumfish and a gigantic Bull Ray, more than 8 feet across!

Our adventures through Jamaica finally came to an end after an early morning drive to see the sunrise overlooking the cactus-studded desert scenery of Hellshire where we scoped a perched Stolid Flycatcher and were examined by the inquisitive Bahama Mockingbird, both species restricted to the Caribbean. Finally it was time to bid farewell to this diverse tropical island and we were able to reflect upon the unique fusion of South American, African, European, and Asian inhabitants that have shaped the island into the multifaceted mosaic of international customs and traditions we experienced. Jamaica offers an amazing combination of diverse habitats, great accommodations, beautiful mountains and beaches, and excellent birding opportunities.



List of Birds encountered during the tour:

Key to abbreviations:

(E): endemic (NE): near-endemic (I): introduced

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe

Podilymbus podiceps

This species proved to be fairly common in a small reservoir at Greencastle.

PELICANS

Brown Pelican

Pelecanus occidentalis

A common species of the coast, especially near Kingston.

FRIGATEBIRDS

Magnificent Frigatebird

Fregata magnificens

We found this elegant flyer commonly along the north coastline.

HERONS EGRETS AND BITTERNs

Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias

Scattered birds were seen near water throughout the tour.

Great Egret

Ardea alba

This is another widespread species that was regularly encountered near water.

Tricolored Heron

Egretta tricolor

A few birds were seen along the edge of the Rio Grande.

Little Blue Heron

Egretta caerulea

Fairly common near water throughout the tour and seen regularly.

Snowy Egret

Egretta thula

Several birds were found at scattered sites throughout the tour with very close encounters along the Rio Grande.

Cattle Egret

Bubulcus ibis

Numerous in fields throughout the tour.

Green Heron

Butorides virescens

Several birds were seen near water with our first views at a reservoir on Greencastle Estate.

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Nycticorax nycticorax

A few birds were seen at a wetland near Kingston.

IBIS AND SPOONBILLS

White Ibis

Eudocimus albus

Several birds were watched in flight at a wetland near Kingston.

Glossy Ibis

Plegadis falcinellus

Numerous birds were flocking together at a wetland near Kingston.

DUCKS GEESE AND SWANS

American Wigeon

Anas americana

A couple birds were noted in a wetland near Kingston.

Blue-winged Teal

Anas discors

Numerous wintering birds were seen in a wetland near Kingston.

Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata

A few individuals were found at a wetland near Kingston.

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*
Common and conspicuous throughout the tour.

HAWKS EAGLES AND KITES

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*
Individuals were found on most days of the trip in small numbers.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*
We regularly encountered this tiny falcon throughout our visit to Jamaica.

RAILS GALLINULES AND COOTS

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
We had a couple sightings at various wetlands during the tour.

American Coot *Fulica americana*
Several birds were noted in a wetland near Kingston.

AVOCETS AND STILTS

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*
A few scattered birds were seen near water during the tour.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
One individual was seen foraging along the north coastline beach.

SANDPIPERS

Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*
A couple of these often secretive birds were seen well feeding at a wetland near Greencastle.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius*
We regularly encountered this species; it was especially numerous along the banks of the Rio Grande.

Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaria*
One individual was seen well at a wetland near Greencastle.

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*
Two birds were seen foraging along the banks of the Rio Grande.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*
A couple birds were noted at a wetland near Greencastle.

Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*
One migrant was seen at a wetland near Greencastle.

GULLS

Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*
Near Kingston this species was common along the Caribbean coastline.

TERNS

Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*
This species was regularly seen near the coast.

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

Several bids were watched near the Kingston airport on the coast.

PIGEONS AND DOVES

Rock Pigeon

Columba livia

Available in urban areas.

White-crowned Pigeon

Patagioenas leucocephala

This attractive species was pleasantly common throughout the tour.

Ring-tailed Pigeon (E)

Patagioenas caribaea

Although hunted illegally, we still saw numerous birds in the highlands with some great scope views of perched birds.

Zenaida Dove

Zenaida aurita

Fairly common throughout the tour, especially in the lowland areas.

White-winged Dove

Zenaida asiatica

We found this invasive species in the gardens of Kingston.

Common Ground-Dove

Columbina passerina

Numerous birds were seen throughout the tour at most birding sites.

Caribbean Dove

Leptotila jamaicensis

We only heard this species calling in the forest near Abbey Green.

Crested Quail-Dove (E)

Geotrygon versicolor

We saw a total of seven birds over three consecutive days including some marvelous perched views of this secretive but surprisingly attractive species.

Ruddy Quail-Dove

Geotrygon montana

We also managed amazing stationary views of this retiring quail-dove motionless and confiding on the forest trail leading to Portland Gap.

PARROTS

Olive-throated (Jamaican) Parakeet

Aratinga nana

Small flocks were encountered at several locations throughout our tour with our first views of a flock thirty strong from Lime Tree Farm.

Green-rumped Parrotlet

Forpus passerinus

We first scoped several birds on the Greencastle Estate and later found other flocks near Hotel Mocking Bird Hill.

Yellow-billed Parrot (E)

Amazona collaria

After hearing several flocks we managed excellent scope views of several birds along the Ecclesdown Road.

Black-billed Parrot (E)

Amazona agilis

We had some great scope views of several birds perched in the morning sunlight on the Ecclesdown Road.

CUCKOOS

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Coccyzus americanus

An uncommon migrant to Jamaica, we had nice views of one bird in the scrubland of Hillshire.

Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo (E)

Coccyzus vetula

This smart-looking endemic was seen very well at Greencastle responding to playback and then later seen once more along the Ecclesdown Road.

Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo (E)

Coccyzus pluvialis

We had awesome scope studies of this massive cuckoo along the road to Abbey Green and again on the

Hardwar Gap.

Smooth-billed Ani

Crotophaga ani

This widespread Neotropical species was seen in degraded habitat and forest edge throughout the tour.

OWLS

Jamaican Owl (E)

Pseudoscops grammicus

We had awesome spot-lit views of this attractive owl responding to playback at Forres Park; we also heard this species on three other occasions at scattered locations during the tour.

POTOOS

Northern Potoo

Nyctibius jamaicensis

This was a great evening experience as we coaxed a responsive bird to perch exactly where we wanted – only fifteen feet away on an eye-level bare snag outside the Greencastle Estate House.

SWIFTS

White-collared Swift

Streptoprocne zonaris

A few birds were seen flying along the foothills of the north coast.

Antillean Palm-Swift (NE)

Tachornis phoenicobia

We sighted this fast-flying Caribbean endemic in open habitat at a few sites including Strawberry Hill.

HUMMINGBIRDS

Jamaican Mango (E)

Anthracothorax mango

There were two very territorial individuals showing well at Greencastle followed by another bird at Hillshire.

Red-billed Streamertail (E)

Trochilus polytmus

This gorgeous endemic, the national bird of Jamaica, was abundant during most of our tours with some amazing views almost daily.

Black-billed Streamertail (E)

Trochilus scitulus

This is the ecological equivalent of the preceding species within its narrow range on the northeast of the island.

Vervain Hummingbird (NE)

Mellisuga minima

We enjoyed several sightings of this absolutely tiny hummingbird with our first great views in the garden of Forres Park.

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher

Megasceryle alcyon

We first found this widespread species along the Rio Grande with further views at a wetland near Kingston.

TODIES

Jamaican Tody (E)

Todus todus

Delightfully common, we encountered this charismatic species almost every day of the tour, and often very confiding.

WOODPECKERS

Jamaican Woodpecker (E)

Melanerpes radiolatus

We found this attractive endemic to be fairly common and widespread throughout the tour.

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS**Jamaican Elaenia (E)***Myiopagis cotta*

Only one bird was encountered on this tour along the Ecclesdown Road.

Greater Antillean Elaenia (NE)*Elaenia fallax*

A bird that seems to be more common in the highest reaches of the Blue Mountains, we found several pairs near the Portland Gap.

Jamaican Pewee (E)*Contopus pallidus*

Surprisingly scarce, we heard one calling which we tracked down for excellent views near Abbey Green and only heard one other bird along the Hardwar Gap.

Eastern Kingbird*Tyrannus tyrannus*

Several birds were seen at scattered sites throughout the tour.

Gray Kingbird*Tyrannus dominicensis*

Only one bird was seen in the dry scrubland of Greencastle.

Loggerhead Kingbird (NE)*Tyrannus caudifasciatus*

This Caribbean endemic was fairly common and seen almost daily often perched on conspicuous perches.

Sad Flycatcher (E)*Myiarchus barbirostris*

We found this species to be increasingly common on the north edge of the island with several nice sightings.

Rufous-tailed Flycatcher (E)*Myiarchus validus*

A robust flycatcher, we first found a pair near Abbey Green followed by further sightings at Hardwar Gap and along the Ecclesdown Road.

Stolid Flycatcher (NE)*Myiarchus stolidus*

We enjoyed great views of a vocal bird at Hellshire.

Jamaican Becard (E)*Pachyramphus niger*

With persistence we eventually trekked down a responsive individual along the Ecclesdown Road.

SWALLOWS**Barn Swallow***Hirundo rustica*

Several birds were seen flying along the Hellshire area.

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS**Bahama Mockingbird (NE)***Mimus gundlachii*

A localized species in Jamaica, we found five birds total that were very responsive in the Hellshire area.

Northern Mockingbird*Mimus polyglottos*

Common and widespread throughout the tour.

THRUSHES**Rufous-throated Solitaire (NE)***Myadestes genibarbis*

This beautiful songster was seen on three occasions in the high Blue Mountains.

White-eyed Thrush (E)*Turdus jamaicensis*

An uncommon species, we found four birds total between our time in the Blue and John Crow Mountains.

White-chinned Thrush (E)*Turdus aurantius*

This thrush is pleasantly common throughout Jamaica including in hotel gardens.

CROWS, JAYS AND MAGPIES**Jamaican Crow (E)***Corvus jamaicensis*

We enjoyed excellent scope views of several individuals calling on a dead snag along the Ecclesdown Road.

STARLINGS**European Starling (I)***Sturnus vulgaris*

An unfortunate introduction.

VIREOS AND ALLIES**Jamaican Vireo (E)***Vireo modestus*

We enjoyed almost daily sightings of this pretty little songster.

Blue Mountain Vireo (E)*Vireo osburni*

A little drab but none-the-less appreciated, we enjoyed great views in the Blue Mountain forest sites as well as along the Ecclesdown Road.

Black-whiskered Vireo*Vireo altiloquus*

Several birds were seen throughout the tour at scattered sites.

SISKINS CROSSBILLS AND ALLIES**Jamaican Euphonia (E)***Euphonia jamaica*

Often located by its eloquent song, we saw several birds well throughout the tour with our first bird at Abbey Green.

NEW WORLD WARBLERS**Northern Parula***Parula americana*

A fairly common migrant during the tour.

Yellow Warbler*Dendroica petechia*

We only found this species singing in the scrub of Hellshire.

Cape May Warbler*Dendroica tigrina*

We only found a few birds throughout the tour with our best sighting at Abbey Green.

Black-throated Blue Warbler*Dendroica caerulescens*

This attractive migrant was abundant and confiding throughout the tour.

Prairie Warbler*Dendroica discolor*

We also found this migrant to be pleasantly common throughout the tour.

Arrow-headed Warbler (E)*Dendroica pharetra*

This attractive endemic was found at virtually all forest sites in small numbers including some excellent prolonged views.

Black-and-white Warbler*Mniotilta varia*

Often creeping along like a nuthatch, we found numerous birds throughout the tour in forested areas.

American Redstart*Setophaga ruticilla*

Probably the most abundant migrant on the island during our visit with numerous birds observed daily.

Worm-eating Warbler*Helmitheros vermivorum*

Two birds were seen very well along the Hardwar Gap and Ecclesdown Road.

Swainson's Warbler*Limnothlypis swainsonii*

A scarce migrant, we were fortunate to obtain outstanding views of this often cryptic species in the undergrowth along the trail to the Portland Gap.

Ovenbird*Seiurus aurocapilla*

We were pleased to see numerous birds while in forested habitat throughout the tour.

Northern Waterthrush *Seiurus noveboracensis*

Two birds were found during the tour, first along the road to Abbey Green and again along the Ecclesdown Road.

Louisiana Waterthrush *Seiurus motacilla*

We had great views of one bird along the Hardwar Gap.

Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*

Several birds were seen at scattered sites including the scrub along Hardwar Gap.

BANANAQUIT

Bananaquit *Coereba flaveola*

Abundant and noisy throughout the tour.

TANAGERS AND ALLIES

Jamaican Spindalis (E) *Spindalis nigricephala*

This brightly colored endemic was common throughout the tour with several sightings daily.

BUNTINGS SPARROWS SEEDEATERS ALLIES

Black-faced Grassquit *Tiaris bicolor*

Almost all grassy areas and forest edge held populations of this active seedeater.

Yellow-shouldered Grassquit (E) *Loxipasser anoxanthus*

We tracked down only one individual that showed very well along the Hardwar Gap.

Orangequit (E) *Euneornis campestris*

This quick-moving species was common throughout the tour with several sightings daily often feeding on the nectar of blooming flowers.

Greater Antillean Bullfinch (NE) *Loxigilla violacea*

Most forest sites during the tour produced a pair or two of this attractive species.

SALTATORS CARDINALS AND ALLIES

Rose-breasted Grosbeak *Pheucticus ludovicianus*

One male was seen along the Hardwar Gap still showing breeding plumage.

TROUPIALS AND ALLIES

Jamaican Blackbird (E) *Nesopsar nigerrimus*

We first heard the outrageous song of this scarce species while walking along the trail to the Portland Gap and managed views of one bird feeding above us in the bromeliads.

Greater Antillean Grackle (NE) *Quiscalus niger*

This species was common along the north coast.

Jamaican Oriole (NE) *Icterus leucopteryx*

We enjoyed the song of this attractive species just as much as the daily sightings.

Mammals encountered:

BATS

Jamaican Fruit Bat (E) *Artibeus jamaicensis*

Several were seen well at our accommodation of Forres Park.

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