JAMAICA: THE BLUE MOUNTAINS, COCKPIT COUNTRY, AND CARIBBEAN COAST

Thursday, January 9–Wednesday, January 15, 2014
Workshop: Thursday, December 12, 6:30-8:30pm
Guides: Tod Winston, Lyndon Johnson, Wendy Lee

Jamaica is among the best island destinations in the world for birding, known for the outstanding beauty of its native avifauna, the richness and variety of its landscape, and its lovely tropical climate. Over 300 bird species have been recorded in Jamaica, including 127 breeding species and 180 migrants. Jamaica has more endemic birds than any other West Indian island: 28 species! Most of Jamaica’s endemics can be found in just a few days, in two very different habitats: the stunningly beautiful Blue Mountains, and the pristine and exotic Cockpit Country.

TOUR ITINERARY

Day 1, Thursday, January 9: WELCOME

Arrival at Norman Manley International Airport, Kingston. Departing immediately from Kingston, we’ll wind our way 4,000 feet to Hardwar Gap, the very heart of the best birding in the Blue Mountains. We’ll stay our first two nights in lovely Blue Mountain villas in the neighborhood of Greenwich and Hollywell National Park, including Woodside villa, which sits on a 12-hectare coffee farm; the house is impeccable in its old-Jamaica feel and boasts spectacular views, gardens, and a spring-fed pool. Superb birding and hiking trails are literally at our doorstep. We’ll enjoy a welcome dinner this evening before getting a good night’s sleep to prepare for our first morning of birding.

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Day 2, Friday, January 10: HARDWAR GAP, BLUE MOUNTAIN COFFEE ESTATE, AND STRAWBERRY HILL GARDENS

We’ll rise early this first morning to relish the dawn chorus of Blue Mountain bird song, especially the haunting flute-like call of rufous-throated Solitaire. We’ll bird the area’s mature montane forests, where as much as 100 inches of rain per year supports luxurious and fascinating vegetation—highland trees such as the Blue Mahoe and a heavy growth of mosses, lichens, and bromeliads. Here we’ll look for high-elevation bird species including white-eyed thrush, greater Antillean elaenia, the often-elusive crested quail-dove, and the endemic Jamaican becard, blue mountain vireo, and Jamaican pewee.

By mid morning we will have made our way to Clifton Mount—one of the oldest and finest Blue Mountain coffee estates in Jamaica. The lovely Clifton Mount Estate House, set in a garden full of flowers, is the last of few surviving 19th-century Coffee Great Houses. We will pause here to sample a cup of the world’s most prized coffee, surrounded by the island’s most magnificent views of the mighty Blue Mountain range.

Our next stop will be Strawberry Hill, a spectacular mountain-top resort surrounded by beautiful gardens. Over 200 endemic and exotic species of plants, trees and shrubs have been catalogued in Strawberry Hills’ 6-acre historic garden, providing a rich habitat for resident and visiting birds. Here we hope to get good looks at the incredible “doctor bird” or red-billed streamertail, Jamaica’s national bird, as well as the Jamaican oriole, white-crowned pigeon, and wintering warblers, before returning for dinner and a relaxing evening at our Blue Mountain villas.
Day 3, Saturday, January 11: BUFF BAY ROAD TO PORT ANTONIO

We’ll depart early this morning for Port Antonio, traveling through prime areas to find Jamaica’s most endangered species, the Jamaican blackbird, known locally as wild-pine sergeant due to its habit of foraging in Bromeliads (a.k.a wild-pine) for insects. We’ll also look for mixed flocks of tanagers and warblers and listen for the noisy Jamaican woodpecker. Other possibilities common to the Blue Mountains include four endemics: the adorable bright green Jamaican Tody, the arrowhead warbler, the striking Jamaican spindalis, and the “old man bird” or chestnut-bellied cuckoo.

Upon arrival in Port Antonio, we will check into Goblin Hill Villas at San San Bay, set on twelve acres of lawns and gardens overlooking sparkling Jamaican white sand beaches and turquoise Caribbean water. Port Antonio is one of the most unspoiled corners of Jamaica, offering an insider’s glimpse into the Caribbean of yesteryear. The endemic black-billed parrot, orangequit (a curious bird, the only member of the genus Euneornis), sad flycatcher, and Jamaican euphonia are some of the birds to be found in the Goblin Hill gardens. Weather permitting, we’ll also make an attempt for Jamaican owl on our Villa grounds this evening.

DAY 4, Sunday, January 12: ECCLESDOWN ROAD

Today we’ll bird renowned Ecclesdown Road in the Drivers River Valley. This is the wettest forest on the island—and the single most endemic-rich spot in the entire Caribbean. Here we’ll have a second chance to spot the scarce Jamaican blackbird; pairs of this endemic species sing short duets, males performing display flights in the canopy. The blackbirds require mature wet forest, a habitat much reduced in Jamaica, and this is one of the best places for them. We also hope to see the smaller, darker, and proportionately longer-tailed “black-billed” streamertail, which occurs only at this end of the island.

Mid-day we will cool down and picnic at the beautiful, unspoiled Reach Falls, close to Ecclesdown. www.nycaudubon.org/jamaica-tour-2014
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DAY 5, Sunday, January 13: RIO GRANDE RIVER RAFT, SEA TURTLE RESCUE, AND SILVER SANDS

This morning we will leave Port Antonio via bamboo river raft, meandering two hours down the majestic Rio Grande River through outstanding scenery. Along the way we’ll look for masked duck, yellow-breasted crake, Caribbean coot, West Indian whistling duck, as well as herons, egrets, and other waterbirds.

Trading bus for raft, we’ll then continue west along the island’s north coast, stopping in Oracabessa for lunch before visiting Mel Tennant, an engaging British ex-pat who runs a creative program to protect sea turtles nesting on Gibraltar Beach. Mel will explain the work he has been doing for 10 years to track turtles and engage the local community in turtle protection. In his time there, Mel has watched the turtle population grow from 13 to over 150, and the survival rate of turtle eggs has improved significantly from 1 in 1000 to about 1 in 100. Now that human interference has been all but eliminated, mongooses remain the biggest threat to nesting sea turtles in Oracabessa.

From Oracabessa we’ll follow the sea coast to the town of Duncans and the lovely beach-side Silver Sands Villas, where we’ll spend our last two nights. Several species of seabirds including magnificent frigatebirds, brown pelicans, and royal terns are common along Jamaica’s seacoast. In the gardens near the villas, the Jamaican mango is the bird to look for—the largest and darkest of Jamaica’s four hummingbird species, with subtle but beautiful dark colors and a long, decurved black bill.

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DAY 6, Monday, January 14: COCKPIT COUNTRY

Our birding guide for our sixth day, Wendy Lee, is director of the Northern Jamaica Conservation Association, and a passionate advocate for Jamaica’s wildlife and wild places. Wendy has worked for nearly three decades to protect Cockpit Country, a wild and beautiful area of karst limestone hills and sinkholes. These rugged Cockpit formations have been an effective deterrent to forest clearing, making Cockpit Country some of the most pristine habitat in Jamaica. The area has a long and fascinating history, home to the Maroons, freed slaves of Spanish colonists who resisted British rule, and a hotbed of Jamaica’s abolitionist movement. In addition to its human history, the region is a critically important bird area that provides wintering grounds for significant numbers of black-throated blue warblers and yellow-throated warblers, among others, and provides large tracts of relatively undeveloped forest for nearly all of the 28 extant Jamaican endemics. Wendy Lee’s wildlife rescue center began as an effort to rescue and rehabilitate the two endemic parrot species, the black- and yellow-billed parrots, but has grown to include a wide variety of the area’s wildlife—and focuses on teaching her fellow Jamaicans to value and protect wild birds.

We’ll begin the day inland at a patch of scrubby forest dominated by gumbo limbo or “tourist” trees, a good habitat for the gorgeous Jamaican lizard cuckoo, the minute vervain hummingbird, common ground doves, and wintering Cape May and prairie warblers. The green-rumped parrotlet, a beautiful little parrot that is not native to Jamaica, may be found chattering in the treetops. After lunch we’ll drive to Stewart Town, a small village on the edge of Cockpit Country. Stewart Town is a hot spot for 25 of the area’s endemic species and we hope to see many of them as we hike the local trails. We’ll look particularly for late afternoon flocks of yellow-billed and black-billed parrots as they swirl overhead on their way to their roosts.

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Day 7, Monday, March 18: Rocklands, Wetlands, and Farewell to Jamaica

Birders have flocked to Rocklands Bird Sanctuary since 1958, when it was founded by the late Lisa Salmon, who tamed and trained wild hummingbirds. It is an extraordinary experience having spectacular red-billed streamertails and mango hummingbirds perch on your finger as they drink out of a miniature bottle, as well as black-faced and yellow-faced grassquits feed from hand. Rocklands is surrounded by woodlands; on a short walk you may find one more Jamaican tody (a bird that always delights), Caribbean dove, black-whiskered vireo, northern parula and even an ovenbird.

On our way to and from Rocklands, we’ll pass by both fresh- and saltwater ponds that may offer wintering ducks and waterbirds: Last year’s sightings included tricolored heron, blue-winged teal, black-necked stilt, and northern Jacana. And alas, all good things must come to an end: Our final stop before heading to the airport will be the traditional Jamaican “jerk”-style restaurant Scotchies, popular among Jamaicans themselves, where we’ll enjoy a delicious farewell lunch before departure to Montego Bay’s Sangster International Airport.

To learn more about our January 2014 birding tour of Jamaica or to register, please contact Adriana Palmer at apalmer@nycaudubon.org or 212-691-7483 x304.