



Jamaican Tody is one of 28 endemic bird species on the island. This short trip produced 25, as well as a couple of regional specialities.

Our Virgin Atlantic flight broke through the clouds into the sun, leaving behind a particularly cold and dank Gatwick in January. We were on a nine-hour flight to Jamaica, where we hoped to connect with many of the 28 endemic species to be found on the island.

Most birding itineraries cover the whole of the island – the west, Cockpit Country in the centre and the Blue Mountains in the east. Our plans were far more limited, and we would stay at just

Jamaica is well known for its sought-after endemics; Roy Beddard managed to connect with most of them even on a trip limited to the east end of the island.

two sites, both in the east of the island. It would be interesting to see how many of the sought-after endemics we would be able to connect with.

Birders visiting Jamaica do not have expectations of leaving the island with a massive list, as in some Neotropical countries. The island's entire species list consists of about 307, and I was expecting a count for the week in the 80s or 90s, but with a very high proportion of endemic species – so quality, not quantity.

Endemics before breakfast

With 28 species, Jamaica boasts more endemics than any other island in the Caribbean, indeed more than any island of comparable size in the world, including Cuba, which has 24. This high rate of endemism is largely due to the fact that Jamaica has always been isolated; it emerged from the ocean more than 10 million years ago and has never been connected with any other landmass. As a result, it has plenty of unique birds and flora. Of the 4,000 plant species about 25 per cent are only found on the island.

Our first stay was at Forres Park, near Mavis Bank in the Blue Mountains. These are the highest mountains on the

island, rising to over 2,250 m, and are home to the production of the most expensive and exclusive coffee in the world. As a confirmed 'coffeeholic' I was looking forward to my first cup of this premium brew.

The mountains are vegetated all the way to their peaks and in past times would have been covered with rainforest. There are still remnants of this, as well as substantial secondary forests, and it is on mountain tracks cutting through these forests that we would be doing our birding for the first part of our stay.

Already waiting for us at Forres Park was John Fletcher, who was to be our guide for the first few days of the trip. John is a veteran birder who first visited Jamaica from Britain in the 1950s, when he was stationed there during his National Service. He liked what he saw and stayed, subsequently raising a family and running several food- and coffee-related businesses.

Tired after our nine-hour flight, we went to bed looking forward to the next day's birding. I was awake well before dawn, listening to the insects, frogs and local dogs, but not a sound from the Jamaican Owl that is supposed to frequent the Ackee tree outside my room. We met before dawn, and in the half-light I glimpsed a familiar sight, a

PHOTOS: NEIL BOWMAN

Escape to Blue Mountain

male Black-throated Blue Warbler. I was to see a number of over-wintering North American warblers during the week, and this first was quickly followed by Northern Parula and American Redstart.

Watching from the balcony of the hotel's open dining area we saw our first two endemic Jamaican species: White-chinned Thrush and Jamaica's national bird, Red-billed Streamertail. This fantastic little hummingbird is emerald green, with huge long tail streamers.

Our party had now assembled and a second guide, Marlon Beale from the Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park Service, joined us. At 6.30 am we set off up the steep shrub-covered slope behind the hotel for an exploratory pre-breakfast walk. Unfortunately many of these shrubs and trees are introduced species such as eucalyptus, entirely unsuited to the region.

The next bird was another stunning little island speciality: Jamaican Tody, a tiny bright green sprite with a red throat, long flattened red bill and pale lemon underparts. It is a miniature foliage-gleaner, feeding on moths and caterpillars. This lifer was followed by a trio of Jamaican Orioles feeding on small fruits on a nearby tree.

We were now well above the hotel, and looking back down the valley had spectacular views of the Blue Mountains in the misty early-morning light. The highest of these, Blue Mountain Peak, was hidden completely in the clouds, as it was during most of our stay.

New birds were still coming thick and fast. A Vervain Hummingbird was more like a large insect than a bird; this is a regional Caribbean endemic, also present on the island of Hispaniola. Just five centimetres in length, it is the second-smallest bird in the world, only fractionally larger than the miniscule Bee Hummingbird which is restricted to Cuba. Four further endemics were found in rapid succession: Orangequit, Jamaican Vireo, Jamaican Euphonia and Jamaican Spindalis.

It was now time to return for breakfast, with eight endemic species already on our lists. It was difficult to concentrate on food with a hive of activity in the garden just below the dining area and there were several rushes to the balcony rail to see new birds, usually an American warbler species, but also local doves and Bananaquit.

After breakfast we went for a short drive to walk down the Old Mine Trail,

which ran through a more substantial area of forest. The day was now getting much hotter, necessitating the application of sunblock to our tender European skins.

As we parked the cars, two Loggerhead Kingbirds – another regional Caribbean species – were nearby. A large flycatcher then caught our eye: at 25 centimetres, Rufous-tailed Flycatcher is the largest of this family in Jamaica.

High up the slope to our left we heard a distinctive dove call *woof-woooooo*, the first note explosive and the second longer and descending. Try as we might, though, we could not see the bird, Crested Quail-dove, which is known locally as the Mountain Witch. We did find the related Ring-tailed Pigeon, though, which was to prove one of the commoner species. Both birds are endemics, as are Jamaican Pewee and Jamaican Woodpecker, which followed soon afterwards.

Further on, the group split into two – always a danger on bird tours! My bunch saw Yellow-shouldered Grassquit and Sad Flycatcher, while the others had a close and photographable view of the Mountain Witch. This bird was to continue to elude me and I didn't catch up with it for several days.

After an excellent lunch we drove up higher to one of the secondary peaks, at some 1,200 m. This is the site of Cinchona Botanical Gardens. There was a wide selection of Jamaican specialities on view and three new trip birds, White-collared Swift, Smooth-billed Ani and Northern Mockingbird. In the grounds were a range of Jamaican and exotic flowering plants including orchids. The gardens were most notable for the superb views over the Blue Mountains.

Birding at its peak

The following day, an early start found us climbing higher to the remnant area of forest and coffee plantations of Abbey Green, at more than 1,500 m. We went up in a leisurely fashion, stopping and walking several times to bird on the way. A nondescript plain little bird with an eyestripe that was only seen briefly was possibly a Jamaican Elaenia, solitaires were numerous and a number of the endemics we had already seen were re-visited.

Climbing steadily upwards we found White-eyed Thrush, Arrowhead Warbler and Jamaican Becard with its bizarre nest; we also had better views of Yellow-shouldered Grassquit. Ovenbird and Black-throated Green Warbler were new, while there were more solitaires.



Jamaican Lizard-cuckoo (top) and White-chinned Thrush (above) are among Jamaica's most sought-after endemic species.



PHOTOS: NEIL BOWMAN

was spoiled somewhat by continuous rain. Eventually this stopped and allowed us to find another Jamaican species, the huge Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, as it clambered through the foliage in search of food.

Nearby squawking noises alerted us to the presence of parrots. A flock of some 30 Yellow-billed Parrots were watched in flight and on a nearby tree-top. Further down the road the Black-billed species was also seen well.

A number of other birds were added to the trip list, including Worm-eating Warbler and Common Yellowthroat. On returning to the hotel, we visited San San NP, which would be well worth visiting at a better time of day, and spent the remainder of the afternoon looking at and photographing birds in the hotel gardens.

We had now seen 25 of the 28 Jamaican endemic species after just five days on the island. The three species that we didn't manage to see – Jamaican Owl, Jamaican Mango (a hummingbird) and Jamaican Elaenia – can be found at the locations we visited.

We saw a number of Jamaican and Caribbean specialities at several locations, demonstrating that most of these endemic species are often widespread and can be seen in many different habitats. As such, a large number of the specialities can be expected on a fairly short but dedicated birding trip limited to just one part of the island, in our case the eastern end.

If visiting and not part of a tour group, arrangements for birding could be made with both of the hotels that we stayed. But I would recommend the use of guides and hired driver with transport to make the most of your trip.

The remaining two full days of the break were spent in a mixture of birding and typical tourist activities courtesy of our hosts, the Jamaica Tourist Board. The only waders we saw were at the end of a two-hour rafting trip on the Rio Grande near Port Antonio; just two species, Semipalmated Sandpiper and Lesser Yellowlegs. A few more terns and Brown Pelican were seen near Kingston on the day we were leaving; otherwise, seabirds and waterbirds were relatively scarce.

Jamaica is a delightful country with friendly and hospitable people, good food (with vegetarians catered for) and excellent birding. ■

Acknowledgements

Birdwatch visited Jamaica courtesy of the Jamaica Tourist Board.

Wintering North American warblers, like this male Black-throated Blue Warbler, were a welcome component of the trip.

Several doves were calling at the top of our ride, including Caribbean Dove and Crested Quail-dove. On the way to our picnic lunch, the group split again and once more the others got good views of this latter bird. By this time I was feeling as if the Mountain Witch was singling me out for special treatment. On the route back to Forres Park we bumped into several small flocks of the Jamaican subspecies of Olive-throated Parakeet.

It was now time to change locations

and to do some birding in Holywell National Park at a site called Hardwar Gap. This was a quiet road passing along a steep forested slope. The trees had some very impressive bromeliads on them, showing that in our transfer of location we were moving into a much wetter area.

Almost immediately I connected with Crested Quail-dove and got several good views of them above us on the slope – at last! A number of familiar endemics were seen again, while new ones were Blue Mountain Vireo, Jamaican Lizard-cuckoo and the elusive Jamaican Blackbird. We first heard this bird in vines close behind us while it was foraging for food and it continued to feed as we took photographs.

Capital Kingston

Continuing, we reached the capital of Jamaica, Kingston, and then had to re-cross the island to reach the north coast. Heading east, we came to the small town of Port Antonio, beloved of 1950s Hollywood stars such as Errol Flynn, after whom the marina is named.

Perched on a power cable close to the marina were some 20 Magnificent Frigatebirds and nearby a range of Nearctic herons were on view, with a Royal Tern circling overhead. Apart from these, there were remarkably few waterbirds to be seen, and most of the rivers and estuaries were stony with little mud.

We arrived at the luxurious Hotel Mocking Bird Hill in time to take a stroll around the stunning gardens, planted with a wide selection of Jamaican flora. We were now in the country of another hummingbird, the recently split Black-billed Streamertail, of which there were many in the gardens. After an excellent meal we retired, looking forward to exploring the north coast of this fascinating island.

The next day saw us leaving early to go to a nearby coastal forested area called Ecclesdown. The first part of the morning

Jamaica

Getting there

Virgin Atlantic flies from London Gatwick to Kingston twice weekly. Fares start from £538.30 including taxes and can be booked either online at www.virginatlantic.com or by calling reservations on 0844 874 7747.

Where to stay

- Hotel Mocking Bird Hill, seven-day birding tour from £1,360 per person, travelling from 1 May to 19 December 2010. For more information or to book, call +876 993 7267 or visit www.hotelmockingbirdhill.com.
- Forres Park Resort, Mavis Bank, St Andrew. Standard rooms from £76 per night double occupancy. Superior suites from £135 per night. For further information visit www.forrespark.com.

More information

Contact the Jamaica Tourist Board on 020 7225 9090 or go to www.visitjamaica.com.

Further reading

- *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Jamaica* by Ann Haynes Sutton, Audrey Downer and Robert Sutton (Christopher Helm, £24.99) – order on page 45.
- *Birds of the West Indies* by Herbert Raffaele, James Wiley, Orlando Garrido, Allan Keith and Janis Raffaele (Helm Field Guides, £16.99) – order on page 45.

JAMAICA

Endemic birds of Jamaica and the Caribbean

This excellent break offers the opportunity to see many of the Caribbean's endemic birds in beautiful surroundings. The tour visits freshwater marshes where the endangered West Indian Whistling Duck occurs, while Cockpit Country is renowned for its endemic species. The remote Blue and John Crow Mountain National Park offers several more endemic birds, including the scarce Crested Quail-dove and the endangered Jamaican Blackbird.

PHOTOS: NEIL BOWMAN



Jamaica is known for its endemic bird species, such as its national bird, Red-billed Streamertail (above) and Jamaican Spindalis (below).

Tour itinerary

20-27 November 2010

Day 1: We arrive at Montego Bay, with the Montego Bay Water Treatment Works nearby, holding Black-crowned Night Heron, Ruddy Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Osprey, Royal Tern and wintering shorebirds. As dusk falls we transfer to Greenwood for an overnight stay.

Day 2: We will bird the gardens and degraded forest habitats around the hotel, looking for a range of species, including Jamaican Woodpecker, Jamaican Lizard-cuckoo, Grey-rumped Parrotlet and Loggerhead Kingbird. Later we drive to Mandeville. Spring Pond is a noted haunt of the rare Masked Duck. At Parrottee Pond we should locate a wide range of herons, egrets, waders and terns. We will transfer to Marshall's Pen for a three-night stay.

Day 3: This morning we concentrate on the grounds of Marshall's Pen. We may find Red-billed Streamertail, Orangequit and a selection of doves. Further endemic species could include Jamaican Becard, White-throated Thrush, Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Oriole and Yellow-shouldered Grassquit. After lunch we visit Treasure Beach, a site noted for Caribbean Coot. At Elim Pools our main interest is the globally endangered West Indian Whistling Duck.

Day 4: We visit Cockpit County, where our main aim is to locate the two endemic parrots, Yellow-billed and Black-billed. Also present are Ring-tailed Pigeon, Jamaican Lizard-cuckoo, Jamaican Vireo and Greater Antillean Bullfinch. On the way back to Mandeville, we will take a short diversion for Grasshopper Sparrow. In the afternoon we revisit the trails at Marshall's Pen, looking for day-

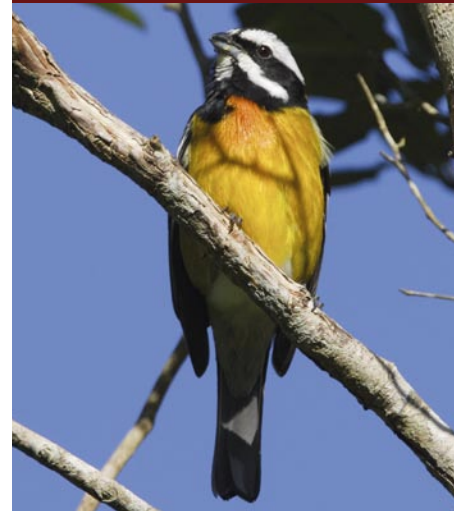
roosting Northern Potoos. As dusk falls we should have close views of the endemic Jamaican Owl.

Day 5: Today we head to Portland Ridge. On reaching the coast, we explore Portland Bight for a wide range of herons, egrets, waders and terns, along with Clapper Rail and Mangrove Cuckoo. The dry, arid habitats here are home to Vervain Hummingbird, Stolid Flycatcher and occasionally the rare Plain Pigeon. On the heavily wooded slopes above Kingston we will look for Rufous-throated Solitaire and Crested Quail-dove. Transfer to Starlight Chalets for one night.

Day 6: An early visit to the Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park should produce two of Jamaica's most difficult birds: Jamaican Blackbird and Crested Quail-dove. At Hardwar Gap we may locate White-eyed Thrush, Blue Mountain Vireo and Arrow-headed Warbler. After a late breakfast we head back to Kingston, where Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds grace the skies above the harbour. Transfer to Frenchman's Cove near Port Antonio for two nights.

Day 7: Another early start as we head towards Ecclesdown Road, an area of forestry and plantations. Birding along the road should produce many Jamaican endemics. It is also a reliable spot for Jamaican Blackbird. Return to Frenchman's Cove, where the hotel grounds have Black-billed Streamertail and Jamaican Mango. In the wetter areas Yellow-crowned Night Herons and wintering Prothonotary Warblers are possible.

Day 8: Today we head back to Montego Bay. Our first stop at Robin's Bay may provide us with Northern Jacana and Masked Duck. A visit to Saltmarsh should provide several waders. Transfer to Montego Bay airport for the flight back to England, arriving the following morning.



■ Tour price: £1,995; single room supplement £200; deposit £200. This tour is operated for *Birdwatch* by Birdwatching Breaks. The price includes flights, accommodation, meals, transport, permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes. Not included are drinks, insurance, items of a personal nature and any relevant fuel surcharges.

Single rooms are limited at Marshall's Pen. Evening meals are based on Jamaican cuisine, which is Creole in character. Transport is by minibus, with short to medium walks along roads and in forest.

For further information about this tour and the itinerary, please contact Birdwatching Breaks, Cygnus House, Gordons Mill, Balblair, Ross-shire IV7 8LQ (email: enquiries@birdwatchingbreaks.com).

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