

Jamaica

25 February – 5 March 2005

Participants:

Alan and Valerie Brown

Paul and Ann Cutforth

Wendy Foster

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Red-billed Streamertail

**Leaders: Vaughan Ashby, Ryan Love,
Brandon Hay**

Day 1: Our departure was delayed and eventually turned out to be an overnight flight.

Day 2: We arrived in Kingston in the early hours of the morning and, after a one-hour transfer to hotel, were able to wash and change for breakfast. Breakfast was somewhat protracted however, with interruptions from Jamaican Woodpecker **E** (endemic), Red-billed Streamertail **E**, Vervain Hummingbird, White-chinned Thrush **E**, Cape May and Black-throated Blue Warblers, Bananaquit and Orangequit **E**. Eventually, we boarded our four-wheel drives and headed up into the Blue Mountains with frequent stops en-route. It was evident that Hurricane Ivan had taken quite a toll of the trees and certainly bird numbers appeared to be down on last year. By working hard however, we gradually accumulated a respectable number of species including Turkey Vulture, Red-tailed Hawk of the Jamaican sub-species, American Kestrel, Ring-tailed Pigeon **E**, the endemic race of Olive-throated Parakeet, the elusive and difficult Jamaican Lizard-cuckoo **E**, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo **E**, the stunning Jamaica Tody **E**, Loggerhead Kingbird, Sad Flycatcher **E**, Jamaican Vireo **E**, Jamaican Stripe-headed Tanager **E**, Jamaican Euphonia **E** Black-faced Grassquit and Greater Antillean Bullfinch. Eventually, we reached the top of the hill and ate our packed lunches admiring the amazing view and basking in the knowledge that we had already seen 12 of the endemic species of Jamaica along with several regional Caribbean endemics in just the first morning! After lunch, we strolled along a mountain trail and although bird numbers were quite low we did manage to obtain amazing close and prolonged views of a normally extremely difficult bird, Rufous-throated Solitaire. Further along the trail a White-eyed Thrush **E** was eventually seen well by most people along with numerous Jamaican Spindalis in a fruiting tree. The return journey down the hill was relatively quiet and after an excellent dinner it was a very tired but happy group that went to sleep with 13 endemics already under our belts.

Day 3: Today our itinerary had to be changed as after the hurricane last year, torrential rains washed out the road at Hardwar Gap so we had to take the coastal route around the east end of the island rather than going over the top. This could have had serious implications as several of the endemic species are easier at Hardwar Gap than any other site on the island. After a brief search for the Jamaican Owl the previous evening when everything had gone wrong with loud speaker and torch failure (the first time that either has

happened in over 20 years and both at the same time!), we were extremely pleased to find an adult and juvenile Jamaican Owl **E** at a daytime roost before breakfast. Despite being in full view no more than a few metres away, neither bird was particularly interested in our presence or the photographic flashes from their admiring audience. What a great start to the day. Next, we headed on our revised route back down to Kingston where in the botanical gardens, Yellow-billed Parrots **E** were very obliging along with Least Grebe, Black-crowned Night-heron, White-winged and Zenaida Doves, White-crowned Pigeon, Antillean Palm-swift, Black-throated Green Warbler, American Redstart and Jamaican Oriole. Continuing east along the coast, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Pelicans and Royal Terns graced the shores along with Snowy Egrets and a Little Blue Heron. Eventually, as we rounded the eastern tip of the island and started to head back west, we arrived at our White-tailed Tropicbird spot. After a short wait, we were rewarded with two birds flying out from their nest site and heading out to sea to feed. It was by now early afternoon so we headed to a lovely beach restaurant where we enjoyed a superb fish meal and well deserved rest on a beautiful golden Caribbean beach with azure seas, a truly tropical experience! After our break, we headed into the hills to do some more forest birding. It wasn't the best time of the day but once again we did extremely well with a couple of Ruddy Quail-doves flying off the road, good numbers of Black-billed Parrots **E**, 2 Green-rumped Parrotlets, Black-billed Streamertail **E**, three each of Jamaican Becard **E** and Jamaican Crow **E**, White-eyed Thrush feeding in a fruiting tree, a pair of Arrow-headed Warblers **E** and a single Yellow-shouldered Grassquit **E**. Probably the most unexpected bird however, was a superb male Merlin perched up in a tree in the forest. This was even a lifer for Ryan, our local guide and the views were exceptional. After that, it was only a short drive to our scenically located and extremely comfortable hotel and after an excellent dinner, we were able to reflect on the fact that we had seen no less than 20 of the endemics already.

Day 4: An early start with a packed breakfast to be at Ecclesdown Road at first birding light. Initially it was quiet with just flocks of noisy Black-billed parrots and Jamaican Crows but eventually, we found our first endemic of the day, a Jamaican Pewee **E**. It was lovely to watch more of the exquisite Jamaican Todys and beautiful Jamaican Spindalis but after brief flight views of Ring-tailed Pigeon the previous day, it was nice to see one perched at very close range. A couple of Rufous-tailed Flycatchers **E** were watched down-slope from the road whilst a Yellow-shouldered Grassquit **E** gave frustratingly brief views. Another Jamaican Lizard-cuckoo showed extremely well before we found not one but two of our most sought-after birds, Crested Quail-dove **E**. Initially, they were flushed from the side of the road as we walked along but we were extremely grateful and not a little surprised that they landed almost immediately and sat in the open looking at us only 15 metres away. Of course, you can never have enough views of birds like this but because of their shyness you are frequently disappointed. Not so with these birds however, they just sat there to be looked at! It is difficult to walk away from birds of this quality and very few people have the opportunity to do so but we had to look for a potentially even more difficult endemic. We hadn't walked more than a few yards when Ryan heard a Jamaican Blackbird **E** and a few of the group were fortunate to have brief views. It is never nice when only half of a group have seen a bird so we persevered with trying to relocate it. Eventually, about thirty minutes later, Ryan heard another bird calling and after a frustrating couple of minutes tracking down the call and being frustrated with brief views in the high canopy, two birds flew to a nearer tree. Only a split second after swinging the telescopes around to look at them however, one of them flew across the road and out of sight. As telescopes were redirected to the second bird our hearts were pounding, would it stay still long enough for everyone to see it? We needn't have worried, it stayed preening on the same open branch for five minutes allowing everyone to enjoy superb views of this very rare endemic bird. Although the colour (black!) was less than inspiring it was the shape of the bill, which was most interesting. Set in a genus of its own, it was immediately obvious why with a long dagger-like bill used to extract insects from bromeliads. As we were watching the blackbird, Ryan heard the distinctive song of Blue Mountain Vireo but try as we may, we couldn't locate the bird. It responded to tape but refused to show itself. Although disappointed, we were well compensated by finding our first Jamaican Mango **E**. Ryan then took us to another track on which

he had seen Blue Mountain Vireos on previous occasions but by then it was getting hot so we decided to return to our wonderful beach restaurant for lunch and a rest. Suitably refreshed, we returned to the forest mid afternoon. Bird activity was quite low but it was nice seeing the occasional Black-billed Streamertail, Jamaican Woodpecker and Jamaican Tody to re-inforce our views of these wonderful endemics. With the sun starting to dip below the mountains, we decided to make one last try for the Blue Mountain Vireo **E** at the track we had visited earlier. Lo and behold, within seconds of playing the tape a male responded and gave wonderful views within just a few yards. Now we had a problem, several of the group had decided not to walk back down the track from the coach so after a mad dash, the missing few were rounded up and the bird obligingly stayed to look at them as well! So, back to our hotel for dinner and the log with 27 out of the 28 endemics now seen.

Day 5: After a leisurely breakfast and watching a few birds in the garden, we started the cross-island journey to Marshall's Pen. Dropping down to the old town of Port Antonio, we spent a few minutes looking in the old harbour where the banana boats used to sail from. Great Egret and Grey Plover were the only birds of note. As we traveled along the coast, we made several stops at bridges across rivers and Pied-billed Grebe and Killdeer were added to our lists. The best birds were however, a small flock of White-collared Swifts, which gave uncharacteristically good views as they swooped low. Heading over the central mountain range along a very winding road, we eventually stopped near the summit at a roadside park in Castleton to eat our picnic lunches. As we watched young boys spear fishing in the adjacent river, a Louisiana Waterthrush was spotted but then mysteriously disappeared behind some rocks. Eventually we arrived in Kingston again and took the motorway east, eventually arriving at Marshall's Pen late afternoon. Checking into our rooms was however, interrupted by superb views of the normally elusive Caribbean Dove feeding in the field opposite. There would have been just enough time for a walk around the grounds with Brandon, our new local guide, but then the heavens decided to open and we in turn decided that discretion was the better part of valour and we would leave the walk until tomorrow!

Day 6: After a wonderful breakfast (Jamaican Mango and Red-billed Streamertails at the adjacent feeders), the morning was spent birding around the extensive grounds of this working farm. Our primary target was the one remaining endemic, Jamaican Elaenia. Jamaican Crows called from the trees whilst Olive-throated Parakeets gave great views as they raided the kitchen garden and an Ovenbird skulked around the bushes. Walking around the various pastures, we enjoyed further views of Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Vervain Hummingbird, Rufous-tailed and Sad Flycatchers, Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Vireo and. The highlight was outstanding views of a male Yellow-shouldered Grassquit, a bird most people had missed earlier in the tour, although a male Shiny Cowbird was less welcome! As we returned to the house for lunch, Cave Swallows were very much in evidence as they flew in with mud to rebuild their nests in the old barn under our rooms. The whole of our building was in fact severely damaged by the hurricane with the roof being completely blown away. This afternoon we headed south to Treasure Beach. There are several saltwater lagoons here where a variety of herons, waders and terns can be found. Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and a Northern Jacana were the highlight of the first pool but the second was even more interesting with two female Masked Ducks a Black-necked Stilt and several Least Grebes. At the largest lagoon, a couple of Magnificent Frigatebirds quartered the area and we disturbed a large flock of Blue-winged Teal whilst in the distance, a Tricoloured Heron was finishing. In the scrub surrounding the lagoon were several Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers and two Palm Warblers characteristically wagging their tails. Continuing on to another lagoon nearby, we were pleased to find large numbers of birds including four Least Sandpiper, three American Purple Gallinules, Ruddy Ducks and eventually by diligently searching through the numerous American Coots, three Caribbean Coots. A Wilson's Snipe was seen briefly in flight and several of the established Saffron Finches watched. Continuing on, we successfully searched for the vagrant Caribbean Flamingo that had been present for some time at another lagoon, whilst Sandwich Tern and Osprey were both new for the tour. With rain threatening, we moved north into the Upper Black River Morass but by the time we arrived, the heavens opened. Undeterred, we set off down the track in fading light with low expectations until we

eventually arrived in the area that the West Indian Whistling-ducks are normally found. The rain had eased by now and low and behold there were the whistling-duck. Not one or two, but over 100 of these highly localised and endangered regional endemics. Thinking that this was a highly successful end to an excellent day, we set off back towards Marshall's Pen in miserable foggy and wet weather but by the time we arrived back, the sky's had cleared and everything was drying up in the warm conditions. As we drove down the drive to Marshall's Pen, Brandon spotted something on a dead branch at the top of a tree, it was a Northern Potoo! We all rapidly climbed out of the bus and walked closer and though the telescope with the spotlight on the bird, we all enjoyed remarkable views of this special bird. Now it was time for dinner and the log!

Day 7: The morning was spent around the grounds, again searching for the elusive elaenia. Once again, many of the endemic and special birds of Jamaica were seen but the only new bird for the tour was a Worm-eating Warbler. Jon had seen the elaenia the previous day so we directed our search to that area and bingo, within seconds of playing a tape, the bird responded and showed well for everyone to enjoy. Jamaican Elaenia **E** was our final endemic and everyone savoured the moment. Quite remarkably a second bird was then found and it appeared that they were on territory! In the afternoon, we drove down to the south coast to Portland Ridge. An isolated population of Bahama Mockingbird exists here but they are greatly outnumbered by the more numerous Northern Mockingbirds. Even with Brandon's expert local knowledge, it took us a while to find one but during our search, we saw several Prairie Warblers and Caribbean Doves and another regional endemic, Stolid Flycatcher, gave excellent views. As we wandered along the track, we heard a couple of birds singing but although they responded to tape, they wouldn't venture out of their territories. Suddenly, Wayne, our driver, called us back, he had found two Bahama Mockingbirds right by the coach! Hurrying back, we watched up to four birds feeding, searching for nesting material and singing at very close quarters for several minutes. Another excellent regional endemic and one that has a very strange range, the Bahamas, the northern Cays of Cuba and the southern limestone headlands of Jamaica.

Day 8: This morning we headed up into Cockpit Country, so named because of the limestone sinkholes which, resembled cock fighting pits of old. After making the 1.5-hour journey along narrow winding roads through numerous small villages and towns, we eventually arrived in the beautiful wooded mountains. These forests are in near pristine condition and although there was nothing new we needed, we spent a pleasant hour watching Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Pewee, Jamaican Crow, Jamaican Vireo, Jamaican Oriole, Jamaican Spindalis and Olive-throated Parakeet. With flights to catch, we headed down the north side of the island to Falmouth and then west along the coast towards Montego Bay. A couple of roadside stops en-route proved very productive. Firstly, we stopped at a tidal mangrove pool where there was a good selection of waders. In amongst the Short-billed Dowitchers was a lone Stilt Sandpiper but after searching a bit more, we discovered good numbers of these normally scarce waders. After a closer inspection of the Short-billed Dowitchers we also discovered a single Long-billed Dowitcher. Several Black-necked Stilt, Ruddy Turnstone and Least Sandpipers added to the variety whilst a Willet was another new bird for the trip. A real surprise however, was a Northern Shoveler. Continuing west along the coast, we stopped for a Yellow-crowned Night-heron atypically fishing not only in the daytime but also in the open in salt water! Finally, just as we arrived in Montego Bay, several Barn Swallows were seen flying around bringing our final total up to 124 species seen in the week. On arrival at Sangster International airport in Montego Bay, some of the group checked into the flight to Havana for the Cuba tour, whilst others checked into the return overnight flight back to the UK.

Day 9: Morning arrival back into the UK.