Lesser Antilles | Dec. 2–13, 2023 | Trip Report by Chris Harbard



With guides Ryan Chenery and Chris Harbard, and participants: Jim, Janine, Peter, Diane, Marion, Joy and Ed



Sat., Dec. 2 Arrival in St Lucia

Five of the guests were flying in from Miami, as was Naturalist Journeys host, Chris. After going through immigration and collecting bags we met with our local guides from Wildlife Ambassadors, Willow and Nestor, outside Arrivals at St Lucia airport. Two more guests were arriving later in the afternoon and would join us where we were staying. We packed our bags into the two brightly colored vans, one depicting St Lucia Parrots as well as Saint Lucia Distilleries Charman's Reserve Rum, who sponsor the company, and the other showing lots of the bird species we hoped to see. We then drove to Balenbouche Estate where we would be staying for the next four nights.

We met with Uta, the owner and manager at Balenbouche, who showed us to our accommodation. Cabins which were scattered over the property, set into some wonderful lawns with mature trees and neighboring forest, with paths down to the beach. All the beds were covered with mosquito netting, which we were very grateful for. The main house had a lovely veranda which is where our breakfasts and dinners would be served. There were lots of birds in the trees and bushes around the property which would be well worth exploring in the next few days. Dinner was planned for 6:30 and the last two of the group (Marion and Joy) arrived just in time to join us. Chris gave a welcome briefing and explained that our leader, Ryan Chenery, has a medical emergency which meant he would be unable to join us for a few days. Tomorrow morning, after breakfast Willow and Nestor would take us up to Des Cartiers Rainforest Trail on our first search for endemic birds. Then a short drive to a lunch stop, just



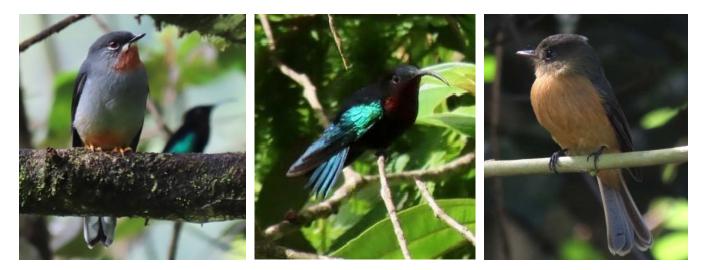
opposite a lovely wetland. Lunch orders were gathered so we could make sure they were ready for us. Everyone was glad to get to bed after a long travel day, but at the same time excited about our first full day in the field.

Sun., Dec. 3 Rainforest walk and Eau Piquant wetland

Breakfast was planned for 6.45 and consisted of delicious bread, with eggs, cheese and jam, plus obligatory coffee (or tea). Joining us was an attentive pair of Lesser Antillean Bullfinches, hoping for some crumbs! In the bushes close to the house were many flowers which attracted a female Antillean Crested hummingbird and a quick glimpse of a Green-throated Carib. We gathered just before 8am to prepare for a prompt departure to explore the Des Cartiers Rainforest Trail which is about 45-minute drive away. Snacks and water were available for us. We arrived at the car park where the trail starts, well prepared, wearing stout hiking boots or shoes and prepared for insects by wearing long sleeves and trousers, and bringing bug spray.

The trail into the forest soon saw us surrounded by huge tree ferns and a dense canopy of tall trees spreading up the slopes on either side. Lots of big tree roots and some muddy patches meant we all walked carefully. Along the way our guide Willow pointed out bird songs he heard – St Lucia Warblers were clearly plentiful, and we stopped to search for a calling St Lucia Oriole which was glimpsed by one of the group. Suddenly Willow said "Look … on the path". In front of us in the middle of the trail, was a small rather uninspiring brown bird, with a seed-eater beak. "It's a St Lucia Black Finch", he continued. "Difficult to see". It was our first island endemic! After about 45 minutes we reached the watchpoint, where the trail overlooked a forested valley with a reasonably clear view. Immediately we noticed a large, dark hummingbird – a male Purple-throated Carib, a Lesser Antilles endemic. There were several males feeding nearby with at least one female. A singing St Lucia Warbler, endemic to the island, soon appeared and gave us good views high in nearby trees. A couple of times we heard distant parrots but saw no sign until a distant pair flew past, typically fluttering with obvious green plumage. A small brown flycatcher appeared and called – it was a St Lucian Pewee, a distinctive endemic subspecies likely to be split in the near future.

We explored a little further along the trail, and Nestor suddenly indicated he could hear something ... a St Lucia Oriole, a notoriously difficult bird to see. There was a movement high in a tree and suddenly a bright orange and black bird appeared, before disappearing behind leaves. Over the next ten minutes we were treated to several



good views of two birds moving through the trees. Another endemic! More parrots could be heard while we were in the forest, closer but invisible. Back at the watchpoint a Lesser Antillean Euphonia showed itself for most of the group and then Willow heard a solitaire and was able to call in a pair of beautiful Rufous-throated Solitaires which perched in the open quite close to us. Soon it was time to head back down the trail. What a successful morning with endemic Parrot, Oriole, Black Finch. Warbler and Pewee all seen, plus many other good species.

We drove to lunch at Chill N Grill, close to the east coast, and enjoyed some tasty wraps, which we had preordered. After a nice break we drove across the road and through a private gateway where we had permission to visit Eau Piquant (also written Aupicon), a wetland area which attracts waterfowl. We drove to a vantage point and set up our scopes. There were lots of Common Gallinules and American Coots (some of the distinct Caribbean form), and more distant there were many ducks, mainly Blue-winged Teal with some Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Ducks. Some high Magnificent Frigatebirds reminded us we were near the coast. From the wetland it was a reasonably short drive back to Balenbouche to relax for a while before dinner. Dinner was at 7pm, and Uta had a delicious meal which included dasheen, a local root vegetable. Afterwards we had a briefing about tomorrow (which would be a busy day with an early start), and then finally the checklist.

Mon., Dec. 4

Exploring to the north of St Lucia

We gathered at 5.45 to collect a packed breakfast so we could head out very early in order to see a very special bird. We set off at 6 and drove north, up the east coast, for about an hour. Willow knew exactly where to stop, and we followed a trail into the dry Atlantic forest. We were warned to stay on the obvious trail because of the risk of Fer-de Lance snakes, which are extremely venomous. About 50 yards along the trail Willow heard and saw something, and making some squeaking noises, he was able to attract the bird we were hoping to see – a White-breasted Thrasher. Found only on St Lucia and Martinique it can be tricky to find, but we were lucky. Further up the trail we found a couple more and heard Scaly-breasted Thrasher and Spectacled Thrush. On the way back to the van be encountered a Lesser Antillean Saltator, another regional endemic.

Continuing north we reached a village called Des Barras, where our guide Willow grew up, he knows almost every tree and bird, in the area and took us down a trail along some forest to look for the endemic subspecies of House Wren as well as other good birds. The path was lined by patches of verbena, its purple flowers attracting



many butterflies which hardly ever landed and so were difficult to see and along the way there was a lovely view across to the coast. Above our heads we saw a beautiful Lesser Antillean Euphonia and soon we heard and saw the very pale House Wren. While we were watching it a St Lucia Pewee popped up, followed by the larger Lesser Antillean Flycatcher.

We continued our drive, heading for Gros Islet where we would stop for lunch. We stopped briefly at Pigeon Island causeway and scoping up a nearby island, we could see distant Brown Boobies. Lunch was at Vinos restaurant, right by the sea. We were able to watch many Royal and Sandwich Terns, with an immature Brown Booby fishing close by. A couple of guests went for a swim while lunch was being prepared and a good, varied menu was enjoyed by all!

After lunch we headed south and stopped at the fishing village of Dennery. Only a few boats had brought fish in but we were able to talk to the fishermen and watch a Dorado being gutted. Magnificent Frigatebirds (also called Man-o-War birds) were hanging overhead, always hoping to something to snatch. Then it was back to Balenbouche with time for a wander around before dinner. At the beach a Belted Kingfisher was heard, and a Mangrove Cuckoo was glimpsed. Dinner at 7pm (another wonderful meal from Uta) was followed by briefing and checklist.

Tues., Dec. 5 Chocolate and volcanos

Today was a much easier day with breakfast at 7am and departure not until 10.15. Chris had seen a Spectacled Thrush at dusk and Willow said that dawn was also a good time for them, so we met up just after 6am for a look around. As it got lighter a bird was seen feeding on the grass near one of the chalets – a Spectacled Thrush! Then another. In the large Ficus tree next to use birds were active – several Scaly-breasted Thrashers gave us great views, then a Mangrove Cuckoo appeared to feed on the fruits. The ubiquitous Bananaquits were also there, along with the ever-present Gray Kingbirds.

This gave us an appetite for another lovely, relaxed breakfast. At the flowers by the house were a few hummingbirds, the usual hopeful Lesser Antillean Bullfinches and a Lesser Antillean Saltator. We then headed to



our appointment at Font Doux, a 135-acre cocoa plantation and resort where we were to experience chocolatemaking and also have lunch. Our guide, the highly exuberant Clinton, showed us a cocoa pod and encouraged us to taste the outside of a bean, which was delightfully sweet. A Gray Trembler, which we had barely glimpsed before, flew into a papaya right by us and 'trembled' before flying off and pair of Broad-winged Hawks circled overhead. Clinton explained how the beans were roasted and the nibs separated from the shells. He even climbed into a metal cauldron to enthusiastically demonstrate how feet could be used to clean the beans. Next, we went to the chocolate lab (not a dog) where we were shown how chocolate bars are made and we all had a chance to make the chocolate mix, which was then placed into a mold and chilled. Time for a delicious lunch at the restaurant, followed by a final visit to the lab where the chocolate bars were taken from the refrigerator so they could be wrapped and labelled.

We had enough of the afternoon left for us to visit Sulphur Springs, a volcano you could drive right up to. You knew there was volcanic activity nearby as soon as you got out and smelled the sulphur. Our guide took us a short distance to a barrier overlooking bubbling mud pools and explained that the last eruption had been in the 1700s so there was nothing to worry about. While watching the pools, a movement in the nearby trees revealed a Scaly-naped Pigeon, feeding on some fruit. Only seen in flight so far, this lovely bird gave us some amazing views! Our last stop of the afternoon was a Soufriere, and the drive there gave us views of the Petit Piton, one of the two peaks for which St Lucia is famous. From high up a hillside, we looked down on the coastal town below, before driving down to explore the local shops and church.

We then returned to Balenbouche to pack before our early departure for the airport and our final dinner, including a marvelous dessert from Uta, bananas flambee, using local rum! Briefing and checklist afterwards.

Wed., Dec. 6 St Lucia to Dominica

Breakfast was at 6.45 and by 8am we were all packed up and ready to leave for the airport to catch our flight to Dominica. At 10am we arrived and checked in at the InterCaribbean desk. Over the road from the airport were some restaurants and we opted to grab an early lunch which we could either eat there and then or take on the plane with us. The flight was called early and so we said farewell to Willow and Nestor and were soon on board the small 30-seater, taxiing down the runway. The flight to Domonica took us over Martinique and only lasted about 30 minutes.



We arrived in Dominica a little early but did not have to wait too long for our transport to arrive – a nice large minivan with enough room for all of us and our luggage. Soon we were heading for the Tamarind Tree, located about an hour and a half away, on the beautiful west coast of Dominica. We were met by Annette, the hotel owner, who showed us to our rooms. With some time to settle there was the opportunity for a walk from the hotel down to the nearby river where we saw a Belted Kingfisher, a Little Blue Heron, a couple of Yellow Warbler known locally as 'Golden Warblers' and lots of Black-faced Grassquits. Back at the hotel, Marion saw a Redlegged Trush from the balcony. Dinner was in the nice open-air restaurant which overlooks the sea. Jim sampled some local 'bush rum' and then we had a briefing and checklist. The good news was that Ryan, the local leader of our trip, would be flying over from Barbados tomorrow afternoon.

Thurs., Dec. 7

Forest trails and waterfalls

Breakfast was at 7.30 in the open-air restaurant. Our guide for the day, Bertrand Jno Baptiste, who goes by the name of Birdy, arrived to meet us at 8.45 am along with our minibus and driver. First, we walked to the river bridge nearby to look for kingfishers and then we drove a few miles to the Layou River Mouth. Local fishermen had their nets out to catch the tiny titiwi fish - small, transparent and about an inch long, which can only be caught at certain times of the year. They are steamed, boiled or fried as cakes, a real local delicacy! On the shore we saw Greater Yellowlegs and several Spotted Sandpipers, a couple of Brown Pelicans were feeding offshore, and there was a Green Heron along the river.

We then drove to a trail which went into the forest to Spanny's Waterfall. The short walk to the falls took us through some nice forest and almost immediately Birdy pointed to a couple of Plumbeous Warblers right by the trail. These are endemic to Dominica and neighboring Guadeloupe and were one of our key targets. Along the way the warm weather meant that there were plenty of lizards, including a black form of the endemic Dominican Anole. At the falls Peter and Jim both swam, enjoying standing under the cascading water. Just as we were leaving, a large (and noisy) party from a German cruise ship arrived ... we were glad they didn't come earlier.

By now it was time for lunch, and we stopped along the way at Molly's Pork Parlour which had the most delicious barbecue pork, among other dishes, served by Molly! We then drove to Lower Colihaut Heights a great area of local forest with a nice wide trail making looking into the trees quite easy. As we walked along road a couple of Red-legged Thrushes were heard but were frustratingly elusive. Plumbeous Warblers were one of the commonest birds and at the farthest point of our walk, at a nice clearing, we were able to find lots of good birds



including Red-legged Thrush, Brown Trembler, Lesser Antillean Flycatcher, Caribbean Elaenia, Lesser Antillean Saltator and, overhead, a few Lesser Antillean Swifts. We headed back to Tamarind Tree, where Ryan was waiting to join us, still slightly pained from his back injury, but pleased to be with us. After a little time, relaxing, we had a briefing and the checklist before enjoying our dinner.

Fri., Dec. 8 Whale-watching

Breakfast at 7.30 and a relaxing morning before we head down south to Roseau for our whale watching trip out at sea. We went for a walk down to the nearby river with Ryan, seeing many of the birds from our previous walk, until Ryan spotted a strange warbler. It was not one he recognized, and we thought it must be a straggler from North America. Luckily, we were able to take photos and it was confirmed as a Cape May Warbler, a new life bird for Ryan. Along the river, the Ringed Kingfisher was seen by a couple of guests only, glimpsed as it flew off and sadly, we never got good views of it. A House Wren was seen well, a very different dark-looking subspecies. Among the Black-faced Grassquits, we spotted a few of the introduced Scaly-breasted Munias.

We then drove to Roseau to grab lunch and join our boat to look for whales. Our captain knew the local Sperm Whales well and we headed straight offshore for a mile or two to where some had been reported. Special listening equipment meant we could eavesdrop on any whale chatter that was going on, so far there was nothing. We headed a further seven miles out to another area they like and bingo, the captain picked up some noises. WE gently edged towards where they were and suddenly Peter shouted "A blow. A blow!" Sure enough, a misty spray could be seen hanging in the air and the back of a whale showed in the water ahead. There were two Sperm Whales which seemed completely unperturbed by our presence, entertaining us for about 20 minutes before diving deep with a wave of the tail flukes. We all had the opportunity to listen to the noises made by the whales as they communicated, sounding like a series of clicking noises. We saw a couple of Royal Terns and a few Brown Boobies and when returning closer to land a bulky uniformly dark bird flew up from close by the boat, revealing white wings flashes – a skua, and it could only be a South Polar Skua, quite rare in the region. We drove back to Tamarind Tree with a real sense of achievement, feeling both lucky and privileged to have experienced these huge marine creatures so well. Briefing, checklist and a very welcome dinner finished off the day.



Sat., Dec. 9

Parrot promenade and river journey

With an early start we had a packed breakfast prepared by Tamarind Tree to take with us on our drive to the Syndicate Nature Trail in the Morne Diablotin National Park. Our guide Birdy drove one van and Ryan took a couple of us in his SUV. It was raining, and there was little indication that it would stop. We arrived at the visitor center at about 7am, and ate our breakfast, hoping for a break in the weather. But the rain continued, and so we made our way up the wet trail to the viewing area where we would look for parrots. We had seen a couple of Red-necked Parrots (endemic to Dominica) flying over in the distance as we made our way to the forest and these were all we saw from the watch point. Some of the group also saw a Blue-headed Hummingbird feeding along the trail. After a couple of hours, Ryan decided it was best to cut our losses and head down to the Indian River early, giving us a chance to return to the nature trail later in the day. By the time we got back to the vehicles some of us were soaked through.

We drove down to Portsmouth, on the coast, where a boat was ready to take us on a trip along the Indian River. We embarked and our guide started to tell us about the river, its history and its wildlife. Lining the riverside were huge trees with buttressed roots – he told us these were Pterocarpus trees, known locally as Bwa Mang. Long vines hung down from many of their branches. Sitting on a branch next to the river, he spotted a Lesser Antillean Iguana, bright green and almost dragon-like. On the muddy edges of the river were large white crabs, actually called Blue Land Crabs. A Green Heron sat on a large tree leaf which dangled in the water. A wooden shack by the water was pointed out as having been specially constructed for a Pirates of the Caribbean movie and left in place afterwards. Occasional birds were seen in the trees overhanging the river – Plumbeous and Yellow Warblers, Caribbean Elaenias as well as Bananaquits.

Back at the quayside it was time to head for lunch, but we had to stop on the way to look for one special bird. We parked by a church in Portsmouth and went inside. Up in the rafters there was a dark shape which with binoculars resolved itself into a Barn Owl, one with quite a dark face, an endemic subspecies of what some consider to be a full species called the Lesser Antillean Barn Owl. Now it is lunch time and we stopped at a nice little restaurant where Ed, together with Ryan, was brave enough to try a bushmeat stew, made from wild boar and agouti.



Fortified by lunch we headed back up to the Syndicate Nature Trail to try again for a must-see bird – the Imperial Parrot. One of the rarest in the world, there may only be about 100 birds left. The weather was much brighter in the afternoon and as we drove up to the visitor center, we encountered several Red-necked Parrots feeding in trees by the road – perhaps it was an omen. The group at the viewing point spread out a little. There was more activity in the nice weather and the Blue-headed Hummingbird was putting on a good show. Suddenly a call went out ... a bird had been heard which sounded like an Imperial Parrot. For 15 minutes nothing, and then there it was, the unmistakable squeaking call. We gathered at one of the watchpoints and listened. The call came from high to the right. A little later another call from the left, also high up. We scanned and listened. Suddenly Birdy exclaimed "I think I can see it". We passed him a scope and after a few minutes he cried "I see it, quick come and look". We took turns, just a few seconds each, and in a couple of minutes we had all seen it – bright green wings, dark head and large! Then it disappeared. And a few minutes later two birds flew along the ridge, large-winged with a very different flight to Red-necked. Two Imperials, probably including the bird we had seen. High fives all round and some special hugs for Birdy!

Back at the Tamarind Tree we reflected on the day – a bad start but a fantastic finish and two endemic parrots added to our list! We could leave Dominica happy. Briefing, checklist, dinner and a very satisfying night sleep.

Sun., Dec. 10

Flights to St Vincent and more parrots

An early rise and a drive to the airport in Ryan's SUV and with Birdy. Packed breakfast on the way and we were soon there. With bags checked in we flew to out next destination of St Vincent, with a stop in Barbados on the way. Ryan lives in Barbados and so is familiar with the airport, and he was confident that he could add one more endemic bird to out lists, actually at the airport. Barbados has one endemic bird, the Barbados Bullfinch, a somewhat brown species with little to recommend it apart from its uniqueness. AS we got off the plane and entered the terminal at Gate 9, Ryan pointed up at a tree and said "There it is" ... and there it was. He also found a couple of 'Barbados' Grackles, smaller than the common Carib Grackles we were used to with females which look more like males, another bird which might soon be elevated to full species status one day soon. An announcement was made – the flight to St Vincent was delayed and would now go via St Lucia. We decided to have lunch at the airport and keep finger crossed that there would be no further delays, as we needed to get to St Vincent in time to visit a parrot roost. The clock was ticking! The stop at St Lucia did not take long and soon we were descending towards our final island.



Our vehicles were there, and we soon headed off to Amazona Nest only about 12 miles away. The final mile or two had to be done in a high clearance vehicle in two goes. The first group arrived and almost immediately parrots could be heard. Three flew into a nearby tree and with a scope we were soon getting great views of the endemic St Vincent Parrot, more colourful than any we had seen so far. By the time the other group had arrived they had gone, but soon others were flying in, and everyone had good views of these lovely birds. We were offered fresh coconut water from the 'nut' and the tables where it was serves had delightful bright green, blue-headed lizards climbing up them – the endemic St Vincent Bush Anole. So many things are endemic here. With the parrot in the bag we headed for the Beachcomber Hotel, our base for the next three nights. Lovely rooms, on the beach and a great dining room. What could be better! A quick briefing, short checklist and then dinner and bed.

Mon., Dec. 11 Search for final endemics

Breakfast at 7am and then straight off with our local guide Lystra, on the hunt for one more St Vincent endemic, the Whistling Warbler. As the van climbed up the hills and down the valleys, the clouds closed in, and it rained ... and rained ... and rained. We reached our destination, Montreal Gardens and waited a while hoping it might stop. Eventually it slackened off and we decided to head for the trees where the warbler lives. It was a slippery trail across some fields and into the trees. Birds were heard and glimpsed ... a tanager was seen. This was the Lesser Antillean Tanager, endemic to St Vincent, the Grenada Flycatcher, endemic to the same islands and several small black birds were seen which it turned out were the black morph of the Bananaquit.

The rain continued. We reached the warbler spot and positioned ourselves, dripping, with a view of where it might be seen. Ryan tried to entice it out, but nothing. On the third attempt a movement was seen and Ryan said, "There it is". 'There' was in view for a couple of people but for the rest of us it was behind branches and leaves. And that was it. Vanished, not to be seen again. That is birding for you, so near and yet ... Another hour was spent searching to no avail. Still, we had all seen some good birds. Back nearer to the hotel we stopped to get some lunch in the form of roti. This is a Caribbean style sandwich, much like a wrap, filled with cooked meats or fish and vegetables. We drove to a nearby beach and enjoyed our lunch with Royal Terns flying offshore. Then back to the hotel for a relaxing few hours before dinner. This had been our last proper birding day, as tomorrow would be spent on a boat exploring islands and swimming or snorkelling. A last briefing was followed by checklist and dinner.



Tues., Dec. 12

Sun, sand, snorkeling and seabirds

After breakfast all of us, apart from Joy who opted to stay at the hotel to explore, enjoy the beach and photograph birds, were driven to the nearby marina where we were joining a boat which would take us across to Bequia Island. Captain Mike was captain of the Bonsai II, a small but fast boat which could rapidly cross the ten or so miles to this northernmost island in the Grenadines. As we headed across the open sea we could see some seabirds, which looked alike boobies. As we got closer, Ryan called out "Red-footed" and this is exactly what they were. Nearing Bequia a shout of "tropicbird" went up and a distant white, very long-tailed bird could be seen flying high along the island ahead of us.

Reaching Bequia, we stopped to hire some snorkel equipment for everyone, and then we continued along the island shore to a suitable spot. Not everyone swam or snorkeled, but many did and there was a good variety of fish to watch quite close to the boat. After about half an hour we hoisted anchor and continued towards another spot seeing several Ospreys on the way, one of which was dived on by a Peregrine Falcon. This took us past a small island called Petit Nevis and here we saw more tropicbirds, this time well enough to make out that they were Red-billed tropicbirds, and a couple were even seen on nesting ledges. Brown Boobies were also nesting, some with large fluffy white chicks. At the Isle A Quatre we stopped just offshore from a lovely, deserted beach where we could walk or swim, and we spent a lovely hour or so there, adding Ruddy Turnstone to the trip list.

Soon it was time to head back to Bequia, where we dropped off the snorkel gear before stopping at a lovely restaurant for a delicious lunch. On the return crossing to St Vincent, we saw more Red-footed Boobies and one Masked Booby, our last new bird for the trip.

Back at the Beachcomber Hotel we met with Joy who had spent and enjoyable day, and most started to pack before the last checklist (we reached about 90 species) and our Farewell Dinner. Chris had an early flight to Miami, and Ryan was taking him to the airport before breakfast, so everyone said goodbye and celebrated the wonderful time we had spent together in than string of jewels called the Lesser Antilles.



Wed., Dec. 13 Departures The rest of the group were taken to the airport for their flights home. Until the next adventure!

Photos: St Lucia with Twin Pitons (Chris Harbard - CH), Balenbouche (CH), Female Antillean Crested Hummingbird (CH), Rufous-throated Solitaire (CH), Purple-throated Carib (CH), St Lucia Pewee (CH), White-breasted Thrasher (CH), Willow showing us the thrasher (CH), Marion and coastal view (CH), Lesser Antillean Flycatcher (CH), Mangrove Cuckoo (CH), Lunch at Fond Doux (CH), Black Dominican Anole (CH), Yellow 'Golden' Warbler (Joy Ferrell – JF), Looking for warblers with Birdy (CH), Plumbeous Warbler (JF), Lesser Antillean Saltator (CH), Sperm Whales (CH), Lesser Antillean Iguana (CH), Red-necked Parrot (JF), St Vincent Parrot (CH, St Vincent Bush Anole (CH), Brown Booby (CH) and Red-billed Tropicbird (CH).

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