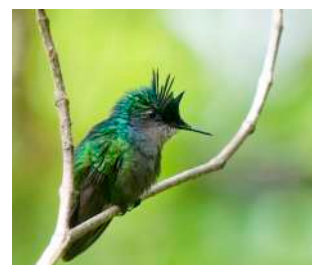


# Lesser Antilles Birding & Nature

## Mar. 17 - 20, 2024 | Trip Report | by Peg Abbott



With guide Ryan Chenery, Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys and participants: Marjorie, Gerry, Holger, Patty, Kathy, John, Robin, Nancy, Michael, Donna and Don. On several islands local guides met us for our outings.



### Early Arrivals

About half of our group came in early, wanting to explore a bit of history and the main city of Antigua before our nature and birding trip launched. The flight in gave us our first view of that jade and turquoise water so iconic to the Caribbean. Our hotel was located in a residential area, within walking range of the main part of downtown with restaurants, shops and a small island museum. Marjorie and Gerry figured out the local bus system to explore historic sites farther away. Everyone did what interested them in the daytime, then we met up for dinners to compare notes and try a few local restaurants.



The hotel grounds were open with some big trees, and several species were easy to see, such as Bananaquit and Green-throated Carib feeding in the flowering hedgerow or flying over. One surprise was seeing White-crowned Pigeon perched boldly out in the open along with the more common Zenaida Dove. A noisy Gray Kingbird kept watch from a perch by the open-air dining area. Peg scouted out a local hotspot, McKinnon's Saltpond on her own and having found about 28 species there, she organized taxis to return the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> with those that wanted to go.

### **Thurs., March 7 Arrivals in Antigua**

Stepping out of our taxi, right at the edge of the pond we were buzzed by an Antillean Crested Hummingbird which then boldly perched as we photographed it, wow! We got good views of White-cheeked Pintail, Common Ground Dove, Common Gallinule, Black-necked Stilt, both Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, and both Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night Heron. Brown Pelicans were nesting on an island, some with bright breeding plumage, others showing off to us their acrobatic feeding. There were various herons and egrets, Carib Grackle, and a distant Belted Kingfisher we tried to make into a Ringed to no avail. Yellow Warblers were quite tame and vocal, and Magnificent Frigatebirds were plentiful. With a tally of 37 species in all this was a fun way to kick off our birding adventure.

Ryan arrived mid-day, and his cheerful and positive demeanor was immediately so welcoming it set the mood for our journey from the start. He answered trip questions, and before dinner did a great overview of the significance of the region for nature and birding enthusiasts. We couldn't wait to dive in!

Back at the hotel, we made a loop walk with Ryan before dinner, in search of a Prairie Warbler he had seen ten days prior. It was across the street and singing but we got distracted by an Antiguan ameiva, A couple of pairs of Lesser Antillean Bullfinch were courting, and down a small side ally street we found Scaly-breasted Munia and Black-faced Grassquit. We had dinner at the hotel and enjoyed introductions to meet our diverse group from 7 states of the USA and Germany.

### **Fri., March 8 Exploring Montserrat**

We left the hotel early, but got a bit of first birding in at the airport, finding singing Caribbean Elaenia among the 8 species total. We were excited to board our morning flight to Montserrat. These were very small planes, and





Kathy jumped into the co-pilot seat of one, a big smile on her face with such amazing views. Below us we saw the shadow of our plan in clouds, at times rays of colored light forming a circular rainbow to frame it.

Once called the 'Emerald Isle of the Caribbean, a volcanic eruption in 1995 rendered half the island uninhabitable and it was amazing to see this firsthand. The northern end of the island where we landed was lush and green, down to the mid-point where we went to a volcanic observatory with a view of the vent and surrounding destruction zone. A map showed us in green and gray the two very different sides of this island. We met our guide, "Nature" sporting dreadlocks and island attire and our driver, Mr. White, wearing a snappy hat. Both had big smiles and were impressively skilled in what they do. We spent time looking for the endemic Montserrat Oriole but kept our eyes open for all species we'd encounter. On a walk up a nice, open road with dense vegetation on either side, we found Scaly-naped Pigeon, Smooth-billed Ani, ridiculously tame Mangrove Cuckoo, both Scaly-breasted and Pearly-eyed Thrasher, and a couple of secretive Forest Thrush.

Our lunch was delicious, prepared at a local restaurant in an island home. When we entered, we knew it would be good and as we sipped local juice drinks savory smells wafted out from the kitchen. After a morning it was nice to sit and refresh before heading off again. For our next stop, Ryan had been talking about our fun chance to try the local Bush Rum, but at lunch he was crestfallen to find out the distiller had recently died. For many years this gentleman had served the rum out of his bakery where you could buy homemade bread and taste some forest herbs in the rum. It was an acquired taste, we were game to try, and we seemed to brighten the day for the sad regular customers coming and going, all a bit in shock.

From the patio of the Volcano Observatory we got an amazing view of the volcanic destruction, and inside there were maps and exhibits that depicted the events. We saw another Montserrat Oriole, many Caribbean Martins and driving back, several wintering American Kestrel. We made a short walk down to a beach area where a bench sign read, "May your Life be filled with relaxing sunsets, cool drinks, and sand between your toes. We were working on it! There were signs on the roads and at the airport of getting prepared for St. Patrick's Day celebrations, a huge holiday on this island, with food and fun long into the night. Alas, we could not stay and we flew back to Antigua in the late afternoon, lifting off from the Emerald Isle to see Red-billed Tropicbirds from the plane as we passed dramatic sea cliffs.

Dinner was at the hotel, by now our long table was lively with conversation and we were having fun with our evening bird tally.



## Sat., March 9 Barbuda

This small, flat island was close enough it was a day trip from Antigua, an important one as it holds an endemic warbler we really wanted to see. Ryan had set up a private speedboat to Barbuda for us, a great way to get there and back in a day without waiting on schedules. David was our Captain and Rascheem, the first mate. They had some nice morning snacks for us which we ate before Captain hit the throttle, once underway it was the wind in your hair and hold on tight. Marjorie and Patty stood at the rail taking full wind, with big smiles on their faces. We passed Royal Tern, Brown Pelican and Magnificent Frigatebirds but saw no other new seabirds on the turquoise waters between these islands.

A local guide and driver met us to walk into a shrubby area not far from the beach, perfect habitat for Barbuda Warbler. In March they were singing and on territories and we had no problem finding them. A great example of locally common, globally rare! They kept company with the local "Golden" variety of Yellow Warbler, Caribbean Elaenia, and Bananaquits.

Satisfied with great looks at the island's endemic, we boarded a motorized dinghy to take us across Codrington Lagoon, a bird sanctuary we could explore to get us close to the largest Magnificent Frigatebird colony in the entire Caribbean. It was hopping with activity, with well over 1500 birds in view. We had so much fun watching the bright males inflate their pouches and drum with their bills. There were big chicks, little chicks and incubating females. Within the mix we found five Brown Booby and got fine looks at them as well. A few Barn Swallow flew past, perhaps early migrants ready to head north.

We had lunch by remains of an old fort, listening to singing Barbuda and Yellow Warblers. By mid-afternoon we boarded our private speedboat back to Antigua because we had an onward flight to Barbados for the night. Michael kept a seabird watch, and Peg caught a photo of him framed by the cerulean sea. Ryan had the logistics for us down to a science, and we found out his wife Alex was a big part of the mastermind as each trip has to figure out the order of island visitation that works with ferries and flights for that time. We would return later to Antigua to bird, this was just an overnight stop, but we picked up an endemic, the Barbados Bullfinch, right at our hotel in the Rockley Beach area. We had dinner, and did our checklist tally and got to bed.





## Sun., March 10 Barbados | St. Vincent

Several got out for an early morning strolling on the beachside boardwalk before it got hot; Don and Donna got in an ocean swim. We then packed up and caught a flight to St. Vincent, a heavily forested, volcanic island about 45 minutes by small plane away.

We were met by our local guide, Lystra, who brought a delicious locally-catered lunch. We drove a short way to eat in view of the sea. A hungry mother dog was so happy to see us and for once had a really good day, as we left it with a belly full of rice and chicken. Around us were Smooth-billed Ani, Spotted Sandpiper, both Little Blue and Green Herons, and (our daily) Gray Kingbird. Lystra gave us a good introduction to the island, having lived here and been involved in conservation and education for many years. Peg had first met her in 2014 so it was nice to be reunited.

We checked into one of our favorite hotels for the tour, the Beachcomber, with nice rooms and a great dining patio with view of a bay with quiet moorings for yachts and sailboats. After settling in, we headed to a site deep in the heart of the islands' verdant forests for a chance at seeing the beautiful and endemic St. Vincent Parrot. We needed a rugged four-wheel drive to get up to Jennings Guest House and its fruiting gardens, and we planned to get up there in shifts. However, both the part of our group there, and part waiting down below got to see parrots right away, studying their wonderful colors in the scope. At first, we saw them flying but then feeding, and investigating nest holes. As afternoon light faded, we admired Short-tailed Swifts, two Common Black Hawks circling and courting, several Broad-winged Hawk and the black form of Bananaquit, feeding in flowers. In all we saw about 20 of this vulnerable and rare parrot before mist rolled in – nice!

Dinner at the hotel's open-air restaurant overlooking the water, and Patty and Ryan saw night herons in mangroves just below us. The ocean air felt lovely as night fell.

## Mon., March 11 St. Vincent | Grenada

We had the full day on St. Vincent and would have normally had two nights at the lovely Beachcomber's Inn, but the vagaries of inter-island flight schedules made it best to take an evening flight to Grenada at 7:15 pm. Our plan was birding in the morning, then take a bit of beach time in the afternoon.



From the breakfast area we saw Laughing Gull, a few distant Brown Noddy, Magnificent Frigatebird and Brown Booby out to sea. In the garden of Beachcomber's Inn we found Eared Dove, Tropical Mockingbird, Shiny Cowbird and Black-faced Grassquit. We then headed out to try to find one of the difficult endemics, Whistling Warbler. Their numbers are in decline, most of the accessible birds are just not there anymore, so it requires quite a climb. The previous night's mist had turned to full rain, so our trail was muddy and a bit treacherous. With big steps required a few gave up and were content to watch tanagers and other species in the lower farmlands where mangos and guava lured in several species including Lesser Antillean Tanager, Brown Trembler, Spectacled Thrush, and Yellow-bellied Elaenia.

Our more intrepid hikers climbed into the forest, with many reaching a first stop where we heard one singing, but it remained shy at this stop. Ryan and Lystra encouraged the group to push on higher, with no success there, but thankfully on the return was the Whistling Warbler in plain view – success! We had lunch back at Beachcombers and some free time to swim in the pool or ocean; a few of the group tried out snorkel gear from the beach. On our drive back to the airport Ryan had a spot in mind to see the local variety of House Wren, a possible split, and we stopped just off the busy road at a local house. The owner smiled as we tramped by, up her steep drive, and lo and behold, right on queue we got good looks. This subspecies has a huge bill!

We caught a flight over the dinner hour, but it was short and our hotel was graciously waiting to give us a late dinner and bar drinks on arrival. There was a big moon shining framed by a Norfolk island pine. Don pointed out Jupiter close to the moon with 3 of its own moons quite visible.

## **Tues., March 12 Grenada | Mount Hartman National Park**

We were met this morning on Grenada by local guide Vaughn and, as with all the guides, he enjoyed seeing Ryan, catching up with him while being well-prepared to help us find sought-after birds.

We knew the endemic dove here would be our most difficult to find, as probably fewer than sixty of these individuals remain. This island is not championing the species as other islands have done with their parrots and little is being done to stop habitat destruction. The trailhead Visitor Center has fallen into disarray and the trail is used for sporting events by locals. These will be hardy birds if they can make it. We left early to be at the Mt. Hartman Grenada Dove trail at dawn, hopeful to hear this critically endangered species calling. Hear we did! But in several hours of searching, only Ryan going a bit ahead had a glimpse. A lone bird came to the trail edge as he scanned around the corner, but it seemed particularly wary and dove back in the brush. We walked about a mile through dry forest scrub, scanning vigilantly. We saw the Grenada subspecies of House Wren, Grenada





Flycatcher, Lesser Antillean Bullfinch and Bananaquit, both the all black and yellow-breasted forms. We separated and monitored our section of path. But aside from a short bout of calling, one bird on each side in the thorny thickets, there was no dove activity. We birded outside the trail entry and had good looks at Grenada Flycatcher, Tropical Mockingbird, and Mangrove Cuckoo.

Back for a full breakfast (we had fruit and yoghurt earlier) and pit stop. Then we headed out to the north side of the island, taking in the dramatic ocean views. Sailboats and yachts filled the harbor and Royal Tern, an Osprey, and Magnificent Frigatebirds flew on the updrafts from the sea. We topped out at a blustery 1900 meters (about 6200 ft.) and stopped at a roadside cluster of stores and a restaurant/bar for tourists traveling this winding mountain road. Almost immediately where we parked, we heard chatter from Lesser Antillean Tanagers, a brighter form (and likely split) from those we'd seen on St. Vincent. At one point they posed out in the open at close range for all to see, sweet!

We continued on to the Etang Visitor Center where Vaughn quickly called out hummingbirds. They were plentiful, both perched and flying, a challenge to our photographers and a good study for all of the darker plumage of Grenada's variety of Green-throated Carib. A lone Rufous-breasted Hermit appeared to be molting. We walked a short way down to Lake Etanga lovely body of freshwater that fills a former volcanic crater. On a mainland, this environment would be teeming with waterfowl but here on an isolated small island, nothing had found it and though we scanned we found no species using this habitat. We admired the view and sat by the roadside to enjoy some delicious chicken and potato Roti Vaughn had provisioned for our lunch. Mono Monkeys quickly appeared in large trees overhead. We were told this introduced population came over from West Africa on sailing ships over a century ago. This troop was thoroughly acclimated and came into the calls of two local gentleman promising them treats. They readily jumped up on the arms of visitors as the gentleman placed pieces of sweet banana in the chosen one's hands. Nancy could not resist and had a big smile when they gave her a turn.

"Time to Go!" Ryan our task master herded us back into the van to head back to our coastal hotel. The choice this afternoon was for free time to swim, go to the beach, or relax. Or, return to the trail to look for doves. Five plus Ryan elected to return to resume the Grenada Dove Quest. Three tried to walk to the beach and found it a bit of an adventure. There are so sadly, not many Grenada Doves to look for and we wrestled with this species sad story as we walked the trail again. The global population is probably between 40-60 birds. One of their two strongholds in required dry forest habitat on the island has been turned into a busy landfill. An active trapping



program to keep introduced Indian Mongoose at bay got discontinued due to the pandemic but it has yet to resume. In the whole lower part of the forest trail there is one pair, just two birds, so odds for us were slim. Added to that, a group had been in the area for a bird banding workshop, and the weeks prior to that the Forestry Department had been in there clearing trails in preparation for that. Only Ryan and one of our group, John, got a view as once again a lone bird came out on the trail only to very quickly disappear. But for the rest of us, even without viewing, we treasured hours spent looking, learning about them, hearing them.

By 5 PM we could tell the doves had gone from the ground to their roost trees. We could hear a third bird calling up the hill. Without immediate intervention this species could become extinct soon. In the middle of the vacation escapes of the wealthy, just a few hours south of the USA, it seems impossible that there is no captive breeding program, no official recovery team. The Visitor facility built with donated funds seems empty, only some roosters and a skinny puppy in residence. We talked into the night on how things could change. It was sad to experience so graphically what critically endangered means.

The hotel owner took great care of us and had another good meal waiting. In the lovely evening breeze, we caught up with each other and enjoyed lively conversation and some local rum as Don was on a mission to compare the varieties and we had fun assisting the project.

## **Sun., March 13    Flight to St. Lucia | Castries Birding**

The morning was one of travel as our Inter-Caribbean Air flight went back through St. Vincent and Barbados with a change of planes to get to St Lucia. Ever-bright Ryan had us look for birds in each stop saying, when do you get to have a 4-country bird list in one morning? He steered us through the logistics, by now we were figuring out a 10 island trip was 10 countries and a lot of immigration, customs and baggage claims!

We had lunch at a great seaside restaurant, Petra's Café, where locals had the food, all made, except for super fresh fish which they popped on the grill. It was idyllic, with a nice breeze and view of turquoise water, waves and surrounding lushly forested hills.

We drove through an agricultural area up to Castries, to walk through a wetter forest type known to harbor many of the island's indigenous and endemic species. The ocean views were almost too pretty to bird! We found the St. Lucia Warbler with ease, and would see it many times over the next couple of days, this afternoon's count was five! We watched Green-throated Carib at close range, Black-whiskered Vireo, the local subspecies of House Wren, two Gray Trembler, Lesser Antillean Euphonia (with some work), as well as two Broad-winged





Hawks and our “regulars”, Antillean Crested Hummingbird, Gray Kingbird, Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Black-faced Grassquit and Caribbean Martin.

We checked into our hotel which was in the island’s interior but up high with a fabulous ocean view. We gathered on an open-air deck for cocktails, with a sunset view that was spectacular, framed by lush, forested mountains and the sea. This lavender and orange sky was a memory we will all keep. Elvie was our host and she had a delicious dinner ready for us of macaroni pie, rice with herbs, potatoes baked with sour cream, kingfish fillets and baked chicken with strawberry banana icecream for dessert.

### **Mon., March 14 St. Lucia | Des Cartiers Rainforest**

We started early, at 6 am, taking a packed breakfast with us. Our local guide, Willow, was knowledgeable and keen. We really wanted to see White-breasted Thrasher in the dry forest before our hike up into Des Cartier’s Rainforest. It was breaking day, first light as we wound through towns and villages. Near a new bridge construction we found a pocket of about 15 Short-tailed Swift. We then drove through lush forest, crossing over the backbone of the island to its drier side.

On a trail in dry forest, we got cracking views of this highly local thrasher, a pair chasing each other around, fairly oblivious to us. At one point two raced in and landed together, right above Peg’s shoulder! In all we had at least 7 on the trail. We were instructed to stay on the path because of the frequency of Fer de Lance sightings – St. Lucia is winning a few islands with a venomous snake. We did not see one, but in a clearing at the trail’s end we had a good bird pocket of activity with St. Lucia Pewee, Lesser Antillean Flycatcher, Green-throated Carib, St. Lucia Warbler and the “ regular bullfinches and bananaquits.

Ryan was super pleased with what we had seen and urged us to head on to the rainforest for we had two species of parrot to find. We parked at the trailhead, rounded up a few natural hiking sticks, and started our climb. The trail was well-cleared, in places slippery, in places steep steps but with teamwork we made good progress. Once at the viewpoint, we spread out along the railing at the viewpoint and had a good hour+ to scan. St. Lucia Parrots announced their presence and we saw about ten birds in flight. A Broad-winged Hawk got a loud squawk and rapid flight out of two parrots on our side of the ravine we’d been unaware of. In trees and



shrubs near the viewpoint we saw Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Purple-throated Carib, a very close St. Lucia Black Finch, Lesser Antillean Euphonia, Gray Tremblers trembling, and other species.

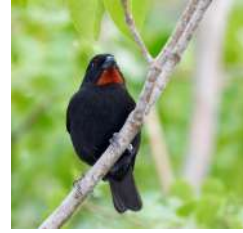
The walk downhill went quickly and from here we headed to lunch. This was at a local restaurant where we tried the local Piton lager, and had some of the freshest fish sandwiches of the trip. After lunch we visited a local pond and were able to scan with scopes, finding Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup and Pied-billed Grebe among the more numerous Blue-winged Teal. There were about 35 Snowy Egret, a couple of Great Egrets, Western Cattle Egret and Great Blue Heron. Patty spotted an Osprey and we got the scopes on it, atop a high shrub in the middle of the pond Ryan scoped a Glossy Ibis, new for the trip. From here we shifted gears to take in some of the island's scenic highlights, particularly views of the twin peaks of Les Pitons. We stopped for photos at several turnouts, finding over a hundred Laughing Gulls perched between colorful fishing boats below us, as well as Magnificent Frigatebirds which we encountered at almost anywhere we were by the sea. We got some nice views of brush birds too, both Scaly-breasted and Pearly-eyed Thrasher, Caribbean Elaenia, House Wren, Black-whiskered Vireo and the endemic St. Lucia Warbler. We had another good dinner and time to relax back at our hotel, and after dinner contributed to our checklist tally.

## Sat., March 15 Martinique

Today was our first ferry transport, over to the French island of Martinique. As we waited to get underway, we compared our journey to that of the huge cruise ships in port – we would not trade for the world! Keeping an eye out to sea, we saw quite a few species, though not many individuals, we were able to log Royal Tern, Brown Noddy, Manx Shearwater, both Red-footed and Brown Booby and Magnificent Frigatebird. We passed Diamond Rock going into the busy harbor.

There was some shuffling to do to get our rental cars, but soon we were on our way to Fort de France, where we found various doves and Spectacled Thrush as roadside species. Heading north to the lush end of the island, we had lunch at a beachside restaurant with some terrific food. We then continued on, driving up scenic roads into the mountains to a well-developed picnic site. Here we saw this island's form of White-breasted Thrasher, less elusive than the one on St. Lucia. Three Lesser Antillean Saltator serenaded us and put on a good show.





Peg had an adventure helping Ryan by driving here, on the opposite side of the road in some pretty intense traffic. This was not Portal, AZ! Indeed this was France and we found that Martinique was modern, quite developed and life here felt in the fast lane. Thankfully Gerry served as her co-pilot and navigated and called out warnings of locals crashing across three lanes of traffic! Our hotel had an ocean view and we caught site of Orange-winged Parrots coming in to roost as we had our cocktails.

### **Fri., March 16 Martinique | Guadeloupe**

We had an early breakfast at the hotel before heading back up into the mountains and the park. There was light rain as we walked up a garden trail, but we were rewarded with great looks at the endemic Martinique Oriole which came right out in the open to perch and preen, spotted by Holgar after we'd seen it dash back and forth several times. We saw three in all, an endemic we did not want to miss.

On a short trail nearby, we looked for Blue-headed Hummingbird which we found feeding in flowers, but by this time the rain came down in earnest. John and Robin hid under huge leaves but the rain felt good and we laughed at our diligent efforts. Walking back to our vehicles, we heard and then spotted Rufous-throated Solitaire which came out on a mossy branch to give us clear, excellent views.

We had a good morning here, then on a mid-afternoon flight we headed on to Guadeloupe, the second of two French Overseas Territories we visited. Anthony Levesque, the local bird expert, met us with a fairly small car so we drove to the hotel in shifts. By now we were on island time, so no worries, we found a café with cold drinks and chilled. We settled in and got a little local color as they were having a fashion show which we could view from our second story balcony. Afterwards there was merchandise for sale and it was fun to watch them having such fun. We enjoyed dinner which they prepared just for us, including some lovely dessert pastries. We then did our checklist tally and prepared for the following day.

### **Wed., March 17 Guadeloupe | Parc National de Guadeloupe | Dominica**

We went out very early today, as one of the species we wanted to find was so elusive, getting out in the park ahead of other tourists was essential. Our quest was to see Bridled Quail-Dove and we had great success! We parked in a lot where someone was tossing out seeds or bread crumbs and Ryan had to pull us away from watching so we could keep on track. We spotted Small Indian Mongoose there, never a good sign for local



wildlife. We went down some stairs to a clearing and picnic area and took our positions under one of the picnic-table awnings, keeping very quiet as we watched and waited. Very soon as if on a stage cue, it came out of the forest edge, and we got fine views. There were a couple of bold Brown Tremblers here and with luck we observed them trembling. By a park map, Anthony gave us a nice overview of the island's bird species and how they used the geography.

Our next quest, and Peg's most hoped for species of the trip, was to see the endemic Guadeloupe Woodpecker. Anthony had seen a pair investigating a nest over the last few weeks, so we set up the scopes here and waited. It was a long time until it came in but then we had super views. We heard and saw another as we moved to a different area of the park and this one flew overhead. We took the most time at our third stop, walking down the winding road into another picnic area. We saw quite a few Purple-throated Carib, Black-whiskered Vireo, and a Chestnut-sided Warbler. Anthony was on the lookout and called out excitedly when he found Forest Thrush.

It was time to celebrate our finds and oh what fun we had at this French-inspired picnic. Anthony had pulled into the local bakery at dawn for fresh baguettes and thankfully those riding with him had not eaten them all! He and Ryan laid out an ample spread of pate and various cheeses with cold drinks and wine. We pulled off fresh bread and chose our toppings and laughed and had a grand time. We were interrupted from this merriment by a pair of Guadeloupe Woodpecker that flew in to the tree right above our table. Fabulous, high five's all around.

Ryan and Peg kept us on course, and soon was telling us we had to pack up, we had a ferry to catch to the next island, Dominica. At the start, the ferry ride looked ideal, with sunny weather, but as we headed out and Guadeloupe was disappearing in view, strong winds had kicked up some swell. Those up on deck in fresh air did well and managed to see Brown and Red-footed Boobies, flying fish, and a White-tailed Tropicbird. An adult Red-footed Booby enjoyed following the boat, drifting right above us for a time. Those down below, seeking AC and comfortable chairs felt a lot more motion, a couple of ours sadly had a rough time. This was exasperated by our ferry trying to rescue an abandoned life raft drifting at sea, of concern of course, but three circles in the swells to retrieve it caused more rocking. These feisty seas also caused issues for docking and we faced a big jam-up as all of us (400 people) had to disembark at one port, be bussed to another, then go through a make-shift set up of immigrations and customs. We were to collect luggage in a very small building with one door to the luggage area, so it was bedlam, and no effort at efficiency shone through. The locals seemed angrier than the tourists so we could only hope this was a rare event. There was an impressive amount of yelling and frustration, and once finally out of there and settled into our lodgings, several poured a bit more rum once





settled into our welcoming hotel to calm our nerves! Thankfully the open-air dining, a good meal, and fresh ocean breezes let us return to enjoying island time. Tomorrow was to be early - off to search for parrots, so it was off to bed tonight.

### **Thurs., March 18    Dominica | Northern Forest Reserve**

We had arrived in the dark after our ferry arrival fiasco, so were thrilled to wake up to find a stunning ocean view from our rooms. Coconut palms waved in the breeze and the garden had some good birdlife.

We left after a quick (bag) breakfast and coffee to head up to Mt. Diablotin National Park, the island stronghold for two impressive Amazons, Red-necked and Imperial Parrots. The fact that this small island supports two species attests to its wildness. These parrots both hit low numbers, but conservation and education efforts had been a success to bring numbers up steadily from the 1980's forward. Then Hurricane Marie hit Dominica hard in 2017, destroying forest habitat and already limited large tree nest cavities.

We could see Red-necked Parrots had made it through, seeing a dozen or more birds in the morning and sixteen-twenty in the afternoon. Ryan thought this valley held up to three pair of the larger Imperial, meaning in this absolute wall of green vegetation we had a possible six birds to find. We were thrilled to hear the first calls, very distinct from red-necked, single note, sometimes in three's, metallic. We heard on repeatedly for several minutes and Ryan leaped and explained as he saw one fly vertically up from one perch to another above it. He got it in the scope but sadly it did not sit, just one of our group got a rear end view. We scanned and scanned, and heard a second call from the center of our view that overlapped the bird we had briefly in view. We stayed about two hours, and enjoyed the flight of Red-necked parrots, and hearing their calls, and watching two investigate a possible nest hole. There were Broad-winged Hawks in flight and Scaly-naped Pigeons, but despite our efforts, we could we did not see any further activity of the Imperial.

We headed back down to lower elevation and tried for some dry-forest species. We had a scrumptious barbecue lunch at Molly's Pork Parlour, can't get much more local than this brightly colored roadside shack! We sat on bus-stop style benches with walls painted bright red. Nearby we found a few treasures at a local basket shop. A highlight was the next stop, to show us a Barn (Ashy-faced) Owl on a perch in a sheltering building, absolutely memorable to be so close with such a view.



Most of the group went back to the hotel to relax a bit, as we'd been keeping up a pretty frenetic pace chasing up a pretty frenetic pace chasing all these endemics. But a few die-hards just had to try again for the Imperial Parrot. We got good looks at many of the same species as the morning, but no Imperials. The consolation prize was seeing a Southern Opossum along the roadside just as we left the park! It had a jaunty stride.

Tonight's patio dinner was very fresh barracuda, perfectly cooked, a treat! We had guacamole as a starter and Tamarind sorbet for dessert. We were now fully in island- enjoyment mode! Laughter flowed in the cool tropical air. Our bird list was now past 100 too, cause for celebration.

## **Tues., March 19    Dominica | Barbados**

Waking up to the alarm clock of Tropical Mockingbirds means waking up early - on bird time. Thankfully this gracious lodge had fresh coffee and tea ready for us, and we could sit out and view of the ocean watching Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Pelican, Royal Terns, and a scattering of garden birds including Lesser Antillean Bullfinch. A Caribbean Elaenia joined them, and we loved as always, watching the green flash from the crest of Antillean Crested Hummingbird as the sun gained its strength. We drove a short way to a narrow spot in the coastal road where the lava held good size openings, these caves, just perfect for nesting White-tailed Tropicbirds. We watched five or six on the wing, just stunning as they banked to Info in the sunlight, and occasionally dipped down just over the blue ocean waves.

Back at the hotel Ryan led a short walk on which Cape May Warbler and Red-legged Thrush were highlights. Then it was time to head to our final island of Barbados, Ryan's home island. Our drive over the mountain to the airport was a little over an hour. On the canal adjacent to the airport, we found both species of kingfisher, Ringed and Belted, sweet! We had some downtime this afternoon to enjoy the sea or the pool. Ryan's family came by so we could meet Alex and their two precious little girls. Our final celebratory dinner was classic Caribbean, simple but simply delicious. At Oisten's Boat Yard we had some of the freshest fish possible, cooked on a grill fresh for our table. This popular fish market area has several food vendors, some shops, and for our dessert, an ice-cream shop (inspired by Donna and very well-received)!

We walked down to the shore after our bellies were full with Marlin, Flying Fish, or Mahi Mahi with potato and coleslaw. It was a beautiful night by the Caribbean Sea and Ryan was happy to be sharing his island and one of his favorite restaurants. We were all so happy with this ten-day marathon, in quest of endemic species, but so





much more. We'd never look at this pearl-like chain of islands on a map again in the same way. Now we knew place names and had met local people, hiked trails, dined on local specialty foods and enjoyed each other – so many memories and such a nice group!

Back at our hotel we did our final bird checklist tally, and then traded thoughts on trip highlights. These were many and varied but we all agreed the best one was Ryan, who we had nicknamed our Daddy Duck as we followed him through the rigors of so many island crossings. His knowledge and patience were amazing!

## **Wed., March 20 Departures**

We had one more morning to explore and do some birding in Barbados. We made a scenic stop above the coast at St. John Parish Church, built in 1645. This island has a lot of agriculture and we drove around various farm fields. We found Grassland Yellow-Finch, new for the trip and were thrilled to get close views of Rose-ringed Parakeet, introduced but a colorful species. A troop of Green Monkeys high-tailed it out of an orchard as the farmer came out to his equipment. We stopped at a couple of ponds and found good views of Pied-billed Grebe, Sora, Common Gallinule and American Coot. At a smaller pond we found Solitary Sandpiper. A final stop was at a sea cliff where we watched expert surfers and numerous Green Sea Turtles. There is just no end to the delights of nature on these islands, but it was departure day, our flock would disperse, and it was time to go. We made it back to the hotel in time for an ample breakfast before most took our Transfer to airport. Holger had a later flight and relaxed by the pool. Patty and Peg were staying one more night to get early morning flights and they enjoyed some downtime, and then dinner at a lovely Caribbean restaurant with an ocean view.

*Photos: Mangrove Cuckoo (Holger Teichmann), Magnificent Frigatebird (HT), Green-throated Carib (HT), St Vincent Amazon (HT), Grenada Tanager (HT), Antillean Crested Hummingbird (HT), Grassland Yellow Finch (HT), Pearly-eyed Thrasher (HT), Montserrat Oriole (HT), Smooth-billed Ani (HT), Barbuda Warbler (HT), Bananaquit (HT), Green-throated Carib (HT), Scaly-naped Pigeon (HT), Broad-winged Hawk (HT), St Vincent Amazon (HT), Antillean Crested Hummingbird (HT), Scenic (PA), Birding Portrait (PA), Bananaquit (HT), Spectacled Thrush (HT), Scenic (PA), Rufous-breasted Hermit (HT), Group Birding (PA), Enjoying the view (PA), Purple-throated Carib (HT), St Lucia Warbler (HT), Group Birding (PA), Enjoying the porch (PA), White-breasted Thrasher (HT), Lesser Antillean Pewee (HT), Lesser Antillean Flycatcher (HT), St Lucia Black Finch (HT), Scenic (PA), White-breasted Thrasher (HT), Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (HT), Lesser Antillean Saltator (HT), Martinique Oriole (HT), Blue-headed Hummingbird (HT), Bridled Quail Dove (HT), Guadeloupe Woodpecker (HT), Red-necked Amazon (HT), Barn Owl (HT), Plumbeous Warbler (HT), Smooth-billed Ani (PA), Caribbean Elaenia (PA), Crystal Waters (PA), Barbuda Warbler (Donna Cooper)*