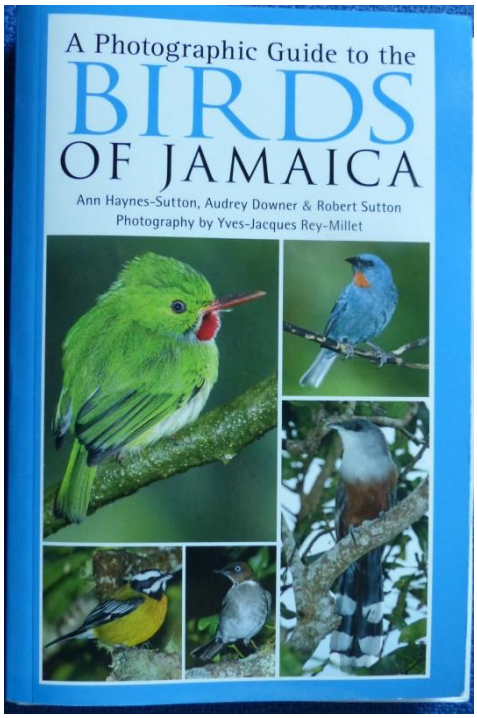
BIRDING in JAMAICA

Sunrise from the Estate House looking towards the Blue Mountains

We recently spent a week in a beautiful rural Estate House standing in its own extensive grounds close to the unspoilt north-east coast of Jamaica, with miles of trails to explore plus a tropical garden, rivers, pools and even its own reservoir. The endemic birds of Jamaica, many of which can be found within the grounds of the estate, were the main focus of the birding package which included some guided walks with a local Bird Guide including two full days in the Blue Mountains, the highest peaks of the Caribbean. This still left plenty of time to do our own birding along the trails, or relax, read, or swim in the pool……



A tiny fluffball of vivid green gleaming in the sunlight zips across the forested trail and perches in a branch about ten feet off the ground. Wow! It's a **Jamaican Tody**……..(the brightest jewel on the front cover of '*The Birds of Jamaica*.') It has a bright red throat patch and prominent long red lower bill, its white breast washed with pale green and pink- such a gem of bird. It moves a few feet higher in the canopy, and instantly 'disappears' though you can still hear its distinctive sibilant 'cheep'. A patient search relocates the bird, beautifully camouflaged in the tropical foliage. Fabulous little bird! It looks up, moves again, and like some conjuror's trick, vanishes from sight once more even though you suspect it is still very close by. Known locally as *Robin Redbreast*, it is a relatively common endemic which we see on several days in different forested areas, our sightings usually measured in seconds rather than minutes. The call, once known, might draw attention to its presence, but we must have walked past many a silent Tody sitting close by in its cloak of invisibility.

No such difficulty attends another beautiful endemic seen in the gardens surrounding the estate house, the **Jamaican Spindalis**, its head striped in bold black and white like a badger and its orange breast fading to yellow on the lower belly. Once known as 'Stripe-headed Tanager' it belongs to the well-known *Tanager* family, brightly-coloured birds famed throughout the Americas. Another, the melodic **Jamaican Oriole**, known locally as *Banana Katie* is an endemic sub-species which can also be seen and heard quite readily in the gardens.

Red-billed Streamertail

Jamaican Mango
Photos: AJM

Even easier to see are the three endemic hummingbirds which visit the flowering shrubs beneath our verandah or visit the sugar feeders. Most eye-catching is the **Red-billed Streamertail**, known locally as the *doctorbird* -Jamaica's National Bird; the mature males sport the streamers which give rise to its name, two elongated scalloped feathers which more than double the length of the bird and create a buzzing sound as they fly. The largest *hummer* on the island is the **Jamaican Mango**, often seen as a slim *all-dark* bird with a long slightly down-curved beak, but catch the plumage in the right light and the head lights up as iridescent magenta, the body shimmers with hints of green and purple, and the underside of the tail when back-lit is a glowing wine red colour. 'Our' Mango based nearby jealously guards the feeder hanging in front of our room and swiftly sees off any other visiting hummers. The minute **Vervain Hummingbird**, at 5cm is one of the world's tiniest birds. We see them around the powderpuff flowers rather than the feeders, but also marvel when they fly to the top of the big tree by the Dining Room and land on the bare twigs, looking more like insects than birds.

Some other endemics are more likely to be seen on the forest trails. On the Tower Trail, an area of tall palm trees is a good place to see and hear the large **Jamaican Woodpeckers** as they fly in to their nesting holes, usually calling loudly as they do so. The males have a bright red crown and nape, the females subtly different with an olive-green crown and bright red nape. In this same area we also saw the pretty little lemon-breasted Sad Flycatcher, and the larger Rufous-tailed Flycatcher. Our excellent local bird-guide, Dwayne, led one walk for the group along the Waterfall Trail where his knowledge of calls and habitat enables him to pick out some of the more elusive species for us; for one or two species it might even be the *only time* we see them. As if he was a magician, Hey Presto, a magnificent **Lizard Cuckoo** springs into view as we start the trail, working its way through the tangles of a shrub to reveal its impressive long beak and even longer tail, but the shy **Yellow-shouldered Grassquit**, reluctant to come to a playback call on this occasion was seen well several times later in the week when walking quietly by ourselves! **White-chinned Thrushes** hop along the trail in front of us in typical *Turdus* fashion, a strange name for a bird with a miniscule and rarely seen 'white chin' but a prominent white patch on its wing.

Hardwar Gap

Two full days are spent away from the Estate seeking out the rarer birds not regularly seen around the estate. A pre-dawn 5a.m. departure for the two-hour drive on increasingly steep and narrow roads climbing up to the Hardwar Gap in the famous Blue Mountains ensures we start birding in the most productive part of the day. Already over 400ft a.s.l., the cloud forests are lush, dark, and cool, the branches draped and festooned with ghostly grey lichens hanging in the mist: these forests are home to several species largely restricted to this habitat. One, the elusive **Crested Quail-dove**, rarely leaves the leaf litter down in the steep slopes either side of the narrow road where it is all but invisible; our best hope of seeing one is to find it foraging quietly along the road edge…….but first, we must check out a side trail, where we locate a **Peewee**, a tiny endemic mountain flycatcher, and a **Jamaican Euphonia**, a rather muted greenish bird with a blue-grey head. Returning to the vehicle for breakfast, including scrumptious Jamaican porridge, imagine how gutted we feel when the driver admits that he has just seen a Crested Quail-dove whilst we were away! We set off walking the Hardwar Gap, always carefully checking the leaf litter at the roadside as we round each bend. Dwayne hears various bird calls as we progress, and gradually introduces us to the **Blue Mountain Vireo**, the **Jamaican Blackbird**, the dainty little **Arrowhead Warbler** and the

beautiful songster known as the **Rufous-throated Solitaire**. We check out several other sites including an old Coffee Plantation road, but sadly that Quail-dove never shows up.

A quieter day follows, with the promise of an evening walk to seek out the prized endemic **Jamaican Owl** after dinner. As we set out with our guide, some light rain is falling as we find a **Northern Potoo** close to the House; but a mere five minutes later we are sheltering in the gazebo about a hundred yards from the house as the rain intensifies into a veritable cloudburst. We patiently wait a while until the inevitable decision is taken to abandon our 'Owling Session'; nobody makes it back to base dry whatever protective clothing we wear! Overnight this weather develops into a tropical storm, and our next scheduled 5a.m departure for the second trip to the mountains is likewise aborted. The rain continues for most of the morning before abating, leaving all the local trails extremely claggy with mud and alive with mosquitos. To avoid 'cabin fever' we arrange an impromptu afternoon visit to the coastal pools and the estate reservoir for ducks and waders.

Stair-rod Downpours ……

Next morning we set off again at 5 a.m. for our postponed visit to Ecclesdown Road, another birding hotspot in the limestone forests of the mountains further east. The sultry dawn arrives under heavy black clouds and the rain begins again in earnest as we drive up into the mountains. Breakfast-time finds us high up in the forest marooned in the minibus with the rain incessantly hammering down. Eventually we set off, determined to make the best of the poor conditions knowing it is our only opportunity to check out this remote area. We soon locate a very wet **Black-billed Streamertail**, the endemic hummingbird of this eastern enclave of Jamaica. Have you ever tried using your binoculars in a deluge of rain whilst holding a brolly at the same time?

'Banana Katie'- the Jamaican Oriole

Fortunately, the rain eases and stops by mid-morning, excellent news for the birds and the birders alike. As the mist begins to rise from the trees, flocks of Parrots take to the air, calling noisily as they fly over the canopy. Two endemic species, the **Yellow-billed Parrot** and the **Black-billed Parrot** are found up here. Although the yellow-billed parrots often fly around in larger groups of 10-20 birds and the black-billed generally fly in smaller groups or as individuals, that distinction is not enough on its own to make an accurate identification. Both species are basically 'green' parrots of similar size, but with practice we learn to look for the bright-red wing coverts of the BBP and the azure-blue primaries of the YBP. Soon, we find some feeding in the canopy at eye level, where we are overlooking a steep-sided valley, and have some *fabulous views* of several individual birds through the scope. What wonderful birds they are too- I could watch parrots all day long and never tire of them. The black-billed has the ear-coverts and neck feathers edged in black giving a 'scaly' effect to the plumage. The yellow-billed has some bare skin surrounding the eyes and above the beak giving it a very expressive face, whilst its throat is suffused with a deep rose pink colour. *Gorgeous*. They are constantly with us throughout the

remainder of the morning….. but there are other endemics still to locate. While it was still raining, a bedraggled **Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo**, largest of the Jamaican cuckoos, put in an appearance in the canopy above us, virtually a silhouette against the sky, so it was particularly good to find two others much later on giving us really memorable views of this impressive bird. **Jamaican Crow** is heard, seen, and ticked, looking very like…… well…… looking like a Crow. Better, closer views emerge of the **Black-billed Streamertail** and the **Antillean Bullfinch** as we follow the road up and up, still hoping against hope to find our Crested Quail-dove. We are by now a couple of miles from the place where our vehicle is parked, when a few large spots of rain precede the 'mother of all stair-rod downpours'. Coats, umbrellas, etc. barely deflect this mighty deluge as we retrace our steps, but at least the rain is warm. Strangely enough, we have had such a great time and enjoyed such exceptional birding that our spirits are not dampened even though our clothes may be! We head back on down to the coast and stop at a Jerk-Meat Restaurant for a very late lunch and a welcome beer, plus our obligatory stop on the way home at the coastal pools where we find three beautiful West Indian Whistling Ducks.

The following day of course is relentlessly beautiful and sunny; we have a quiet walk down to the coast at Robins Bay, followed by a lazy afternoon round the pool with our friends enjoying a Pina Colada. It's all looking more promising for our second attempt on the Jamaican Owl, (or so we think), but the rain starts again as soon as we head out after Dinner. Despite our Guide's best efforts to lure them out, Wise Owls have more sense than to try hunting or even calling in the rain-so it's 'game over' for that one!

Altogether we managed to see 26 of the 28 endemic species on Jamaica plus another 14 endemic sub-species. Apart from the endemics, we managed to see lots of other good birds such as wintering American Warblers, ducks, waders, herons, egrets, a few birds of prey etc, about 100 species altogether. Perhaps our rarest sighting of the trip was the 'fastest man on the planet' Usain Bolt, who flew out to Jamaica on our flight from Gatwick!

Photo: AJM