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BIRDING JAMAICA

by David W. Bates, Jan P. Smith, and Peter P. Marra

Jamaica is a delightful place to bird. It is close to the United States, only 700 miles from Miami, with many inexpensive flights between, and English is the language spoken. Part of the Greater Antilles of the West Indies, Jamaica lies 90 miles south of the eastern extremity of Cuba and is the third largest Caribbean island—146 miles long and between 22 and 53 miles wide. The name Jamaica stems from the Arawak Indian expression for a "land of wood and water." The tropical vegetation benefits from an average annual rainfall of 78 inches (30 to 300 inches is the range) and an average temperature of 80° F. March and October are the rainiest months, with the main dry period in January and February. Hurricanes are most frequent between July and September.

Most Jamaican birds nest in May, though nesting takes place throughout the year. We (Bates and Smith) visited Jamaica in May 1989, and Marra did extensive field work there in 1990. Many tourists, other than birders, are drawn to Jamaica, which is noted for its miles of beautiful white-sand beaches. The high season for tourism is from December to May. In the off season, which begins usually after mid-April, rates are as much as fifteen percent lower. Reservations are essential during the high season, but nearly all the tourists stick to the north coast. If you visit the areas described here, you will see a different Jamaica.

Although few forest areas are undisturbed, they are accessible, and the island has twenty-five endemic birds, many of which are common. One can see virtually all the birds in a week on one's own—we saw twenty-four of the endemics and heard the Jamaican Owl—and still have enough time left over to spend a day or two relaxing in the sun on the beautiful north coast.

The roads are in generally good shape; rental cars are readily available (\$60 per day); the hotels excellent; and the people, especially in rural and less touristy areas, extraordinarily friendly. Renting a car and driving on your own is the best way to visit a variety of habitats. The alternatives are multiple taxi rides, which can be expensive and hard to arrange, or local buses, which are unreliable. Driving is on the left and can be difficult in Kingston and Montego Bay, but outside of these urban areas, it is not bad. Road signs are sparse, and the maps at times inaccurate. We used the road map obtained from the Jamaican Tourist Board and had few route-finding difficulties. If in doubt, ask a Jamaican. Although the lilting dialect is sometimes hard to understand, people were always helpful to us: "Take dis road, mon, it's a better-drivin' road."

The endemics most difficult to see are the Jamaican Owl, the Jamaican Blackbird, and the Crested Quail-Dove. Although the owl is widely distributed

in areas above sea level, it is not easy to find. We heard it at the Rocklands Feeding Station just after dusk. The blackbird is arboreal and lives in forest high in the Blue Mountains, which were particularly hard hit in Hurricane Gilbert (September, 1988). The quail-dove is easiest to locate here and at Marshall's Pen. Of the other endemic birds, Golden Swallow, Yellow-breasted Crake, and the West Indian Whistling-Duck are also difficult; locations are given below. The best field guide is James Bond's *Birds of the West Indies* with illustrations by Don R. Eckelberry and Earl L. Poole (Houghton Mifflin), and much of our information was drawn from it. The fifth edition is the most recent.

One note about safety. Parts of Kingston, like most populous urban areas today, can be very dangerous, and it is important to use discretion about where you go. Also, marijuana (called *ganja* in Jamaica) is grown in the bush in many places, and it is probably prudent not to wander too far off the beaten track. If you do chance upon a ganja patch, get out quickly! Marijuana is illegal in Jamaica, and the penalties for possession are severe. We had no difficulties of any kind.

Mandeville Area.

Mandeville, in south central Jamaica, is the island's only large hill town (elevation of two thousand feet). Built around a traditional green, the town center resembles an English-style village.

Marshall's Pen is a two-hundred-year-old "Great House" set on a three-hundred-acre cattle farm just outside Mandeville and is maintained as a tourist attraction by the Sutton family, who are very interested in and knowledgeable about birds. (Robert Sutton offers birding tours of Marshall's Pen, the Cockpit Country, and south coast areas.) The grounds are a bird sanctuary, have hiking trails, and are an excellent spot for birding. It is essential to call in advance; the Astra Hotel will do this for you. We spent several hours here one afternoon and then arranged to return the following morning at dawn. Explore the grounds by walking through a gate and down a track behind the parking area. Do not miss the tour of the house, which offers a large shell collection, a stamp collection, and interesting antiques. We spent two of our most delightful hours in Jamaica at this place. Marshall's Pen, or farm, is good for Crested Quail-Dove, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Becard, Arrow-headed Warbler, flycatchers, and both thrushes, White-eyed and White-chinned.

Dry coastal areas. The road east of Alligator Pond runs through dry woodland where Jamaican White-eyed Vireo, hummingbirds, pigeons, White-bellied Dove, and flycatchers can be found.

The road southeast from Portland Cottage is the best spot for Bahama Mockingbird, which is local. Between Amity Hall and Salt River on the Mitchell Town Road is another chance to see the mockingbird, and on the right

is a large fish hatchery, where many herons, migrant shorebirds, and terns may be seen.

The Cockpit Country is northwest of Mandeville (and southeast of Montego Bay). This is a densely vegetated wild area—a high plateau of deep-sea limestone broken by innumerable hills, valleys, and sinkholes. In the seventeenth century runaway slaves, or Maroons, fled here to hide at the time their Spanish masters were being driven out of Jamaica by the English. As the Maroons struggled for freedom and independence, many bloody battles raged here for a century and a half—hence the name Cockpit.

The route from Spring Garden through Burnt Hill and Barbecue Bottom is a spectacular, isolated road that provides an excellent sample of the Cockpit Country. There is almost continuous forest from Spring Garden on. The road surface is very rough, though readily negotiable. This is an excellent area for Jamaican Crow, Yellow-billed and Black-billed parrots—Black-billed is much less common—flycatchers, and other montane species, and there is a chance for Golden Swallow.



Cockpit Country

Photo by Peter P. Marra

Black River is located on the south coast to the west of Mandeville. *Great Morass* is the Jamaican name for the inland areas of freshwater swamp and marshland, and Luana Point, just west of the Black River is a good spot to see West Indian Whistling-Duck. You may have to search around a bit in the black mangrove swamps of the morass to see them. Get an early start, and also look for crocodiles. The best boat trips up the Black River are with local fisherman. Other birds found here include Common Potoo, numerous waterbirds, and as many as twenty species of migrant warblers, including Swainson's.

Milk River Spa, home of what is reputed to be the world's most radioactive mineral bath with a water temperature of 92° F, is a good place to spend an evening and the best spot to find the Yellow-breasted Crake. This is a fine example of what the Jamaican government has done to manage one of the few beautiful natural places left on the island. You can get a canoe from a ranger as early as 7:00 A.M. and head down the river toward the ocean. Crakes are common in the reeds, and there is a possibility of seeing manatees and crocodiles.

Kingston and the Blue Mountains.

Kingston, the capital of Jamaica, is the site of the University of the West Indies and the location of one of the two international airports on the island. If you have time to spare in Kingston, a visit to the Hope Botanical Gardens could be worthwhile, providing very accessible and easy birding, according to reports of other birders.

North of Kingston are the rugged Blue Mountains, a part of the mountainous backbone extending through Jamaica from east to west. The highest elevation (7402 feet) is Blue Mountain Peak. When we were there, the mountain hotels had been closed since Hurricane Gilbert in 1988. We stayed in Kingston and got an early start on our trip to Hardwar Gap.

Hardwar Gap is the highest point on the road that leads from Kingston through the wild and forested Blue Mountains to Buff Bay on the north coast. In the Newcastle area, the road is very twisted and winding. The Blue Mountain forests were devastated by Gilbert, the most powerful storm recorded in the Caribbean in this century. A survey of local foresters by the International Council for Bird Preservation determined that eight percent of the trees were blown over and twenty-two percent lost their crowns. The majority of trees and shrubs were totally defoliated; those flowering or fruiting at the time lost their blooms and crop. When we visited the area in 1989, the road over the mountains had just been cleared. Most of the trails in the area were still covered with downed trees and mud slides. The forest itself was destroyed in many areas. The trees that remained were just beginning to leaf out from the main branches and trunks.

You can park in the bus lot at Hardwar Gap and walk down the old road.

Here we easily found Blue Mountain Vireo, Arrow-headed Warbler, and Rufous-throated Solitaire. Crested Quail-Dove is also more common here than elsewhere. The Jamaican Blackbird was more difficult. We saw one on the Waterfall Trail, which starts from above the parking area and runs for about a mile through a small area of relatively intact forest.

Montego Bay Area.

Montego Bay on the north coast, a major center for tourism and a market town for western Jamaica, is the site of the other international airport. The coastal highway east leads to Ocho Rios and to Buff Bay. The Cockpit Country is to the east of Montego Bay.

Negril. The highway west follows the coast to Bloody Bay (so named because it was a whale-butchering site in bygone days) and to Negril, famous for seven miles of white-sand beach. The swampy marshland (the Great Morass) inland from Negril has been extensively drained and developed in the interests of tourism. The remaining undeveloped portion of the morass which contains remnants of the original swampy forests is "jealously guarded by naturalists," according to a Jamaican guidebook.

Rocklands Feeding Station is reached by following the main road west from Montego Bay past Reading. Turn left on the road that leads toward Anchovy. Drive 2.2 miles, and, at the top of Long Hill (before Anchovy), turn left at a small signpost for Rock Pleasant. Rocklands is on this road, half a mile along on the right. The feeding station opens at 3:30 P.M., though you may visit in the mornings with a prior appointment. This station has been managed for twenty years by Lisa Salmon, who has recorded 116 species on the property. Many can be readily seen in a brief visit, notably Orangequit, White-bellied Dove, and Saffron Finch. Streamertail and Jamaican Mango come to the hand to feed, providing great opportunities for photos. All the flycatchers have been seen on the grounds, and we heard the owl at dusk.

Windsor Caves. The area near the caves provides another way of entering the Cockpit Country. We saw the Jamaican Crow and both parrots here, though the habitat is not as good as the Burnt Hill area. It is probably important to come early in the morning. We found a large flock of Golden Swallows flying over fields opposite the entrance to the Good Hope Plantation, a coconut and cattle plantation with marked trails for horseback riding.

One possible itinerary is to fly to Montego Bay, visit the Rocklands Feeding Station that afternoon, and stay overnight. The following morning, rise early, drive to Mandeville, and spend several days in that area. From Mandeville, it is a three-hour drive to Kingston, and the dry coast can be visited en route. After overnight in Kingston, leave very early the next day, visit Hardwar Gap near dawn, then continue to Ocho Rios or Montego Bay.

The Hotel Astra in Mandeville caters to birders and is an excellent place to be based for a few days. A three-day minimum stay is required if you wish to make reservations ahead. Most Jamaican hotels encourage prolonged stays but will take you for shorter periods if you arrive without reservations. There are a number of good, inexpensive, safe hotels in New Kingston which the Astra will help you to book. The Hibiscus Lodge in Ocho Rios and the Toby Inn in Montego Bay are very nice, accept people for short stays, and are good values. Also worth checking are the various guesthouses one passes while driving

Jamaican Bird List

The list below includes Jamaican endemics and Greater Antillean specialties. For a complete list, see *Finding Birds Around the World* by Peter Alden and John Gooders, 1981 (Houghton Mifflin). The following symbols are used: * = endemic to Jamaica; w = widespread; B = Blue Mountains; C = Cockpit Country; D = Dry Lowlands; L = Luana; MP = Marshall's Pen; M = Milk Creek Spa; R = Rocklands Feeding Station.

West Indian Whistling-Duck *L*
 Yellow-breasted Crake *M*
 Scaly-Naped (Red-necked Pigeon) *w*
 Plain Pigeon *w*
 Ring-tailed Pigeon *w* *
 White-bellied Dove *D, L, R*
 Crested Quail-Dove *B, MP* *
 Olive-throated Parakeet *w*
 Guiana Parrotlet *w*
 Yellow-billed Parrot *C* *
 Black-billed Parrot *C* *
 Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo *w, MP* *
 Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo *w, MP* *
 Jamaican Owl *
 Jamaican Mango *w* *
 Streamertail *w* *
 Vervain Hummingbird *w*
 Jamaican Tody *w* *
 Jamaican Woodpecker *w* *
 Yellow-crowned Elaenia *w* *
 Greater Antillean Elaenia *w*
 Greater Antillean Pewee *B, C, MP*
 Dusky-capped Flycatcher *w* *
 Stolid Flycatcher *w*
 Rufous-tailed Flycatcher *B, C, MP* *
 Loggerhead Kingbird *w*
 Jamaican Becard *MP* *
 Golden Swallow *C*
 Jamaican Crow *C* *
 Rufous-throated Solitaire *B, C, MP*

White-eyed Thrush *w* *
 White-chinned Thrush *w* *
 Bahama Mockingbird *D*
 Jamaican White-eyed Vireo *w* *
 Blue Mountain Vireo *B* *
 Arrow-headed Warbler *B, MP* *
 Jamaican Euphonia *w* *
 Stripe-headed Tanager *w*
 Yellow-faced Grassquit *w*
 Yellow-shouldered Grassquit *B, C, MP* *
 Greater Antillean Bullfinch *B, C, MP*
 Orangequit *w* *
 Jamaican Blackbird *B* *
 Greater Antillean Grackle *w*
 Jamaican Oriole *w* *



White-eyed Thrush
 Photo by Peter P. Marra

through Jamaica. They offer a touch of real Jamaican hospitality and good Jamaican food. Examples are Loquille House in Savanna-La-Mar and Bridge House in Black River.

Addresses. The following addresses may be helpful in planning a Jamaican birding trip.

- Jamaican Tourist Board, 866 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Telephone 212-688-7650.
- Astra Hotel, 62 Ward Avenue, P.O. Box 60, Mandeville, Jamaica.
- Mrs. Audrey Downer, Gosse Bird Club, P.O. Box 1002, Kingston 8, Jamaica, arranges birding excursions.
- Robert and Anne Sutton, Marshall's Pen, Mandeville, Jamaica, arrange birding tours of the Marshall Pen area, Cockpit Country, and south coast.

DAVID W. BATES, educated at Stanford and at Johns Hopkins universities, is a physician in the Division of General Medicine at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, doing research in cost-effectiveness and efficiency in medical care. He grew up in Arizona, where an interest in birds began at age five. David has traveled all around the world to see birds (he is just back from Argentina), has lived in Kenya and Peru, and estimates his life list as close to three thousand.

JAN P. SMITH, a native of Marblehead, has been observing birds since age eleven. He has two master's degrees—one in zoology from the University of Washington in Seattle, where he specialized in bird endocrinology, and one in engineering from Northeastern University. Jan has worked with the World Wildlife Fund in Manaus, Brazil, researching the effect of rain-forest fragmentation on the viability of bird populations. In addition to numerous bird-related trips to Central and South America and several to southeast Asia, Jan has spent three months in Ethiopia and lived in Europe for two and a half years. He is a water quality specialist doing environmental work in Coastal Zone Management for the state's Executive Office of Environmental Affairs.

PETER P. MARRA, interested in birds since early childhood in Connecticut, is currently at Dartmouth College doing a three-year research project on the population dynamics of the Black-throated Blue Warbler and the American Redstart in New Hampshire and on the birds' wintering grounds in Jamaica. Pete studied with Nobel Proctor at South Connecticut State University and received his master's degree in ornithology at Louisiana State University. His research projects have included two seasons in Peru investigating habitat selection and population diversity in birds of the tropical understory, a study of birds affecting the gypsy moth populations in Connecticut for the U. S. Forest Service, and a project for Connecticut Audubon Society on the Chimon Island heronry.

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