

## Birding in Saint Lucia By Richard Lobley November 2016

This was my third trip to the Caribbean and the latest in the year. Migration was apparently almost at an end although the wetlands would be expected to hold large numbers of duck by December.

Migrants were a bonus as my main targets on the island were the endemic species. Although I could have easily hired a car; they drive on the left & speak English, the roads are not great. More importantly without a guide it would have been extremely difficult to find the sites for the endemic birds. Indeed without the 4 x 4 I wouldn't have tackled any of the dirt tracks!



Saint Lucia Oriole

Part of the inspiration to go to Saint Lucia had come from reading a trip report in Birdwatch magazine. The island is c10 hours flying time from Manchester & we flew with Thomas Cook but Virgin & BA also fly there. Unfortunately most flights tend to include passengers flying on to Barbados so this makes the return flight longer as it involves disembarking there for 3 hours.

The island itself holds about 280,000 people & is roughly 28 miles long by about 14 wide. It is quite mountainous so the journey by road from the international airport in the south of the island to the capital, Castries, takes about 75 minutes. The alternative of a helicopter transfer is pricey and weather dependant. We arrived in torrential rain & were lucky to get to the north by taxi as the roads flood extensively.

Our beachside resort was The Rendezvous Hotel. It was beyond the port area, and immediately outside the small (& original airport); and graveyard. I'm there was no connection between the air safety record of Carib Airways & the location of the graveyard other than there is very little flat land on the island. When not birding the regular take-offs &

landings were a pleasant distraction.

The hotel grounds were quite small but yielded Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Bannaquit, Carib Grackle & Shiny Cowbird and numerous doves together with Gray Kingbird and 2 hummingbird species – purple throated carib & green throated carib. Every day the breakwater in front of the hotel held little blue heron & turnstone. Most days Osprey flew over as indeed did Magnificent Frigatebird. Every day multiple Cattle Egrets flew by. Possibly the best birds in & around the hotel were Green Heron, American Kestrel & Semi palmated plovers but each of these was seen on only one occasion.

For two days we hired a guide. Birdwatch magazine had recommended Adams Toussaint although for operational reasons we were guided by a Rasta called Vision. He was very good although not cheap -the two trips cost US\$480 or about £400. The first day was very long 6am to 5pm due in part to the vehicle having a flat battery that lost us about an hour. It was also long because we went into the tropical forest & eventually down to the Adams delivered & fit a replacement whilst we had gone walking down the main road from a viewpoint overlooking a fishing port called Dennery & onto a side track to a mobile phone transmitter. This track was short but with visions help & persistent with his mobile phone (using bird calls) & a blue tooth speaker we managed to call in Saint Lucia Warbler & Saint Lucia Black Finch (endemics). At this site we also had a very inquisitive Mangrove Cuckoo and Lesser Antillean Saltator together with Caribbean Elaenia and black whiskered vireo. Vision was very knowledgeable pointing out to us local plant and tree species.



Rufous Throated Solitaire

By the time our 4x4 minivan had been restored to us we had had a highly successful first hour of birding. Within a couple of further stops only a quarter of a mile further one (both on R/H side) we had got two further good birds – Saint Lucia Peewee & White Breasted Thrasher (2 – or pair).

After stopping for water – East Caribbean dollars useful but not essential we went into the rainforest. This was quite an uphill drive through very poor roads & eventually up to a former French overland road. This was Des Cartier Rainforest Trail. On the drive up we had our first views of broad winged hawk.

At this site we again missed Saint Lucia Oriole which responded to tape luring but not sufficiently for us to see it. We did however eventually after about a mile of uphill walking get to a view point over the mountain range. From here we saw the Saint Lucia parrot which apparently is a national conservation success. Much of the island is effectively a protected area & the locals appear to be doing a good job of conservation. From this same viewing area we managed L A Flycatcher, Rufous Throated Solitaire (very good views of a very nice species) together with views of Scaly Breasted Thrasher & Pearly Eyed Thrasher.

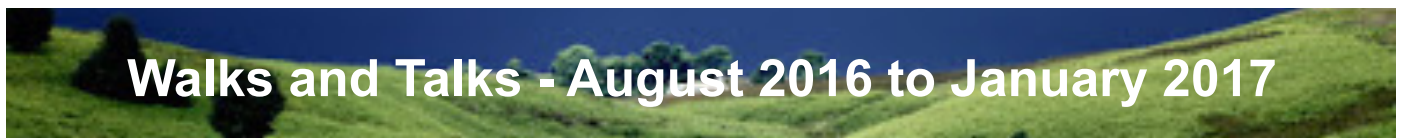
After that hour of being eaten by mosquitoes etc we retreated back to the minivan to go south. Near the airport ground was still reasonably wet and we saw Great egret, snowy egret, cattle egret & lesser yellowlegs. From there we drove up to a lighthouse at cape Moule a Chique. Unfortunately on a Sunday we couldn't get to the lighthouse so didn't get close views of the cliffs – we were further away at a transmitter. Nevertheless we could pick out Red Billed Tropicbirds that nest on the cliffs. We had a bonus of Peregrine & Cliff Swallow amongst the Barn Swallows.

To finish our first day we called in at Vieux Fort wetlands & bagged more egrets along with an Osprey (with fish) and Pied Billed Grebe, American & Caribbean Coot. Day one had yielded four out of the five endemic species.

Day two was in the North of the island – going via villages & old sugar plantations eventually up to the Rodney Bay causeway. We first tried yet another spot for the oriole without success – heard but not seen. Although we did pull in Gray Trembler & House Wren (the latter considered an endemic recently).

In the old sugar plantation area we got a sighting of Bare Eyed Thrush; good close views of Yellow Warbler & eventually prolonged excellent views of Saint Lucia Oriole.

Tropical rainforest is not the easiest of habitat to bird in so I was extremely pleased to finish our time with 5 out of 6 endemics (the 6<sup>th</sup> hasn't been seen for over 50 years) plus a few local scarcities. The overall total wasn't that big at about 63 but given the time of year I was well pleased. I had hoped for a few more American birds – such as belted kingfisher – but couldn't grumble.



#### **20th August 2016 - Scargill and John O' Gaunt's Reservoirs**

Joined by two stalwarts from the Group (SR and JP), we (all three) set off at 8am in less than promising weather. Having left a car at the end of the walk we started from Stainburn Forest car park. There was little activity on Sandwith Moor and the low level of Scargill Reservoir only produced a Common Sandpiper, a few Common Gulls, a Little Grebe and a few Tufted Duck.

Raptors were soon in evidence over the woodland below the reservoir and after a Red Kite, pairs of Kestrel and Buzzard, the distinctive call of a young raptor put us onto superb views of a juvenile Sparrowhawk - its large size suggesting a female - waiting to be fed in a tree, eventually flying off to deeper cover. A stop for coffee by the bridge proved fruitful as a Kingfisher flew up the outlet from the former Beaver Dyke Reservoir.

The weather was proving better than anticipated with only two brief light showers and some sunny intervals. The walk through the trees adjacent to the lower part of John O' Gaunt's produced little but Common Redstart that breed here can still be around in late summer. Having reached the seats overlooking the Reservoir we proceeded to scan for waders in the surrounding muddy areas. Some distance away a largish wader attracted our attention and as it moved around our first identification of a Black-tailed Godwit proved correct. Also present was a Little Egret.

We followed the path away from the water and discovered two Spotted Flycatchers on their passage south. Crossing towards the Sun Inn, we noticed a couple of Whinchats sitting on fences. Once back at the Swinsty Reservoir car park at 12 noon, we felt well satisfied with our efforts.

Derek Parkin.

#### **6th September: The Barn Owl - Its Life, Behaviour and Conservation in East Yorkshire - Robin Arundale**

Robin is a prominent member of the Wolds Barn Owl Study Group. They are licensed to study, monitor and visit sites and advise local farmers and landowners whether nesting birds are present and Robin is their licensed ringer. The UK population is estimated to be 9,000 pairs and the number of breeding pairs in East Yorkshire is now thought to be between 250 and 290. Fortunately, there has recently been a big increase in Barn Owls since the worst breeding seasons ever in 2013. This improvement has been helped by the dedication of volunteers like Robin and his group who have worked tirelessly with farmers and landowners to create the perfect habitats for these enigmatic birds. The Barn Owl is a bird that evolved from the planet's tropical and sub-tropical zones. It is poorly insulated, doesn't lay down the layers of fat for winter and consequently is at risk in the harshest of climates. The bird needs to hunt within 2km of its nest site and reduced food amounts severely affect the populations. In addition, Robin informed us that 17% of adults and 24% of juveniles are killed on roads and the BTO have found that 72% of Barn Owls which encountered a major road