



**Birding the Islands Ltd: Every Endemic in the Lesser Antilles**  
**(with optional extension to Trinidad)**  
**February 22nd - March 9th 2018**



*Our Birding the Islands Endemics of the Lesser Antilles + Trinidad group, February 2018!*

**Barbados**

Oistins - the bustling fishing village of the south coast of the island is the location for our meet and greet dinner. Colourful beach huts are filled with bubbly locals beckoning us over to join them for the best meal in town, but we negotiate the lively avenues until we find ourselves at The Bajan Birder's favourite seafood spot - De Red Snapper. On offer is everything from fried flying fish to grilled lobster and as we tuck into this wide selection of fresh seafood (delicious alternatives available for those who aren't fond of fish), we get to know everyone who'll be setting out on this epic adventure through the islands. Every Lesser Antillean island has its beer of choice, and here on our first island, it's Banks - the best in my books... but of course I'm slightly biased. We take it easy on this first night, and just order a bucket!



Early the next morning we make for a mangrove wetland home to one of the greatest concentrations of flora and fauna on the island. Clearly visible from the air, this is the last expanse of forested land on the south coast and as we enter this bastion of resistance to development we are greeted by a drop in air temperature, and the calls of several target bird species. As the reserve is closed to the public we have our choice of where to begin, and select a prime viewing site on the aptly titled Leaf Deck (*pictured below is the view of the wetland just before sunrise from the Leaf Deck*).



Gazing out across the brackish waters, the rising sun reflected in the tannin-rich waters, the dorsal fins of massive Atlantic Tarpon begin to breach the surface and Red-eared Sliders seek out their favoured basking sites on the long tendril-like roots of Red Mangroves. It is early enough that Snowy and Little Egrets have not left their roosts and (evidenced by 3 individuals perched low over the water) even those nocturnal specialists the Black-crowned Night Herons have not yet retreated in response to the sun's advance. Belted Kingfishers rattle and fly across our eyeline and golden-eyed Carib Grackles (surely soon to be split to Barbados Grackles) chip and chatter from overhanging branches.

An unexpected drizzle sees us make our way to the shelter of the gazebos, but as it eases, the bird song intensifies tenfold, and within it we hear the unmistakable eloquent song of the endemic subspecies of Yellow Warbler. Known locally as the Golden Warbler, a brilliant yellow male, perched at the top of a prominent Fiddlewood, puffs out his thickly rufous striped breast and proclaims this territory his. In response, a lovely, soft, yellow female peers from under a Bismarck Palm and flits up to the Fiddlewood to investigate; it is breeding season after all.



Our comfortable and relaxed stroll along the immaculately maintained boardwalk and pathways of the reserve allow for brilliant views of Black-whiskered Vireo, Caribbean Elaenia and Scaly-naped Pigeon (*a young bird pictured left - photo by Ryan Chenery*), as well as a spectacular display by a pair of Antillean-crested Hummingbirds cavorting in a Yellow Poui tree. Their crests dance in the high winds and with binoculars trained on them, we are rewarded when the sunlight on occasion catches the emerald green and blue sapphire crest of the male.

A delightful start to the trip!

## Dominica

Under a still dark and starry night sky, we board our vehicles and begin the slow and steady ascent to the uppermost heights of this heavily forested and still blissfully rural island. Our SUVs carefully negotiate the winding roads that take us deep into one of the last remaining primary forests in the Caribbean - the Morne Diablotin Forest Reserve.

Still recovering from the destruction of Hurricane Maria, along the roadside the glinting of galvanized roofs reflect the beams of our vans; however, sadly all of these roofs are now lying at the side of the road, having been ripped from their houses not 6 months earlier. Although we are safe in the knowledge that outside of the hurricane season there is no chance of our being caught up in one of these systems, it is impossible to not feel an enormous amount of sympathy for a people who have gone through hell on earth.

As we wind still further passed the small holdings of yam and dasheen, the first light of dawn begins to illuminate the impressive mountain range that surrounds us. We are in the land of the Jaco (*one of several Red-necked Parrots we saw on our second day on Dominica is pictured below left - photo by Birding the Islands client Steve Kornfeld*) and the Sisserou - two of the four impressive Amazonas we'll target on this trip through the islands.



Disembarking from the vehicles, we haven't travelled twenty feet before a wide eyed and curious Brown Trembler (*pictured above right - photo by Ryan Chenery*) flits to within four feet of our heads and, tail stiffly held erect, wings drooped and held loosely at his sides, begins his impressive quivering territorial display. He is soon joined by a Plumbeous Warbler, his melodic call a precursor to his arrival.

We move deeper into the forest, a machete on hand to clear any limbs fallen across the established path. The massive buttress roots of Gommier Trees plunge deep into the earth around us, their huge crowns sprawling above our heads. In centuries past one of these massive giants would have been felled by the local Carib people to make a canoe, its long straight trunk providing the perfect vessel to see them across the ocean.

We make our way through the forest, until eventually we come upon the viewpoint we've been seeking - the Syndicate Lookout Point. A winding river courses below us and the steep hillsides are thick with a forest punctuated by towering emergents, standing like sentinels overseeing all that transpires in this expansive wilderness. Within half an hour we hear our first target - the trill call of the Jaco! Bob catches sight of three parrots as they course across the blue sky, unseasonably high winds further accelerating their flight. The flash of yellow in the tail and red in the wings confirming that what we heard earlier had indeed been the Jaco

(Red-necked Parrot). With one Amazona spotted, we settle in to watch the forest for the other, the larger and darker Imperial Parrot, each of us selecting our own prime viewing site.

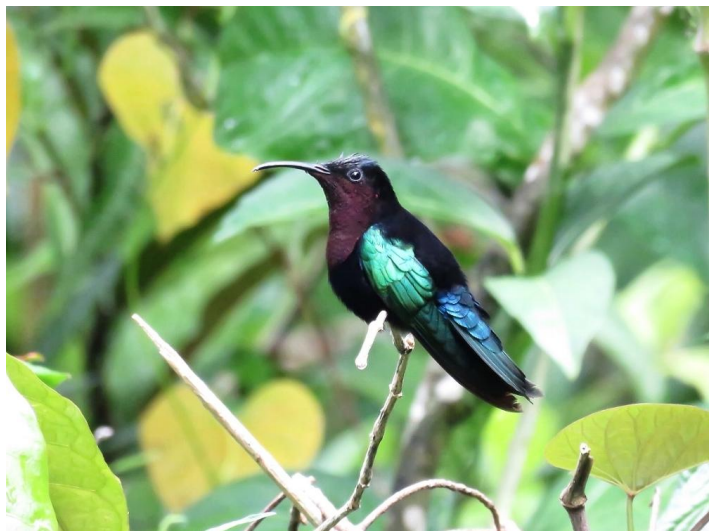
Although the guys opt to stay grounded....

Jade prefers to scan the trees from a slightly loftier viewpoint!



Despite staying for a couple of hours, the Imperials remain elusive, so we decide a change of location is in order, and move on.

Perched on the edge of the forest is a charming wood lodge styled Visitor Centre, (sadly abandoned after the hurricane, but largely undamaged - sheltered by the forest). Here in a low hanging Tree Orchid we see our first Lesser Antillean Bullfinch - a plucky jet-black male flitting from branch to branch flashing his impressive rufous throat.



Leading away from the Visitor Centre is a well-paved road bordered on both sides by a mixture of open grassland, citrus trees and native woodland. This "edge" habitat is frequented by a host of regional delights. Our first sighting proves to be one of the most dazzling, as a Purple-throated Carib female (*pictured right, the*

*largest of the hummers seen on the Caribbean leg of our trip - photo by Birding the Islands client Steve Kornfeld*) plunges her impressive deeply curved bill rapidly into a Lobster Heliconia. Shortly thereafter a shrill squeal announces the presence of the first of two regional endemics - the Lesser Antillean Flycatcher, followed closely behind by the minuscule Lesser Antillean Peewee (a welcome sight as Birdy confirms it's the first he's seen since the hurricane). Gazing up at the surrounding mountains four Broad-winged Hawks begin to soar on thermals, and then a fifth raptor....but as it drifts closer, no...it's a Jaco! Stiff winged and riding the thermals like a hawk, this magnificently plumaged parrot drifts closer, eventually perching in the bare crown of a nearby tree, where it provides us with stunning views while it dexterously preens for over half an hour.

As fading light begins to signal the end of our day on Dominica, a faint and distinctly metallic call can be heard echoing across the mountain range...and it's getting closer! Suddenly and ever so fleetingly a pair come into view, framed by the highest and darkest mountain in the range and drifting ghost-like into and out of low wispy clouds – it is the rarest of parrots and undisputed monarchs of this land - the magnificent Sisserou. With their dark plumage and massive, imposing size, and a wingspan capable of negotiating the howling winds and heights of their range they are so obviously suited to this dark mystical realm. There is a land which still remains largely inaccessible to man...and long may it remain that way.

### **St.Lucia**

Picked up at the airport, we make straight for Des Cartiers Rainforest. Upon entry into this protected land, we immediately hear the high pitched whistle of the Rufous-throated Solitaire (*pictured right -photo by Ryan Chenery*). Incredibly, it is not long before we see a pair of these ethereal birds, their graceful movements into and out of the shadows of the trees more akin to those of fairies than birds; slender bodies and lengthy tails only serving to further accentuate their every flit and twist.



As we follow the well-worn stone trail further into the forest, other delights begin to be first heard and then seen. That infamous raider of passerine nests, the Pearly-eyed Thrasher (*pictured left - photo by Ryan Chenery*), shrieks and darts above our heads, it's brilliantly gleaming cream eyes no doubt seeking out the eggs and nestlings of the numerous St.Lucia Orioles and Antillean Euphonias that also frequent this forest.

On our way to the lookout, the forestry officer who accompanies us through Des Cartiers lets us in on a secret; standing beneath a giant emergent our upward gaze follows a massive branch, laden with epiphytes and dangling sphagnum moss, to a deep cavity set in the trunk. She's in there he says with a gleaming smile - a female St.Lucia Parrot! As it is late February he expects that she is on eggs. We linger for a while to see if the male is perched outside guarding, but not wishing to overstay our welcome, continue on our way after he does not show in a few minutes. One thing is certain, however - the parrots are here.

Arriving at an established lookout we prop on the rail and gaze down to a river coursing through the valley hundreds of feet below. We aren't there more than a few minutes before the telltale *clack cleack clack* of the national bird of St.Lucia is heard echoing across the valley. Suddenly here they come, each wingbeat viewed against a backdrop of dark green forest providing us with excellent views of the contrast in their rich blue primaries and brilliantly red speculums. Undoubtedly this is one of the most striking of all Amazonas. We spend the rest of a glorious day here, watching as pairs and small flocks continually make their way along well-travelled flight routes between feeding trees.

After returning to the blissful FoxGrove Inn, we relax before dinner, some of us even choosing to have a dip in the pool.

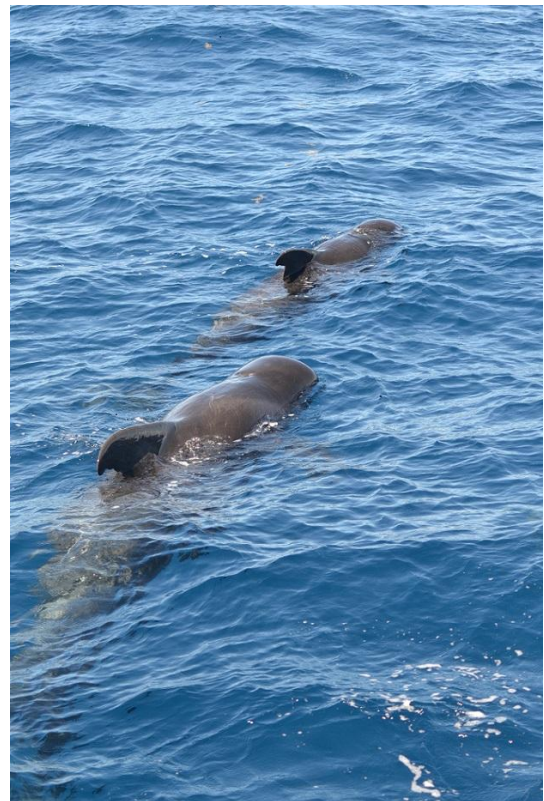
The following day sees us set out at dawn to the best location on the island for the White-breasted Thrasher. An initial stroll up the grassy path surprisingly yields no thrashers, but thankfully two other target species do reveal themselves from amongst the mix of scrubby Acasia and Tamarind Trees that line the path. The first to investigate we intruders is the Lesser Antillean Saltator. He dashes boldly out, but stays only briefly, perhaps realizing there is no threat and flits away back into the forest.

Slightly further down the trail rustling amongst the leaf litter draws our attention to a charming pair of St.Lucia Black Finch on the hunt for a little breakfast. As they creep closer, the gleaming black of the male is a stark contrast to the soft cinnamon brown of his mate, but perhaps the most striking feature of all is those elegant pink legs dancing amongst the crisp brown leaves – a pair of fashionistas indeed.

It is not until the end of the path that we are rewarded with views of our main target bird, a species that has come perilously close to extinction. Not ten feet away, moving through the understory of the woodland are the unmistakable forms of White-breasted Thrashers. Glistening white bellies of two adults easily distinguish them from their juvenile offspring and confirm that as is the case with many thrashers, these birds are foraging in a small family group.

Emerging from the forest, it's time for a picnic breakfast of sandwiches and bananas enjoyed overlooking the beautiful coastal village of Dennery. Here we relax and take in the view of Magnificent Frigatebirds craftily following fishing boats for scraps, the boats themselves making their way back in from a nighttime harvest of their own.

Breakfast over, it's not long before we are making our own way down to the coast - after all it's whale watching time!! After negotiating the traffic of Castries, both by car and for two of us by foot (an urgent lavatory call requiring a dash into a busy mall between red lights) we board a privately chartered cruiser, destined for the deep waters a couple of miles off of the island . As we are enjoying the sight of Brown Boobies coasting over the waves and Royal Terns pursuing Flying Fish (in mid air!), the Captain suddenly shouts to us from the deck above ....WHALE! We scamper to the port side and where a minute before there was only deep blue sea, there is now the unmistakable silhouette of a Short-finned Pilot Whale (*pictured right - photo by Ryan Chenery*). The Captain doesn't seem in a



hurry to get a bit closer to them...when questioned, he says ....just watch. Slowly the lone silhouette is joined by others cautiously breaking the smooth plain of the surface. They're heading our way! We stare in awe as the entire pod has soon joined us at the side of the boat. Naturally curious, these intelligent creatures begin to bob their heads out of the water peering at us as much as we are staring at them - a truly magical moment where I for one felt as though I truly connected with the whales. Before we have to move on we count all of the members of this 22 strong pod, led by a MASSIVE male, well over 18 feet! What an experience.

## **Martinique**

The following day we make for Martinique, not by plane, but back out onto those glistening Caribbean waters



aboard a sleek gleaming catamaran. With Captain Ron at the helm, we pull out of the luxurious Rodney Bay marina at dawn. Once in deeper waters Flying Fish suddenly begin leaping and traveling upwards of 20 meters out of the water in front of us. As we sit on the netting between the twin-hulls, we're offered great views of these delightful little ocean wanderers. The more we watch, the more we begin to understand the reason for these fishes' frantic flight. Out of nowhere large pods of Atlantic Spotted and Common Dolphins begin leaping alongside us, in full hunt mode. Seeming to

relish the chase, they leap and then glide effortlessly beneath the boat in gleeful pursuit of prey. Nature is in full swing beneath the waves.

Pulling into Fort de France Martinique, a lively scene greets us, with street vendors offering up a range of local dishes and taxi drivers hustling tourists for a quick fare around the city to see the sights. We engage two of the taxi men to take us to a well known sight for Martinique Oriole, but despite 5 hours in the field, we only hear/get fleeting glimpses of the birds.

Back on the catamaran and as the sun begins to set, the city comes alive. Rollerbladers (wheels illuminated red and pink in the dark of night) whisk along the boardwalk, vendors hawk their produce, and in the nearby park, a group of locals is engaging in a closely contested game of boules.

We enjoy a delicious meal aboard the catamaran, before heading out to soak in some of the culture and architecture of this beautiful city, a social beverage in hand of course.



## **Guadeloupe**

Today we jet off from Martinique to her fellow French Territory of Guadeloupe. What a difference in countries. Guadeloupe is wild, rugged, and nine shades of verdant green. After leaving the airport we venture into the region of Basse Terre, stopping at a small bakery tucked away in an avenue in Point-de-Pitre, where we select from an impressive selection of baguettes and pastries and store in the van for a picnic later.

On the trail of the Guadeloupe Woodpecker we venture into the positively primeval and incredibly lush forests of Basse Terre. Almost immediately we hear a distant but firm drumming. It's here. Using a tape to call the bird in, we are soon enjoying excellent views of a breeding pair. This is a curious woodpecker with a honking bill, and stiff, long, woodcreeper-like tail feathers, but it is its overall dull black feathers and deeply maroon breast that make it most unlike any other woodpecker I have ever seen - certainly not the most glamorous of woodpeckers, but it has a certain ... Ok, as we are in Guadeloupe I'll say it - "Je ne sais quoi!".



The woodpecker is the endemic, and is fabulous to see, but our next sighting quite simply takes our breath away. From within a shrouded, sheltered copse of trees, overhanging a serene mountain lake, comes the soft coo of a quail dove. This isn't the call of the Ruddy, but the far less common and regionally indigenous Bridled Quail Dove (*pictured left - photo by Birding the Islands client Steve Kornfeld*)! Stealthily creeping along the forest floor we peer cautiously around, under and through overhanging branches, and as those of us in front slowly pull back a curtain of sphagnum moss, reveal the bird perched not twelve feet away. It clearly can see us, but as is the quail dove modus operandi, prefers to stay in situ relying on camouflage; camouflage that thankfully did not work this time.

What a privilege to be able to connect with this gentle and unassuming bird - the epitome of peace and tranquillity.

As the heat of the day increases, we enjoy a picnic in a secluded part of the forest, where despite the thundering of cascading waterfalls in the background, the unmistakable call of an American Redstart can clearly be heard. Spishsing lures it within sight.

There is one species on Guadeloupe which can prove especially difficult without local knowledge, and this is the Forest Thrush. Driving along a deserted lane in a quiet forest after lunch, we get a glimpse of a suspected Forest Thrush hopping at the side of the road. Getting binoculars on it quickly is essential, for this bird does not tend to linger, and once back in the dense surrounding forest, it is lost. Thankfully, we all get terrific looks of the diagnostic orange eye ring, and heavily chevroned chest.

With clear running streams filled with crayfish, large emergents festooned with epiphytes and an abundance of indigenous species from Lesser Antillean Pewees and Brown Tremblers to Lesser Antillean Bullfinches, this becomes the perfect spot to while away the afternoon and enjoy some leisurely birding.

Our stay on Guadeloupe is in a stunning neo-colonial styled mansion perched high on a ridgeline overlooking the countryside and coastline. Dinner is creole cooking at its best, enjoyed at a beachside restaurant.





## **Montserrat**

The next day while jetting across the deep blue Atlantic waters between Guadeloupe and Montserrat, our eccentric and slightly odd French captain suddenly yelps “baleine” “baleine” and swings the speed boat around to starboard. His trained eye has spotted the fin of a False Killer Whale! At this time of year these waters teem with marine mammals and two of these magnificent creatures spend some time with us before a pod of Frasers Dolphins arrives and seems to drive them off.



As we approach Montserrat, the imposing Soufriere volcano looms ever closer (*pictured left - the lava flow clearly visible as we approach the island - photo by Birding the Islands client Steve Kornfeld*). Thrust out of the sea like a giant wedge, the thick steam erupting from the gaping vent and the sweeping lava flows aptly illustrate the devastation and raw power which this infamous peak has in the not too distant past reigned down on the settlements of this region.

In complete contrast to the dark and foreboding Soufriere, the west coast of Montserrat is fringed with steep white cliffs, amongst which Red-billed Tropicbirds wheel and cavort on the airways, their magnificent white lanceolate tails billowing

in the wind. As we make our way steadily into Port, Brown Pelicans take advantage of the crystal clear water to plunge head first into schools of fish.

Indeed, fish seem to be the order of the day, playing a significant role in delaying our arrival as fishermen slowly (very slowly) move a huge shoal of needle-nosed fish carefully from the small dock of the Port to a van. Eventually we are on solid ground, and after a few questions from intrigued customs officials, we board pre-arranged transport and make for the protected primary forests of this island - forests quite unlike any other we see on the trip.

Still a British Territory, international conservation groups such as RSPB are heavily involved in the protection of the natural resources of this island, and in the preservation of her many unique species. Number one on our list of priorities is the Montserrat Oriole.

This forest is dense, with enormous trees erupting out of the rich fertile black volcanic soil. High in the canopy above, "Bracka" (nickname of one of our local guides - everyone on Montserrat has a nickname, and it's this that they're commonly referred by) pauses...he's heard an oriole call. We creep forward and position ourselves under the limbs of a superb Balata Tree. As Bracka mimics the call, the bird - a juvenile (*pictured right - photo by Ryan Chenery*) - gets closer



and closer until eventually it's a mere 6 feet or so above our heads. Success, we've seen the endemic bird species for the island. But we want more, we want to see an adult male. As we are here in the height of the breeding season, we concentrate our search on stands of Heliconias in which could very likely be nesting orioles.

Our search is yielding plenty of females frantically stripping and gathering brown leaves and affixing them to the underneath of the broad, dark green leafed Heliconias ....but where are the males? We need to keep going. Finally Shane spots him, not in a Heliconia, but perched high atop a towering Cecropia, it's bare branches permitting him an unimpaird view of his impressive territory below. He is absolutely stunning, a brilliantly black glossy back and hood shimmering in the tropical sun, perfectly contrasted by a rich burnt-orange breast. Here stands Icterus, the firebird, reigning over his volcanic island. The nomenclature is so perfectly fitting. What a sight!



As we continue our walk through this picturesque land, it's clear that the forest floor can be just as alive as the trees above. Leaves rustle everywhere, Montserrat's Anolis species of lizard scuttle across the ground and clamber up tree trunks, Bracka grabs an endemic Montserrat Racer so we can see it up close, and we are fortunate enough to see a Dwarf Gecko (*pictured left - photo by Rayn Chenery*) curled up on a shrivelled brown leaf on the path before us. No bigger than the tip of your thumb this little marvel studies us with googly eyes before being once again placed

under his "giant" leaf shelter.

Although some of us head back to the hotel to enjoy a complimentary rum punch, others continue birding under the trees and are rewarded with stunning views of Forest Thrush – it's heavily chevroned chest confirming it as the local race. That's two Forest Thrush races on two islands – excellent.

A stunning sunset enjoyed on the balcony of our hotel brings the curtain down on a brilliant day, on a truly magical island.

### **Antigua & Barbuda**



The tourist mecca of Antigua with its 365 beaches is a hive of activity in March, and as we pull into the Port, two huge cruise ships are offloading passengers - flooding like ants out of a nest and seeking prey (AKA duty free shopping). Somehow I don't think any of the thousand or so people that pass us notice the great view of a White-crowned Pigeon perched in a tree overhanging the very boardwalk they're walking on.

We soon see a sleek white vessel, with 750 horses in tow pulling up alongside one of the ships. Here is our privately chartered vessel to take us away from the shops and towards a place that none of these tourists will likely ever see.

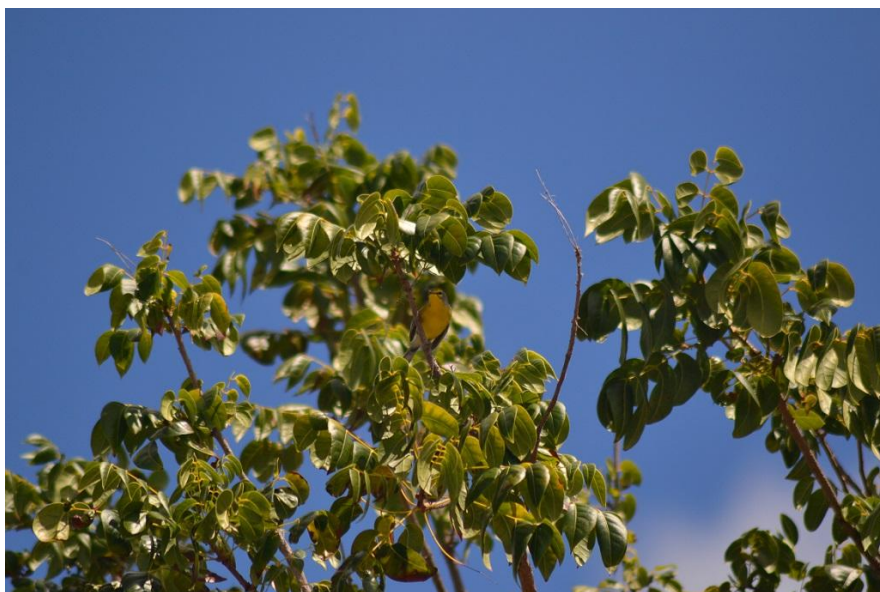
It is a picturesque Caribbean day, typical of this time of year, and the sea is perfectly flat and a sparkling turquoise blue – a perfect day to get out on the water. So, without further delay, we board our boat, bound for Barbuda...



With the panicked news reports coming out of this island during Hurricane Irma still fresh in our minds, it is no surprise that the first sight that greets us as Barbuda's shoreline becomes visible, is the weather-battered remains of a once thriving hotel. With the roof off and the walls caved in, we are left in no doubt as to the raw power that ravaged this small, flat island. Again, as was the case when we visited Dominica, we are grateful that we are not travelling these islands during hurricane season.

Pulling up to the small dock in the town of Codrington, we see a large tent with Samaritan Aid emblazoned on the side. Food aid is still being distributed here some 6 months after the hurricane. But the good news is that there are people here who the food can be distributed to. 250 people have now returned to live on the island and are doing their best to rebuild their homes. Perhaps surprised to see visitors, we are greeted with smiles and handshakes and we pass the time chatting with friendly locals until a slightly battered blue van arrives complete with driver (and his son) to take us to the best sites for the endemic warbler.

As we slowly negotiate the heavily potholed and dusty roads, we are somewhat surprised to see a small herd of five donkeys casually trotting towards us! It seems a bit bizarre, however when asked, the driver simply shrugs and says *Pets*. Apparently the donkey is a popular household pet on the island, and thankfully a large number have survived the hurricane.



The scrubby windswept and ravaged vegetation that is scattered throughout the land is prime warbler habitat, and we excitedly begin our search - walking and spissing, walking and spissing. A large iguana, a Mangrove Cuckoo, Kentropyx lizards....no luck yet. The sun is extremely hot, easily the hottest island of the trip, and we are just about to break for a snack and water, when from behind a secondary school where ten children are perched atop a broken wall eating their lunch, we hear a warbler's melodic song - instantly adding cheer to this land of dust and devastation. High in a Neem Tree looking down on us, a beautiful male Barbuda Warbler is singing his heart out; his brilliant yellow breast strangely out of place in this otherwise brown, beige and desolate land (*pictured above - a true survivor - photo by Ryan Chenery*). It is incredible to think that this minuscule, delicate 3" songbird bore witness to the most powerful devastation Mother Nature can wield...and survived! His song is the cue for another to begin to sing, and another, and soon there are four of these critically endangered dazzling gems calling all around us. What a privilege to still be able to enjoy his call - a call that could so easily have been silenced.

On the way back to the dock, after negotiating our way around a few more quadrupeds...namely sheep and goats eking out an existence on scraps of vegetation, we arrive back at the boat where a delicious meal of BBQ chicken, rice, grilled vegetables and salad is waiting for us. We wash this down with several glasses of rum punch and finish off with slices of banana bread – all enjoyed with a backdrop of a shimmering sea.



After lunch it's time to kick back, relax, and enjoy the smooth ride back to Antigua. We are almost back to Port, in fact the cruise liners are well in view, when a MASSIVE black shape breaches the water on our starboard side. **WHALE!!!!** the Captain shouts! He wheels the boat around and aligns our bow with the tail of the animal. The clear hump on the back is diagnostic and it's evident that we are in the company of a migrating Humpback (*pictured left - photo by Ryan Chenery*). Incredibly, a much smaller fin then breaches the surface...she has a calf with her. A large number of Humpbacks give birth in the warmth and safety of Caribbean waters,

and evidently this has been the case for this mum.

What is more staggering is that they aren't alone, for no sooner had we taken a breath and begun to fathom what was before us, than another (much larger) dark form begins to make its way up, up, up towards the surface. We lean over in anticipation and are met with a huge spout of spray shooting into the air as an enormous male, once and a half the breadth of the female and calf, empties his gargantuan lungs and prepares to once again fill them with fresh oxygen. As soon as the spray has settled, he sinks back under the surface, but not to return to the depths, instead he turns on his side and waves a car sized fin up and down, as if waving to us.

This was an experience none on board will ever forget. What a privilege. We stay in their company for some 15 minutes, before they swim off toward the horizon.

## **St.Vincent**

Arrival at the stunning Beachcombers Hotel (*its elegant lobby pictured right*) sees us jump out of the van and start combing the grounds for island specialties; all black Bananaquit - check, Yellow-bellied Elaenia - check, Grenada Flycatcher - check. We meander through colourful gardens awash with tropical flowers, gardens where Antillean-crested Hummingbirds mill around Antillean Heath, Spectacled Thrush (*pictured below - photo by Ryan Chenery*) pluck berries from fruiting Christmas Palms and those brilliant blue-headed Anoles dart across the path in front of our feet.



After our hotel garden birding session, the late afternoon is ours to relax and enjoy, and some of us head to the hotel's black sand beach and enjoy a swim in the calm waters of the western coast, while others sit out on their verandas surrounded by bougainvillea and hibiscus and get stuck in to a good book. Dinner in the stunningly decorated hotel restaurant is filled with excited conversation as we discuss what's to come tomorrow.

The following morning sees us set off at 4:30am in order to be at a secret location deep in the forest in time for a spectacle we've all been waiting for since the plane touched down in St.Vincent.

Negotiating the winding roads upwards, deeper and deeper into the interior of the island, we turn off onto a little used farm road. For miles, bananas and coffee line the fields on either side of us, until eventually we break clear of the agricultural areas and into secondary forest. After climbing further still, we leave the vehicle to walk the final passage towards a high ridgeline overlooking a heavily forested gorge. The views are spectacular from all sides, with towering emergents lining the western slope, a river running to the south, and to the east, the early light of dawn beginning to bathe the waters of the Caribbean Sea.

This dawning of the light is the cue for the parrots to begin to stir. They first appear in ones and twos, calling and flying directly over our heads and then offering some stunning views as they drop down from their roosts to crisscross the dark green of the forest with the brilliant blues and oranges of their wings. What a sight! More and more birds are heading our way. There are soon over 50 either perched in fruiting trees, or in the skies above us. And then something even more extraordinary happens. A male begins to gently pluck individual fruit from a tree and offer them to a female. She graciously accepts them and then offers herself to him for copulation. We can't believe what we are watching ...two parrots from one of the rarest species on the planet creating new life (and Steve gets it on video)!



*A pair of St Vincent Parrots leaving their roost at sunrise - photo by Ryan Chenery*

After our incredible time spent with the parrots, we make for La Soufriere volcano, and a step back in time. Upon exiting the van, one is overcome by an overwhelming sense of peace and tranquillity emanating from this ancient forest. Grenada Flycatchers make forays from their favoured perches in pursuit of flying beetles, and a large assemblage of St. Vincent Anoles, their sapphire blue heads and tails shimmering in the morning sun, greet us at the start of the path leading us into elfin woodland and the home of the secretive Whistling Warbler.

The path is lined with endemic Begonias and Ficus, with large windows cut in the foliage offering stunning views of the Atlantic Ocean, just visible beyond the distant slope of the volcano.

A Ruddy Quail Dove, startled by our quiet approach, flutters off the path to settle a few feet deeper into the forest and a softly coloured Cocoa Thrush flits onto a branch protruding from the steep sided gorge that lines our route. Deeper in the gorge, a fruiting tree has attracted a host of birds, and our vantage point above them, offers us a different perspective on some previously seen species and a very exciting new one. Vireos, Bananaquits, thrashers and bullfinches all feed voraciously on the swollen berries of the "fig", however it is a flickering movement high in the canopy that catches my attention. Lesser Antillean Tanagers! With the sun brilliantly illuminating their ochre covered plumage they flit into and out of clusters of fruit, their masked faces reminiscent of bandits making a quick getaway - their prize secured.

Feeling peckish after our adventurous morning, we find a clearing beside a dry river bed, bedecked with large boulders, and here we tuck into a selection of fruit gathered fresh from the trail, along with plantain chips and conkie (a local delicacy of coconut, sweet potato and cinnamon, wrapped in a banana leaf). Overhead a pair of Common Black Hawk soar on the thermals of the midday tropical sun, a Peregrine whizzes by and flushes a Scaly-naped Pigeon - only to see it duck back into the forest before being hit, and all around us Lesser Antillean Swifts wheel and dip. And then from deep within the forest we hear the sweetest whistle of the entire trip –

that of the Whistling Warbler. With a focal point for our search established, we make our way along a divergent path in the trees, and are soon treated to brilliant, yet fleeting, glimpses of one of the most challenging birds of our travels through the islands.



## **Grenada**

We encounter the only rain on the entire trip upon arrival into Grenada. The plan this afternoon is to spend some time in the company of the critically endangered Grenada Dove, however, after arriving at Mt. Hartman Estate, we soon realise that the downpour is going to make this impossible today. Fortunately, knowing that this could be one of the most difficult birds to see on the trip, Birding the Islands has planned the itinerary so that we have the afternoon on one day, and the entire morning of another to look for the bird.

We awake to a beautiful morning, and the calls of Smooth-billed Anis, Grenada Flycatchers (*pictured right - photo by Birding the Islands client Steve Kornfeld*) and those ever-presents in the Antilles - the Grey Kingbirds filling the morning air. Now this looks more promising for dove-spotting! From the entrance to the reserve we maintain radio silence, absolutely no speaking, for this dove is renowned for being as elusive and skittish as they come. The rain actually turns out to be a blessing in disguise, for it softens the leaves and twigs underfoot and makes our travel through the dry scrubby habitat less obvious. Finding a large clearing underneath the Acacia we settle in and hunker down - this is going to be a waiting game. Incredibly though, within 15 minutes of waiting, Keith whispers "dovvvve". We cannot believe our eyes, as strolling down the very path we have been traveling is an elegant male Grenada Dove. This just does not happen... but it is happening. Catching sight of us he casually changes course and saunters into the scrubby undergrowth. But there is no panic in his movements, he simply moves off track, and then amazingly, perhaps realizing we are not a threat, makes his way back to the path. There is just enough sunlight filtering through the compound leaves of the trees overhead to dapple the path, and as he walks through, the beams perfectly highlight the soft purple iridescence of his neck. What a gem!



We all get stunning views of a bird many do not even know exists... and far fewer have ever seen.

The reserve also has a very functional observation tower which we use to great effect. Climbing the stairs with the calls of the local race of House Wren echoing all around us, we are soon looking out over the very forest we were walking through a few moments ago. A shrill cry from low over the modest Visitor Centre attracts our attention. Furiously beating oddly shaped wings, a striking male Hook-billed Kite swoops towards us. It had obviously just lifted off and is soon joined by its mate. As the warmth of the sun increases, the kites gain altitude until they are directly overhead! Phenomenal birding, and all before 9am!

Time to head back to the hotel for a swim in the ocean and a tasty lunch. In the afternoon we head to Trinidad!

## **Trinidad**

As soon as we exit the Piarco International Airport, we have our binoculars at the ready and as the van leaves the outskirts of Port of Spain and winds its way deeper into the islands extensive Northern Range, bound for the birders paradise of Asa wright Nature Centre, we have several opportunities to use them; White-winged Swallow, Short-tailed Hawk, Scaled Pigeon, Yellow-chinned Spinetail – some fine "van birding" indeed.



Upon arrival at Asa Wright, we make straight for the famed veranda, where despite the heat of the tropical afternoon, the hummingbirds, honeycreepers and tanagers are putting on quite

the show. White-chested Emeralds and Blue-chinned Sapphires hover inches from our eyes and sip from the well-stocked feeders, before being chased off by the bullies of the group - the imposing White-necked Jacobins, brilliant white tails fully flared and primaries extended for maximum intimidation factor (*pictured above, these imposing hummingbirds certainly rule the roost - photo by Ryan Chenery*). Below us, a dazzling Long-billed Starthroat flits its head frantically from left to right, each turn allowing us fabulous views of that electric pink throat, before darting off to feed from one of myriad tropical flowers. Electric Green as well as Purple

Honeycreepers have their choice of tropical fruit, and Violaceous Euphonias practically sparkle in the blazing sun. Crested Oropendolas, their comical bulbous nests swinging from nearby Cecropias cackle and croak, and tanagers of every imaginable colour feed on the fruiting trees that border the veranda.



These usual suspects are, however, interrupted when Steve spots a Trinidad Euphonia making for the canopy of a nearby tree (*pictured left a Violaceous Euphonia with Bananaquit in the foreground - photo by Ryan Chenery*). What a welcome to the island we are given!



Having spent a couple of fabulous hours in the company of some of the wonders of the reserve, we make for the driveway to see what other wonders lay in store for us. *Twee twee Twee twee*, the call is everywhere as Cocoa Thrush seemingly reclaim their territories before settling in to roost. This constant call is interrupted by two high pitched "*clacks*" which cause us to flick our heads skyward just in time to see a pair of Lilac-tailed Parrotlets deftly slipping into the canopy of a towering Mahogany.

Early morning (very early morning) on the next day sees three of our group set off on a two hour journey to the north east coast in order to catch sight of one of the rarest birds on the island - the endemic Trinidad Piping Guan. Incredibly they are not only treated to views of one or two of these large black and white birds, but are able to spend the morning in the company of six guans. As if this wasn't enough, they also get stunning looks at one of the most glamorous of hummingbird species on the island, the magnificent Ruby Topaz! What with this and the daily visits of Tufted Coquettes to the Vervenas at Asa Wright, we truly are spoiled for choice when it comes to hummingbirds.

Not to be outdone, those of us who stay behind are treated to a bold Great Antshrike plucking beetles from the wall of the security hut, before we set off on a delightful orientation walk. Passing under a spectacular Bee Orchid, we enter the realm of the Bearded Bellbird (*pictured right - photo by Birding the Islands client Steve Kornfeld*), its otherworldly metallic call boldly proclaiming this land to be his. It's superb wattled neck flickering with every clank. White-breasted Thrush, White-flanked Antwren, lekking Golden-headed Manakins and their White-bearded cousins dance in the sun. Golden Tegus and other ground lizards dart around our feet, skuttling out of the way as we interrupt their basking in the morning sun.



At Asa Wright, nature is well and truly all around us...! (*Who's watching whom? A Great Antshrike, pictured left, perches on a sign at the centre - photo by Ryan Chenery*)

The afternoon hours are ours to enjoy as we please. A delicious lunch, followed by a stroll around the grounds for some; perched on the verandah scanning the skies for raptors and the forest stretched out before us for woodpeckers and toucans; or finally taking a dip in one of the several natural spring fed pools in the company of Blue-Morpho Butterflies - the choice is yours.

Early the next morning following a customary incredibly tasty buffet breakfast we head down Jacaranda trail for an encounter with Oilbirds. They just don't belong do they. Isolated from the rest of the bird world in a family of their own, living in caves and using echolocation to negotiate their nocturnal feeding forays, this is easily one of the strangest birds we connect with on the trip. The cave at Asa Wright is one of the most accessible sites to see this species in the world and we are rewarded with sensational views.

The late afternoon sees us make our way for Caroni Swamp for *the* spectacle of Trinidad. Pausing at the side of the road near to the University of the West Indies for a spot of shorebird spotting, we get terrific looks at Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Stilt, Least and Semipalmated Sandpiper, Southern Lapwing and Black-necked Stilts. In the fields bordering the stream we get an incredibly close view of the impressive Red-breasted Blackbird (*pictured right - photo by Ryan Chenery*). It is then a further 20 minutes from the university until we arrive in the 40 sq.miles that is Caroni Swamp.



As the boatman is busy preparing our flat bottomed boat for our private excursion along the waterways , we are treated to unparalleled views of Masked Cardinals flitting from branch to branch, their brilliantly coiffured red heads easily spotted amongst the pale green leaves of the mangroves that line the road into the swamp (*pictured left - photo by Ryan Chenery*). High above, a Rufous-browed Peppershrike calls loudly, but louder still is Bob's shout of caiman! At which point the rest of us dart over to see a lumbering seven foot Spectacled Caiman raised high on its haunches making its way out of the shade and out onto an exposed mudflat.

The boatman is now happy that his vessel is ready for boarding, and as the single engine sputters to life, we ease away from the pier and make for the depths of the mangrove swamp. "What would you like to see today?" he asks. Steve jokes that he hasn't seen a Boat-billed Heron in forever. "Might be tricky but I'll see what I can do." We all smile to ourselves thinking - yeah sure!

As we glide along further, he asks: "Want to see a Tropical Screech Owl?" Umm, yes! He manoeuvres his craft backwards and forwards until he provides us the perfect angle to view this darling little owl nestled against the trunk of a Red Mangrove. "Cooks Tree Boa?" he asks... absolutely!...and there it is curled up on a limb directly over our heads. Maybe we will see a Boat-billed Heron after all.

Suddenly he cuts the engine and allows the boat to drift into a quiet cove...Common Potoo, beak held proudly skyward dozing in the afternoon sun. And then the grand prize amongst these secretive and oft elusive mangrove inhabitants; the promised Boat-billed Heron. Incredibly, not one, but two! An adult and an

immature, barely visible above our heads, both awaiting the dimming of the light, and an opportunity to dine on the plethora of creatures lying in the depths of the mud soaked banks of the mangrove. Simply...Wow!

Drifting along the channels that slice through the mangroves we eventually break out into a massive lake, and right on cue, perfectly framed by a backdrop of the towering mountains of the Northern Range, come the ibis. Flocks of 50-200 birds, their brilliantly shimmering red plumage seemingly ablaze in the late afternoon light, seek the shelter of their roosts before the setting of the sun. What colour, perfectly contrasting with the dark green of the mangrove - this is a spectacle to warm the cockles of any heart. Nature, in all its glorious splendour.



*Simply spectacular! Scarlet Ibis coming into roost at Caroni - photo by Ryan Chenery*

On our final day we have one more endemic to find. We've got them all so far - Imperial Parrot, Barbuda Warbler, St Vincent Parrot, Grenada Dove, even the troublesome Martinique Oriole was heard by all and seen by some. However, the Trinidad Motmot remains to be found, and we fly out later this same day. Walking along the main drive into Asa Wright, where two had been seen the previous day, we hear the strange "gloomp gloomp" call and trace it to a grove of bamboo up a muddy incline, deeply set amongst Banana Trees and heliconias. High in the Mountain Immortelle above, Orange-winged Parrots clamber and squabble over the flame coloured flowers, and Euphonias twitter, but still the "gloomp gloomp" of the motmot echoes from within the bamboo. We have scanned the boughs for over 1/2 hour, before the rising sun reveals a bare limb out in the open, and on it is perched a bird that seems to have appeared from absolutely nowhere (although was probably sitting before our eyes the whole time, shrouded in the low light of early morning) - a brilliant Trinidad Motmot. Turquoise emblazoned head, thick decurved beak, and that tail, what a tail. Final day, final endemic on the islands.

That's it, we've connected with them all – a whopping 44 of 45 endemic, regional and local race target species seen, and the 45th heard. A hugely successful trip!

As we are making our way down from the heliconia grove a pair of Channel-billed Toucans, for me the epitome of wild South America, fly in and perch in the bare branches of a lone forest giant. Those brilliant colours - that Caribbean Sea-blue eyering, the sunset orange breast band, and the gleaming tropical sun-yellow chest - all the colours of our trip on one bird. Truly fabulous. They peer inquisitively down at us, before flying off over the expanse of rainforest and settling into another ancient tree nestled deep in the rainforest. Safe there, protected, wild, and it's there that we'll look for them on our next birding trip to the spectacular islands of the Caribbean.

**February 2018 Every Endemic in The Lesser Antilles bird list (endemics, including local races, along with regional indigenous species are in bold)**

Pied-billed Grebe, Wilson's Storm Petrel, Red-billed Tropicbird, Brown Booby, Brown Pelican, Anhinga, Magnificent Frigatebird, Neotropic Cormorant, Cocoi Heron, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Little Egret, Snowy Egret, Little Blue Heron, Tricoloured Heron, Cattle Egret, Green Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Striated Heron, Boat-billed Heron, Scarlet Ibis, White-cheeked Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, **Trinidad Piping-Guan**, Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, Osprey, **Hook-billed Kite (Grenada local race)**, **Common Black Hawk (St.Vincent local race)**, Common Black Hawk, Savanna Hawk, White Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, **American Kestrel (subspecies caribaeorum)**, Peregrine Falcon, Yellow-headed Caracara, Crested Caracara, Common Moorhen, Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Black-necked Stilt, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Willet, Spotted Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Wattled Jacana, Laughing Gull, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, Rock Dove, Scaled Pigeon, Scaly-naped Pigeon, White-crowned Pigeon, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Zenaida Dove, Eared Dove, Common Ground-Dove, Ruddy Ground-Dove, **Grenada Dove**, **Bridled Quail-Dove**, Ruddy Quail-Dove, White-tipped Dove, Gray-fronted Dove, Lilac-tailed Parrotlet, Blue-headed Parrot, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Orange-winged Parrot, Green-rumped Parrotlet, **Red-necked Parrot**, **St.Lucia Parrot**, **Imperial Parrot**, **St. Vincent Parrot**, Great Antshrike, Barred Antshrike, White-flanked Antwren, Silvered Antbird, Black-faced Antthrush, Gray-throated Leaf-tosser, Plain-brown Woodcreeper, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Forest Elaenia, Mangrove Cuckoo, Smooth-billed Ani, Tropical Screech-Owl, Short-tailed Nighthawk, Common Potoo, Oilbird, Band-rumped Swift, Short-tailed Swift, Grey-rumped Swift, **Lesser Antillean Swift**, White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-breasted Hermit, Green Hermit, Little Hermit, Ruby-topaz Hummingbird, Green-throated Mango, Black-throated Mango, Tufted Coquette, Long-billed Starthroat, Blue-chinned Sapphire, White-chested Emerald, Copper-rumped Hummingbird, **Purple-throated Carib**, **Green-throated Carib**, **Antillean Crested Hummingbird**, **Blue-headed Hummingbird**, Green-backed Trogon, Guianan Trogon, Collared Trogon, **Trinidad Motmot**, Ringed Kingfisher, Belted Kingfisher, Green Kingfisher, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Channel-billed Toucan, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Lineated Woodpecker, **Caribbean Elaenia**, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Forest Elaenia, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, Yellow-breasted Flycatcher, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Euler's Flycatcher, Tropical Pewee, Pied Water-Tyrant, White-headed Marsh-Tyrant, Venezuelan Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Streaked Flycatcher, Piratic Flycatcher, **Lesser Antillean Pewee**, **St.Lucia Pewee**, **Grenada Flycatcher**, **Lesser Antillean Flycatcher**, Tropical Kingbird, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Grey Kingbird, Bearded Bellbird, White-bearded Manakin, Golden-headed Manakin, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, **Caribbean Martin**, Southern Rough-winged Swallow, Cliff Swallow, Barn Swallow, White-winged Swallow, House Wren, **House Wren (St.Lucia local race)**, **House Wren (St. Vincent local race)**, **House Wren (Grenada race)**, Long-billed Gnatwren, Rufous-throated Solitaire, Cocoa Thrush, Spectacled Thrush, Red-legged Thrush, **Forest Thrush (Montserrat local race)**, **Forest Thrush (Dominica local race)**, White-necked Thrush, Tropical Mockingbird, **White-breasted**

**Thrasher, Scaly-breasted Thrasher, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, Brown Trembler, Grey Trembler, Black-whiskered Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Yellow (Mangrove) Warbler, Yellow (Golden) Warbler, Whistling Warbler, American Redstart, Northern Waterthrush, Bananaquit, Lesser Antillean Tanager, Antillean Euphonia, Violaceous Euphonia, Trinidad Euphonia, Masked Cardinal, White-shouldered Tanager, White-lined Tanager, Silver-beaked Tanager, Blue-grey Tanager, Palm Tanager, Turquoise Tanager, Bay-headed Tanager, Blue Dacnis, Purple Honeycreeper, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Green Honeycreeper, Lesser Antillean Saltator, Blue-black Grassquit, Black-faced Grassquit, Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Barbados Bullfinch, St.Lucia Black Finch, Grassland Yellow-Finch, Red-crowned Ant-Tanager, Crested Oropendola, Carib Grackle, Shiny Cowbird, St.Lucia Oriole, Martinique Oriole**

**February 2018 Every Endemic in The Lesser Antilles mammal list**

Humpback Whale  
Short-finned Pilot Whale  
Long-finned Pilot Whale  
False Killer Whale  
Fraser's Dolphin  
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin  
Pantropical Spotted Dolphin  
Common Dolphin  
Indian Mongoose  
Red-rumped Agouti  
Jamaican Fruit Bat  
Antillean Fruit Bat  
Molossus molossus  
Greater Bulldog Bat  
Sac-winged Bat  
Pallas's Long-tongued Bat

**February 2018 Every Endemic in The Lesser Antilles reptile list**

Cook's Tree Boa  
Montserrat Racer  
Barbados Anole  
Antiguan Bank Bush Anole  
Barbuda Bank Tree Anole  
St.Lucia Anole  
Grenada Tree Anole  
Montserrat Anole  
St. Vincent Tree Anole  
St. Vincent Bush Anole  
Tropical House Gecko  
Green Iguana  
Antigua Bank Whiptail  
Green Turtle  
Hawksbill Turtle