



Birding the Islands Ltd: Trip Report

Private Group Tour

June 9th - 27th 2022



Every Endemic in the Lesser Antilles plus post trip ext to Trinidad plus post trip ext to Tobago - it's FANTASTIC!!

Day 1: Dominica

You get the feeling it's going to be an awesome trip with a gang of super cool people when you arrive at the hotel and they're all downing rum punch in shorts and sandals and sitting around the pool. One look, and I knew this group was born to Bird the Islands!

After picking up BobbYY Butler at the airport in Dominica and stopping for a couple of fried chicken legs and Kubuli beers, this was the scene that greeted me upon arrival at Tamarind Tree - our bohemian abode perched high atop glittering Salisbury Bay in stunning Dominica.

As we get to chatting around the pool, the rum punch eases the blow dealt to me when I learn that most of the group has already seen about 95% of the targets for the island - including the near endemic Plumbeous Warbler. Thank goodness those 2 endemic parrots are endangered, otherwise it may well have been a case of "what the heck's this guy doing here?!"

With the always smiling and rum punch concocting Jethro keeping our whistles whet, we make our way over to the open air dining room, where we tuck into a sumptuous dinner of Accra balls, fresh fish, provision and salad.

Day 2: Dominica

With numbers of Imperial Parrots now thought to have dwindled to as low as 50 individuals, it's always a good idea to set aside as much time as possible to try to get a glimpse of these gigantic Amazonas. And so, in the company of Dr. Birdy, we wind our way high into the cloud forests of Morne Diablotin National Park. Arriving at the beautifully designed, but seldom frequented visitor centre, we take our packed breakfast to the first of three ideally placed observation platforms nestled above a deep riverine valley, and settle down for the long wait...



<< *Before seeing the Imperial...*

The Imperial's far more gregarious and relatively numerous "cousin" - the striking Red-necked Parrot - provides near endless entertainment as it wheels and cavorts in the high winds that dominate this wild and rugged land. One particularly obliging bird lands a mere 10 feet above us and proceeds to feed. We gaze upwards - utterly transfixed. The first of 4 target endemic Amazonas has now been seen. But the second is likely to take far longer, and indeed it does - but instead of days - it turns out to be hours. Honing in on the number one species on *Ryan's Most Difficult Endemics To See List*, begins with the hearing of that telltale squeaky-gate shriek echoing out across the forest. The Imperial is out there!!!! But where...?

7 pairs of binoculars and 3 scopes diligently comb the dense canopy and towering emergents for signs of movement. Suddenly, a fleeting glimpse of a bird in flight. Next, a bird briefly perches far in the distance before dropping down. And then, an absolutely astonishing and incredible sight - a majestic adult Imperial perches in the bare branches of a nearby tree (one whose canopy was ravaged in the 2017 hurricane). By selecting this perch, one drenched in morning sunlight and utterly devoid of the clutter of leaves, this undoubted monarch of the land gazes

out across its realm - and in the process provides us with unparalleled scope views. Ohhh YEAH! FILL THAT FRAME BABY!! Dark olive greens punctuated by red flashes on the wing, and deep rich purples tempered with dark browns on the heavily scaled head and neck - a stunning beauty, and a species that continues to doggedly defy both man's and nature's best efforts to see it tumble into oblivion.



Utterly delighted, we congratulate each other with a flurry of fist bumps and handshakes before making our way back towards the vans. On the way, we pause by what has long been a regular haunt of the Blue-headed Hummingbird, and within 5 minutes, a dazzling male zips by at eye height and begins to sink its ruby-mandibled beak into the almost identically coloured tubular flowers of a coffee shrub.

After seeing the Imperial... >>

After lunch, we round off a highly successful day of birding with a visit to an old church perched atop the hillsides of St. Joseph for a near impossibly close view of a pair of Lesser Antillean Barn Owls!



Day 3: Dominica

Today sees us travel south to Middleham Falls and make a sharp ascent in search of the island's endemic subspecies of Forest Thrush and Rufous-throated Solitaire. The former was more obliging, in that it at least made an appearance - although trying to follow its frenzied movements back-and-forth across the trail ensured the entire process was something akin to watching a frenetic tennis rally!

Once we'd made it back down the trail and enjoyed a fly-over by the southern 'clan' of Red-necked Parrots, we tuck into a picnic lunch (with some tasty coconut tarts for afters).

Day 4: Dominica

Our 3rd day on Dominica sees us climb so high into Trois Pitons National Park, that we apparently end up somewhere in the Highlands of Scotland! Dave is super delighted when he gets a close up view of his first lekking Black Grouse (or is that a bottle of dark stout with lunch)?

Speaking of lunch, after the Goat Curry and Chicken Surprise is ravenously consumed we make for the airport and a date with the first of two French Overseas Territories - Guadeloupe - and our dusk arrival coincides with a delightful visual and oratory display by a low flying Antillean Nighthawk.

At dinner we meet up with 2 other members of our party.

Day 5: Guadeloupe

On a wet morning, all 10 of us set out bright and early at 05.15 in order to track down two of the earliest risers of the trip - the Bridled Quail Dove and Forest Thrush. Although these are the targets, upon disembarking our vehicles, we are greeted by superb views of a Pearly-eyed Thrasher perched atop the small visitor centre, which later in the day will be overrun with tourists and locals thronging to visit the *Cascade aux Ecrevisses*. Thankfully, our early start means we have the place to ourselves, and after crossing the D23 that bisects this lush National Park, and descending to the river, we freeze, as a rather damp (and somewhat bedraggled) Quail Dove walks out from behind one of the gazebos. Shortly thereafter, in the trees above, we get good views of Scaly-breasted Thrasher.

Bridled Quail Dove site >>

A 2-minute drive to our next stop proves to be far more rewarding. Not only has the rain eased by this point, but it appears that the Bridled Quail Doves of this area are far more fastidious about their



appearance, and have hence opted to wait out the rainstorm beneath picnic tables - only now emerging into the sunlight with feathers immaculately preened and dry. It is only at this second site that we can gain a true appreciation for the dazzling beauty of this bird - the purple green iridescence on the neck sides, the thick white horizontal stripe painted beneath the eye, pinkish breast, and copper-toned primaries contrasting with smokey grey upperparts - a true stunner!

Not to be outdone, our other target also makes an appearance - hopping out from beneath a gargantuan Anthereum on bright yellow legs to provide 'crippling' views. Unlike the subspecies on Dominica, here, we can observe in tremendous detail the chocolate fringed chevrons that adorn its snowy white breast, the bold yellow eye and deep chocolate brown upperparts.

As Lesser Antillean and Black Swifts dance in the skies overhead, a walk along the densely treed road reveals the Butterfly Island's lone endemic - the uniquely plumaged Guadeloupe Woodpecker, as well as a sunshine-soaked Mangrove Cuckoo and Plumbeous Warblers flitting at eye level amongst the yellow allamanda flowers.

The Woodpecker returns again and again, flitting across the road and perching in nearby trees, providing astonishingly close views. Today was truly a case of "Spanking the Peckers," eh Stratto?!

With all of our key targets in the bag, we relax by the riverside in this idyllic setting, before driving south and being treated to a freshly prepared French picnic. Soon we are up to our gills in patés, French baguettes, an assortment of cheeses, wine... and of course, rum. Hic! French hospitality at its best, eh Dave?! 'Haw, haw...haw, haw'!

Day 6: Martinique

Martinique greets us somewhat less warmly. A delayed flight departure, followed by an expletive-laden drive to the hotel (at least for those in Ryan's van!), precedes a wet morning's birding in the ancient



Carbet Mountain Range, where we do at least have excellent looks at a male Blue-headed Hummingbird drying its wings in the brief patches of sun, and eventually (after some persistence on our part) fair views of the endemic oriole.

<< Carbet Mountains were a bit damp!

Shortly thereafter, even our battle-hardened group is feeling a bit damp, (as is the optical equipment, although Craig does an incredible job keeping my scope dry under her poncho - thank you Craig - what a star you are), so

we high tail it out of there, and make for the sunny shores of Presqu'île de la Caravelle...at least they're supposed to be sunny. The heavens soon open, and with this goes any chance of White-breasted Thrasher sightings.

After lunch, (the less said about this the better!), we drive back to the summit, where an industrious Sir Huntington and Lady Beatriz have successfully lured the Thrashers out into the warming weather with a selection of saltines!! When in doubt, why not break out the crackers?! Out the birds flock - thrashers, saltators, bullfinches, doves. They're all here! But all of these are soon cast aside, when the call of the Puffer Fish echoes across the Caravelle to announce the arrival of the oriole! What staggering views; with the bird itself sometimes not more than 15 feet away - it's brilliant maroon cast head and burnt orange underparts, framed by glossy black plumage. Superb.

In celebratory mood, the cocktails flow heavily that night back at the poolside hotel bar. Piña coladas, cervezas, and of course, in order to maintain her impressive streak, the Queen of Rum Punch leads the charge with the ordering of this island favourite. There is even an appearance by Captain Jack Sparrow's lesser known comrade-in-arms...Captain Dave (accompanied by Polly the Parrot)!

Day 7: St. Lucia

The following morning sees us drive into Fort-de-France to board our private catamaran destined for the white-sand shores of St. Lucia. Within 20 minutes of casting off, we are joined by five Brown Boobies (including a couple of strikingly patterned adults), who entertain us throughout the trip by darting across our bow and plunging into deep blue waters in constant pursuit of what are seemingly endless shoals of flying fish. Other highlights include thrilling flybys of Sooty Tern, Great Shearwater and Brown Noddy.

Landfall on St. Lucia sees us make our way into the northeastern-most part of the island - a land dominated by grassland, scrub and dry Atlantic forest. Here, thanks to a flowering Love Apple tree, we have the unexpected pleasure of witnessing all 3 hummingbird species known to the island feeding side by side. Gargantuan *Eulampis jugularis*, with their rippling pinkish-purple throats, are joined by Green-throated Caribs, whose sapphire blue crescents are emblazoned across their breasts; and amidst it all, the dainty emerald crests of *Orthorhyncus cristatus* dancing like tiny kites in a thunderstorm.

As we approach our **Rufous** Nightjar site (a species well known to the northern regions of South America, and certainly not a full endemic :) , we have stellar views of Lesser Antillean Flycatcher and the absolutely beautiful St. Lucia Warbler. Although several birds were heard, alas the nightjar didn't make an appearance, and so we set off south for a 3-day stay at a glorious old estate steeped in history. An experience quite unlike any other on the tour begins with our being greeted by 2 of the remarkable women who have transformed this once working estate into one of the most fascinating and unique accommodation providers on the island.

Day 8: St. Lucia

A busy day of birding commences with our seeking an audience with the subspecies of White-breasted Thrasher endemic to St. Lucia. Although sightings can prove difficult on some trips, this certainly is not

the case on ours, as several of these immaculately tuxedoed birds greet our entry into the dry Eastern forests with a plethora of up close looks; with two even going so far as to perform a courtship dance a mere 10 feet from the group! Amazing!

A new fashion statement for leaders...but will it catch on?



From here, our vans travel inland to the heart of the island. Here lies the largest expanse of protected forest in the country, and one of the greatest natural wonders in the Caribbean's crown - the Des Cartiers Rainforest. Winding our way along the path that scythes its way through the many hectares of this lush primary rainforest, we find ourselves surrounded by all manner of trees and ferns - many indigenous to the region. Some like the Gommier, Chatanier and Lansan, are historically and culturally significant - their trunks having once been used by Amerindians to fashion canoes, and their sap representing a resilient

and effective pitch capable of plugging holes in what were essential vessels for travel and fishing. Modern day uses for the pods, seeds and bark of these trees include incense (which we all had a good smell of when Willow gave the seed pod a squeeze), mosquito repellent and basket weaving.

The forest is in good voice today with a near constant cacophony of calls following us as we negotiate the gradual ascent. We use the telltale songs of two of the less frequently seen of Des Cartiers inhabitants to track them down - and are rewarded with superb looks at both - the jet black St. Lucia Black Finch male in the understory, and in the canopy above the striking St. Lucia Oriole.

But in order to fully appreciate the scale and diversity of species that call Des Cartiers home, we must get to the observation platform. No sooner have we arrived than the ethereal song of the Rufous-throated Solitaire begins to waft upwards from the valley below. Playback allows us to coax this deep forest dweller ever closer, until it is mouth-droppingly close - perched above the very railing against which we are leaning! The ooohs and ahhs say it all.

The St. Lucia Parrots are not nearly as cooperative today, and sightings are limited to a few individuals whizzing by at distance. That is, however, until two birds lift from tree canopies directly beneath us, providing fulfilling views of their spectacular unfurled wings and blue-green heads - *Amazona versicolor* indeed.

One bird has so far proved elusive on our travels, and the leader is starting to get a touch antsy, as St. Lucia represents the last island upon which it is likely to be seen. Why will it not just come and perch in the mistletoe atop the tallest tree directly in front of us? Just before we are due to leave, movement in that very tree confirms that this is exactly what happens! You little BEAUTY. Just look at that stunning turquoise blue crown, dark mask and orange yellow underparts. Bird of the trip...except for the Bat Falcon of course (I've reserved 4 chapters on this species later in the report).

Lunch is taken on the beach at the aptly named The Reef restaurant. A delicious selection of fish and chicken is enjoyed, even if the Octopus I volunteered to eat tasted a bit thin...almost as if it were made of air.

Back at beautiful Balenbouche, the afternoon is ours to relax, and what better way to do so than with a selection of cocktails and piton beer. With a couple of beautifully crafted rum punches and mojitos under our belt, a stroll down to the seaside and dip in the ocean is called for. Ahh bliss. Dinner is an elegant affair, with white table cloths, polished cutlery and a lavish buffet spread enjoyed whilst seated on the large open air verandah.



Our Balenbouche dinner spread

Day 9: St. Lucia

Our final day on St. Lucia is a relaxed one, with many of us opting to spend the morning strolling the extensive grounds and learning of the wealth of history associated with the site. A scenic drive along the glittering west coast of the island follows, and is highlighted by views of Soufriere Bay, Les Pitons and lunch at The Beacon restaurant.

Our plane to Antigua is delayed by a couple of hours, but the regional airport at Castries is not a bad place to be "stranded". We sit on the beachside pier, beside the ocean, and enjoy a few beers and a light local snack. For two of us, the lapping waters of the Caribbean Sea prove too tempting, and we break out the swim suits and enjoy a soak.

Due to our late arrival into Antigua, the hotel packages our dinners and pops them in the fridge for us so we can eat them at leisure.

Day 10: Barbuda

The following morning, we board the Barbuda Express in order to be whisked across to what is still one of the most undeveloped and stunningly beautiful islands in the Caribbean. The healthy population of

Barbuda Warbler has benefited from the lack of construction of resorts, villas and golf courses, but times are a-changin', and we may well be one of the last groups to have seen this tiny island in such a pristine state.

Having had fabulous views of our plucky little target, along with several sightings of the notably pale endemic subspecies of Caribbean Elaenia, we board 2 motorised skiffs and make for the Codrington Bird Sanctuary. Flocks of White-crowned Pigeons skim over the water as the boat engines slow and we begin our approach towards the low-lying mangrove islands that dominate this shallow lagoon. Swarms of jellyfish, urchins, crabs and all manner of marine fish can be seen in the waters below, but it is in the skies above that the real show is taking place. Hundreds of Magnificent Frigatebirds soar overhead, and even more remarkable are the dozens upon dozens of immature birds still perched on or near nests. This is the end of the nesting season and the chicks are fully fledged, but still stick around in search of a few handouts from the parents. Our skillful boat captains negotiate the vessels so we are literally within touching distance.



Before we head back to the mainland, a few of us take the opportunity to walk along the nearby pink sand beach, a remote stretch of beach accessible only by boat. The waters here are amongst the most beautiful in the world, and the temptation to dive in proves too much - in we go!

<< SNAP! There goes spoon number 2!

Back on mainland Antigua, we settle down to a three course meal and rum punches; disturbingly, the punch seems a touch thin. Thankfully, upon our request, a full bottle of rum is brought to the table, and a fair amount of supplemental topping up takes place.

Day 11: Barbados

Barbados is an island of spectacular beaches and crystal clear waters, and one that is flocked to by many hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. But few come here for the birds. The lone endemic is the Barbados Bullfinch, which we see after taking a few steps along the path bisecting the Graeme Hall

Swamp. A vibrantly coloured Golden Warbler (endemic subspecies of Yellow Warbler), Scaly-naped Pigeon, Caribbean Martin, endemic subspecies of Caribbean Elaenia and Common Gallinule, along with a Rose-ringed Parakeet round off the birding for the afternoon.

2-for-1 Happy Hour ensures the night at the hotel begins, and finishes, on a high!

Day 12: Grenada

There are some birds whose fate is perhaps already sealed in this particular region of the Caribbean, and it is highly likely that our next target is one of them. On Grenada, we endure a long wait whilst precariously perched at the base of a small knoll, using anything we can to prop up against so we don't take a tumble...but avoiding any leaning on the trees with thorns (which are many!). One hour passes and then 2. Although there is plenty of life in the dry forest, a pair of Grenada Flycatchers calling and fluttering above us, a Grenada House Wren moving through the underbrush clattering away, three Hook-billed Kites just visible through the sparse forest canopy soaring overhead, a female Antillean Crested Hummingbird dutifully returning time and time again to her tiny brood in her thumb sized nest, and large anoles chasing each other up branches and running across the leaf-littered forest floor...there is no sign of a single Grenada Dove.

This changes when Stratto signals to me that he's spotted a bird moving along the top of the knoll. Unfortunately, said bird moves rapidly away from us, and although over the course of the afternoon a few other birds were spotted by the leader, none cooperated in making their way over the hill and to within view.

Day 13: Grenada & St. Vincent

The following morning, a few of us make the early morning trip back to Hartman Estate to try to get a glimpse of this walking ghost. At least this morning the birds are vocalising, and Vaughan therefore manages to track one down to its perch. But getting there quietly without flushing the bird was anything but easy, with our having to negotiate thorn-covered trees, slippery muddy slopes, and crackly leaf litter. Some of us are at least able to see the bird, but I fear that in years to come, it will become increasingly difficult to see the few of these birds that remain. With all conservation funding now cut, and faced with the daily threats of mongoose predation, disturbance of nesting habitat and hunting, the birds are moving ever higher and deeper into the inaccessible highlands surrounding the estate. However, even this approach won't protect the last survivors if/when the bulldozers come and a marina is built... This bird is well and truly poised on a knife edge.

Later in the morning, we arrive at the Argyle International Airport to bird the final island of our Lesser Antillean leg of the trip. This is a beautiful and little developed island with towering Mt. Soufriere looming over her lush forests and black sandy beaches.

Upon arrival, we make straight for the moist montane forests that dominate the landscape around this majestic mountain. Looking around as we drive, it is difficult to imagine that a year ago this mountain was spewing magma hundreds of feet into the air and the entire island was blanketed in a thick layer of

ash. We drive through the coastal city of Georgetown (picking up Dave's coveted House Sparrow en route), and arrive at the La Rabacca Trail Head, where we embark on our quest for the endangered and challenging Whistling Warbler. This is a spectacular trail, with the vast waters of the Atlantic Ocean visible to the east, and a densely forested riverine valley to the west.

Fortified with mangos, we plough ahead, listening and watching for any sign of this tiny survivor of the natural disaster that rocked its home 12 months prior. Then, as we arrive at the exact location where my May group had encountered the bird, Mr Whistles makes an appearance!! What an absolute stunner...and perched a mere 6 feet in front of us. Impossible to get better looks. It freezes for what seems an eternity (but was likely only a couple of seconds), and then flits across to a nearby stand of bamboo, before disappearing entirely. This is a sighting that will not soon be forgotten. On the way back to the vans, we pause to pick up the St. Vincent House Wren - the subspecies nomenclature of *musicus* - most appropriate, given its varied and trill notes vs others of its ilk.

The afternoon is reserved for St. Vincent Parrots, and we arrive in plenty of time for the birds to begin coming in to roost. In fact, we have likely arrived a touch early, because the incoming birds are few and far between, providing both those who have stayed at the picnic tables near the car park, and those who climbed to the top of the ridge only fleeting and not overly impressive views. But that's the way the cookie crumbles sometimes.



Nooooooo it ain't!! NOT ON MY WATCH!

As we drive in the SUV convoy back towards the vans, a call breaks the silence...PARROTS PERCHED!! We all pile out and spend a solid 15 minutes enjoying what are unquestionably the closest and longest looks at any Amazona species on the entire trip. What weird and wonderful looking parrots they are: the odd owl-like face, the unique (or is that very unique, James?) deeply bronzed plumage, and stunning sapphire blues, fire oranges and lemon yellows all combining to make a stunner.

Back at our elegant beachside resort, we settle in for cocktails around the pool, followed by a selection of Mediterranean dishes... and more drinks (is anyone noticing a common denominator?).

Day 14: St. Vincent & Trinidad

With wheels not up until midday, we have the entire morning to relax ..."ERRRRK" goes the buzzer... NOooo WE DON'T. We leave the Lesser Antilles later today, and we still haven't seen the LESSER ANTILLEAN ENDEMIC the LESSER ANTILLEAN Tanager. To the batmobile everyone!!

In convoy, we motor North towards Montreal Gardens, where dense cloud cover meets us. It's a foreboding sign. Does this mean we are to fall at the final hurdle?? Again I say...No, not on my watch! We comb the trees diligently and thoroughly, but only get fleeting glimpses of birds darting between low lying clouds from one tree canopy to the next. Eventually though, a lone Tanager perches in a Fiddlewood just above us. Everyone gets excellent views of this delightful little bird, and others, as the clouds lift. It's 07.00 folks - time to go back to the hotel for breakfast at 8 and leave the hotel at 10.15. Ryan still has to return the van and SUV with Lystra, but there's plenty of time to go in the ocean for a 'good luck' swim before we make for the South American leg of our epic island hopping adventure.

From the moment we step off the plane in Trinidad it's Bird City! We board our large bus (Maxi Taxi) and head for the golf course. Here, we pick up a host of colourful characters. Eyes are constantly glued to the large windows, and as the bus creeps along everyone scoots from one side of the bus to the other as bird-upon-bird are continuously called out: Saffron Finch! Southern Lapwing! Yellow Oriole! Red-breasted Meadowlark - whoa it's flying right toward us! Yellow-hooded Blackbird!

All of this birding takes place in between munching on some delicious rotis. Sondra notes that these are the rotis she remembers. Super tasty. Be careful though, because as Patsy delicately and expertly extricates an entire chicken LEG from the middle of her roti....it's very evident that consuming these rotis is not for the faint hearted! Of course, we could always throw the bones to the Spectacled Caiman lurking in the water hazard on the 16th hole! I guess not all of the reptiles live in the Swamp...

Speaking of the Swamp, we arrive at the sprawling Caroni Swamp - jewel in the Crown of this twin island nation - at the perfect time for a boat cruise. The sun is getting lower, but is still bright enough for the Green-throated Mango to be feeding along the shore as we pass. Ryan squeals as he notes a raptor perched near the mango. Large, dark grey, red eyes, long red legs - CRANE HAWK!! LIFER FOR THE LEADER. Woohoo!!!

In keeping with Ryan's excitement, Sondra, too, is over the moon with the fabulously close views she has of American Pygmy Kingfisher **perched** in the Red Mangrove roots not 20 feet away. As Lester expertly eases the boat along, he spots a pair of Tropical Screech Owls roosting directly over our craft. The birds are so close that Norm needs the boat to back up a bit in order to take their photo. The intricate markings on the breast are a sight to behold.

HOOORAY!!!! >>



But these are all precursors to witnessing the arrival of the ibis. As we tether the boat and break out our 2nd bottle of rum punch (made with 72% local Puncheon rum), flocks of dozens of brilliant adult Scarlet Ibis and mottled immatures begin to wing their way past the boat. Words don't often fail me...but there are times when silence is golden. We just sit back, relax and soak it all in...



Arriving at PAX Guesthouse, we make for the dinner table and a sumptuous buffet.

Day 15: Trinidad

The morning sees us scurry outside for a chance at Hummingbirds...and they sure don't disappoint. In the vervain (verbena) patch, unbelievably patterned male Tufted Coquettes are joined by brilliant Ruby Topaz, as well as White-chested Emeralds, and Copper-rumped.

As we migrate around to the back of the large old house, we sit for a while on the balcony and enjoy an entirely new cast of characters - here, gleaming Violaceous Euphonias, Black-throated Mangos and White-necked Jacobins are the stars of the show. That is until a magnificent Zone-tailed Hawk spars effortlessly by on thermals upwelling from the deep valley below. Again and again, she passes by at close range. What a wonderful start to the day!

Blanchisseuse Road is one of the highlights of any birding tour to Trinidad, and we are eager to get going after breakfast. The birds themselves, however, take a while to warm up, and as we negotiate the long winding road that snakes its way through the heart of the island's impressive Northern Range, the birding is steady rather than overwhelming. But slowly they start to appear. Ah yes, here they come. Green-backed Trogon, Blue-chinned Sapphire, Rufous-breasted Wren, Silver-beaked, Bay-headed, White-lined and Turquoise Tanagers, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Golden-headed Manakin and Streak-breasted Spinetail.

We pause at the highest point along the Road for some refreshing coconut water (straight from the fruit itself) and jelly. Then we wind our way down to Brasso Secco (a small mountain village of less than 300 people) for a delicious buffet lunch, and learn of the community's successful efforts to produce chocolate and coffee for both local consumption on Trinidad and export!

After lunch, on the outskirts of the village, we pause as Linneated Woodpecker, Tropical Paula, Guianan Trogon and Rufous-tailed Jacamar all make a roadside appearance.

Our final destination today is a usually reliable site for Blue-headed Parrots. But it proves not to be on this occasion. Birds are fickle and unreliable at times. Thankfully, we can always rely on Mr. Dependable (AKA Rum Punch) to be there in our hour(s) of need. We share our packed lunches with a lovely little family from the village. They are deeply appreciative.

On the ride back, we pause for a look at a pair of Bat Falcons perched high atop a broken Cecropia - the two are bathed in the soft light of dusk, and the setting sun kisses their brilliantly plumaged breasts. They leave their perch, but repeatedly return, providing lengthy looks. Ryan is over the moon. He sure does like his Bat Falcons.

Day 16: Trinidad

The following morning we make for Aripo Savannah, where we find soaring Short-tailed Hawk, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Golden-fronted Greenlet, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, and a fabulous little pair

of Green-rumped Parrotlets peaking their heads from under the awning of the Aripo Livestock Station - the hole in the galvanised piping the perfect nesting cavity for this finger-length species.

From Aripo, we head east to the raging Atlantic Coast and Nariva Swamp. One look at the ocean and beaches here indicates why Trinidad is not high on the list of tourist destinations for sun seekers and beach goers, however, it sure is coveted by birders! As we make our way along the long straight coast road lined with what Trini folklore states are 'millions of coconut trees', we see Yellow-headed Caracaras and Savannah Hawks perched, and are serenaded by Laughing Gulls intent on foraging amongst the tons of sargassum seaweed that's been hurled on shore by the heaving tide. The swamp itself provides us with fantastic up close looks at Black-crested Antshrike, Pinnated Bittern and Long-winged Harriers, as well as a host of Striated Herons, Little Blue Herons, the seemingly ever-present Cattle Egrets, Great Kiskadees and Tropical Kingbirds. Oh and don't forget those bathing Black-bellied Whistling Ducks. haha

Although Nariva has much to offer, we want to start our long journey north to Grande Riviere in time to have a shot at the number one target for the entire T&T extension (the Trinidad Piping Guan) this evening as well as tomorrow morning (back-ups!). We arrive at our destination when the rain is just starting to spit, but undeterred, we scamper up the slick road and are rewarded with absolutely stunning views of 11 Piping Guans!!!! With an estimated population of as few as 150, and the birds typically skittish due to intense and unrelenting hunting pressure, seeing this number is a real coup! The light is also just right, and perfectly highlights the key features of this island rarity.

We soak it up.

On arrival at our beachside hotel, we tuck into a seafood feast before some of us embark on a late night encounter with ocean giants - nesting Leatherbacks!! Two of these unbelievable-sized beasts are seen coming ashore. An unforgettable experience.

Day 17: Trinidad & Tobago

By morning, the first of the sun's rays reveals there is still action on the beach as a lone female (absolutely covered in Black Vultures) finishes her impressive feat before returning to the ocean depths. After breakfast, there is even time to return 4 leatherback nestlings (who had made the wrong turn and headed inshore to the lights of human habitation) back to the sea in order that they may begin their own ocean odyssey.

Although Trinidad's sister island of Tobago is our heading today, there is still time for a spot of early morning birding, and we pick up some wonderful additions to the trip list here, including all 3 hermits, White-bearded Manakin and White-flanked Antwren. Around 9am, our bus starts the long drive to Piarco International Airport for the short 20-minute flight to Tobago.

Upon arrival we get straight to birding, and are rewarded with a few mosquito bites, along with super sightings of White-fringed Antwren and a hitherto unknown endemic - the magnificently plumaged Tobago Greenlet (perhaps a slight embellishment). But it is our arrival at Cuffie Nature Retreat which

blows our hats off! We haven't even gotten out of the bus before the near-endemic White-tailed Sabrewing is staring us in the eye!! These gargantuan and fabulously gaudy hummers rule the roost at the feeders that line the driveway and fervently chase away others such as White-necked Jacobins, Ruby Topaz and Rufous-breasted Hermits, who dare to intrude.

Dinner is a throwback to 'de old time Caribbean', and is beautifully laid out with a cauldron of pumpkin soup, followed by hearty portions of roast lamb, potatoes, and pumpkin fritters. Delicious.

But this isn't where the night ends. It's nightjar spotting time!! We ease outside and cautiously make our way down the drive. Oh \$#%* THERE IT IS!! IT'S RIGHT THERE IN FRONT OF US!!! The King of the Scope, James, is already lining it up, and everyone gets absolutely breathtaking views of this little marvel. Man it doesn't get much better than this!



Day 18: Tobago

On our final full day of birding, we wake early to make for the Main Ridge Forest Reserve - THE place for birding in Tobago. Our first steps into this ancient primary forest reveals a lek of Blue-backed Manakins, their frenzied movements on fluttering wings and incessant chirrup-like calls providing endless entertainment. Golden-olive Woodpeckers provide excellent views, but none more so than when we exit the forest, and on the roadside, see Sondra's friend, who's keen on showing itself to the rest of the group too.

A short drive along the well-paved road through the forest sees us arrive at the famous Gilpin Trace. Several of us make our way onto this trail intent on one bird and one bird only - the Yellow-legged Thrush. We have to work for it, and are interrupted by a brief rainfall, but once we do see it, the views are unparalleled - a magnificent male enjoying a bath in a pristine mountain stream. Once his jet blue-black plumage and gleaming yellow beak, eye ring and legs are suitably polished in the water, he perches on a small branch that straddles the stream. Stunning.

Lunch is enjoyed on the coast at the appropriately named Birders Restaurant, before making our way to Blue Waters Inn to board our glass-bottomed boat for a short 20-minute sail across to the seabird haven of Little Tobago.

We arrive just before a rain squall lashes the tiny island, but undeterred, we start the trek through the forest and up to the lookout. What an amazing sight awaits us here. Towering black cliffs and jagged rock faces, punctuated by hardy cactus and wind-lashed palms, careen down towards an angry sea, above which a constant stream of seabirds effortlessly negotiate the elements. Red-billed Tropicbirds whiz by at eye height, so close we can almost touch them; an incredible 4 morphs of Red-footed Booby provide scope views; and Brown Booby, Sooty, Bridled Tern and Brown Noddy take turns to perch and shelter periodically before launching themselves back out into the now torrential rain and out to sea. It is somehow fitting that we don't see these birds bathed in sunlight on a calm and blissful tropical day. These birds endure challenging lives, constantly exposed to and battling the elements. Today, we experience firsthand a mere taste of these hardships.

Back at Cuffie, and after another delicious meal and round(s) of rum punch, Norm puts on a wonderful slideshow of some of his Lesser Antillean photos. I think my favourites were the St. Lucia Warbler, Martinique Oriole and, of course, what was almost a bogey bird (the Lesser Antillean Euphonia) - all absolutely stunning pics! Thank you Norm.

This morning, we say our goodbyes to our host Regina and bus driver Sean, and fly back to Trinidad. As we've got a few hours before boarding, several of us set out on one last birding jaunt, to the sewage ponds, rice fields and golf course. We pick up 4 new species for the trip - Purple Gallinule, Greater Ani, Plain-breasted Ground Dove, and Common Waxbill. Birding down to the last feather!

After another round of Trini Doubles, it's time to say our fond farewells.

There is no doubt that this has been the most enjoyable trip I've ever had the pleasure of leading. Thank you all for your wonderful company during our 3 weeks Birding the Islands together. I've never had a cooler and more fun group. You guys are awesome!

CHEERS!

