

A Tropical Birding CUSTOM TOUR Jamaica: The Caribbean Introtour

11-16 January, 2018

TOUR LEADER: Charley Hesse Local guide: Ricardo Miller Report & photos by Charley Hesse. All photos were taken on this tour



The undeniable star of the show: The Jamaican Tody is a little gem.

Jamaica is the perfect place to begin exploring the Caribbean. It is easily reached from the US with regular flights, there is a good tourist infrastructure, and the impressive crop of endemics (27 by a conservative count) tops the Carribean. The birding is relatively easy, and one has a good chance of seeing every endemic and even photographing many of them. The charm of the friendly locals, a distinctive cuisine, fantastic music, stunning scenery and world-famous coffee all add extra reasons to visit this already attractive destination. It's not just number of endemics either. The list boasts some absolute corkers with birds like Jamaican Tody, the long-tailed Streamertail hummingbird and Jamaican Owl being perennial favorites. Lush montane forest in the famous Blue Mountains National Park holds the vast majority of Jamaica's endemics, but dry forest of the Hellshire Hills, relaxing botanical gardens, the famous Ecclesdown Road in the base of the John Crow Mountains, and even a splash of birding on the coast and wetlands gives a very varied trip.

(Although this was a custom trip, it follows the same itinerary as our set departure tour.)

12th January - Kingston to the Blue Mountains

After a late arrival last night, we started our birding in the hotel parking lot this morning, while we waited for our local guide to arrive. We saw White-crowned Pigeon, White-winged & Zenaida Doves, a female Streamertail and a rather vocal **Northern Mockingbird** singing from the top of the building. After being picked up, we headed to an area of dry forest on the outskirts of Kingston, called Hellshire Hills. Named so as it is one of the hottest places in Jamaica. The skies were clear and even in winter it was pretty hot, although I wouldn't go as far as calling it hellish. We started at a local pond where we picked up a few common water birds, with Blue-winged Teal, Tricolored Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and Black-necked Stilt, before starting our walk along the gravel road through the fascinating dry forest habitat. Along here we found Smooth-billed Ani, Common Ground-**Dove**, and **Mourning Dove**. The latter which is surprisingly rare in Jamaica. In the bushes and small trees, we saw Jamaican Vireo, Prairie Warbler, Bananaquit and Jamaican Oriole which is locally known as Auntie Katie.



Stolid Flycatcher is a target in the dry forest at Hellshire Hills.

Our two main targets of the morning though were **Stolid Flycatcher** and **Bahama Mockingbird**. Neither of these endemics but rather Caribbean specialties. We had great views of both of these rather understated birds, but spiced things up a bit with a couple of hummers on the way out. One of the smallest birds in the world, the **Vervain Hummingbird** and the endemic **Jamaican Mango**. On the way out, we stopped at the Wreck Bay pond where we saw Magnificent Frigatebird, Brown Pelican, Little Blue Heron and Glossy Ibis. We also added our first shorebirds of the trip, with Black-necked Stilt, Black-bellied & Semipalmated Plovers, Killdeer, Least **Sandpiper** and **Greater Yellowlegs.** We had just enough time to quickly check out the Greater Portmore Sewage ponds where we added West Indian Whistling-Duck, Green Heron, Common Gallinule, Northern Jacana, **Spotted Sandpiper** and **Lesser Yellowlegs**. We made it back for check out with minutes to spare, before packing up and heading for lunch at a local eatery serving traditional Jamaican cuisine.

After lunch we went to check out the Hope Botanical Gardens which is located near the base of the road going up to the Blue Mountains. Just after the gate, our local guide stopped the car, looked up into a small tree, and said 'Potoo'. We pulled over and got out to find a Northern Potoo perched in a rather conspicuous fashion. It was rather cooperative and even opened its eyes for us. After we had taken our fill of photos we continued on in to the gardens. We found several common species easily, including Jamaican Woodpecker, American Kestrel and Loggerhead Kingbird. We also had good warbler activity with good views of American Redstart, Cape May Warbler and Northern Parula. Our main target remaining though was the endemic Yellow-billed Parrot. Our guide was an expert on the species, but we still struggled. We finally found a group foraging low down in a fruiting tree which posed nicely for photos. It was time now to head up to our beautifully situated lodge in the Blue Mountains; our base for the next two days. Mountain birding would have to wait for tomorrow, but we did find a **Chuck-will's-widow** perched on top of a light just across from the restaurant.



Northern Potoo strikes a pose in Hope Gardens.



The endemic Yellow-billed Parrot & Jamaican Spindalis.

13th January - Blue Mountains

We had a pre-breakfast try for the Jamaica Owl along the road near our lodge but there was no response to our gruff hoots. We did see the **Chuck-will's-widow** on the same light as last night, though. As the day dawned, birds came in to pick off insects that had been brought in by the lights overnight, and we saw Sad & Rufous-tailed Flycatchers (both endemic), Loggerhead Kingbird, White-chinned Thrush, American Redstart, Orangequit and the beautiful **Jamaican Spindalis**. Red-billed **Streamertails** had also started coming to the feeders and people were busy photographing a stunning male. After a filling breakfast we continued birding the Silverhill Gap area.



The stunning endemic Streamertail is easily seen at feeders.

We slowly built our list of endemics, with Ring-tailed Pigeon, Jamaican Woodpecker, Jamaican Pewee, Blue Mountain & Jamaican Vireos, Jamaican Euphonia, and the seemingly ever-present White-chinned Thrush, locally known as 'Hopping Dick' for its habit of hopping along roads. The most threatened, and usually one of the toughest endemics to find is the endangered Jamaican Blackbird, but today we located them quickly and had great views. Of course, one of the 'must see' birds in Jamaica is the Jamaican Tody. We found a few of these luminous green bundles of cuteness, but getting a photo was a little more difficult as they seem to hop to the next branch just before you focus on them. Patience prevailed and we finally got results. We had plenty of warblers during the morning, including Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart and Black-throated Blue Warbler. Of course, the one that everybody wanted to see was the endemic Arrowhead Warbler, which we finally got good views of but photographing these was even more challenging.



The restless little Arrowhead Warbler has a totally different feeding behaviour from Black-and-white Warbler.

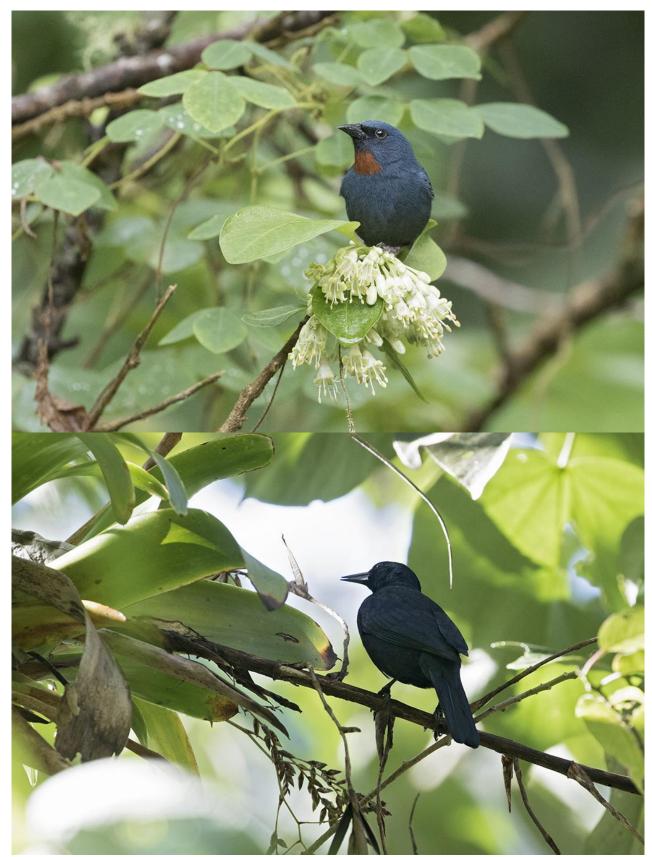
Next, we tried the well-known Woodside Track, one of the best sites for maybe the toughest endemic, the **Crested** Quail-Dove. We had one calling up in a tree, but unfortunately it flushed before we could locate it. We did find the even more difficult to see Ruddy Quail-Dove which we got in the scope. We had a few other nice additions with Red-tailed Hawk, Greater Antillean Elaenia, Greater Antillean Bullfinch and the endemic White-eyed Thrush. We called it a morning and returned to the lodge for lunch, after which we took a short tour of a local coffee grower who explained the all the stages in the production process of the world famous Blue Mountain coffee. We also got to try a cup and of course buy a few bags straight from the producer. It was misty and rainy by now, but we had a gap and walked the road through some great habitat and succeeded in locating a Crested Quail-Dove which flew in and perched to give great scope views. It had been a tremendously successful day and we now only had a small handful of endemics still to find.

14th January - Blue Mountains to Port Antonia

We took another bash at the Jamaican Owl again before breakfast, this time a different spot came up trumps and we got great views. After breakfast, we packed up and started birding our way down the slope towards the north coast. Two major targets of the day were the 2 endemic species of cuckoo, and as luck would have it we found them both easily today. They both have unusual croaking calls. Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo does a low croak, and Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo does a higher-pitched croak. The Chestnut-bellied is therefore locally known as the 'Old Man Bird' and the Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, the 'Old Woman Bird'. Important targets under our belts, we enjoyed more great views of the endemics, including Ring-tailed Pigeon, Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Woodpecker, Jamaican Elaenia, Jamaican Pewee, both vireos, White-eyed Thrush, Orangequit, Jamaican Spindalis, **Jamaican Euphonia** and the rare **Jamaican Blackbird** feeding around the base of bromeliads.



Jamaican Owl & Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo



The endemic Orangequit & Jamaican Blackbird.

It got to 10am and we finished our mountain birding and drove down to the coast. We passed the Port Antonio Bay where some Magnificent Frigatebirds were circling over the water, and also Great Blue Heron and Belted Kingfisher by the water's edge. We had some fantastic burgers at a well-known restaurant with a nice garden which we took a stroll around. We had our coffee souvenirs bought, but we also stopped to buy some rum to take back. We arrived at the amusingly-named Goblin Hill Villas and strolled around the gardens until our rooms were ready to enter. We had great views of Jamaican Mango and Black-billed Streamertails by the feeders, then took a break before heading out birding along the San San Police Station Road. Before getting out of the vehicle we had a Ruddy Quail-Dove and an Ovenbird by the side of the road. Our main target though, was the Caribbean Dove which were calling everywhere but seeing them was another matter. We finally got some of the group on one before it flew off but we only heard our other target, the Jamaican Becard. That would have to wait for tomorrow. We had a delicious Jamaican meal to finish off another wonderful day.



We had fine views of White-tailed Tropicbirds from atop the cliffs at Hector's River.

15th January - Hector's River & Ecclesdown Road

An early start was required today as it was about an hour to our first birding site. During breakfast, we had a Jamaican Owl giving its gruff hoot in a tree right next to us. We left our scrambled eggs briefly and rushed out to see this very unusual owl one more time. We were on our way to a small town called Hector's River on a section of the coast with cliffs where **White-tailed Tropicbirds** are known to breed. We stood on the top of the cliffs and soon spotted several tropicbirds over the sea, far along the coast. As we were figuring out how we would get closer looks, they actually came closer to us and we ended up with great views. They are not guaranteed at this time of year so we counted our lucky stars. Next, we set off for the Ecclesdown Road and had a lucky Mangrove Cuckoo en route. This site was our last chance for a couple of endemics we were still missing.



More endemics: Black-billed Parrots & Jamaican Mango.

We had several good birds during the morning, including Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Blue Mountain Vireo, Orangequit, Greater Antillean Bullfinch and Jamaican Oriole. We also had excellent views of 2 endemics we were still missing: Black-billed Parrot and Jamaican Becard. Although we had seen Jamaican Tody numerous times, some participants were still lacking photos. Some more effort gave us our best views yet of this gorgeous little bird. We made it back to our lodge for lunch and a rest, during which time it rained heavily. Luckily it cleared up a bit in the afternoon and we were able to bird a little on the grounds. We had our first views of **Olive-throated** Parakeet and Greater Antillean Grackle, and more fine views of the endemic Iamaican Mango and the blackbilled form of **Streamertail** which was formally considered a separate species. We strolled about the expansive lawns and also scoped American Kestrel and a White-crowned Pigeon. At the bottom of the gardens, we found quite a concentration of birds that had been attracted by a fruiting tree. Here we saw American Redstart, Blackthroated Blue Warbler, Orangequit, Jamaican Spindalis, Jamaican Euphonia and our penultimate endemic, the Yellow-shouldered Grassquit. Luckily we had one more chance for our final endemic one the way to the airport tomorrow.



Cutting it fine, we got out last endemic on our way to the airport.

15th January - Castleton Botanical Gardens to Kingston

We had an early afternoon flight so only had a short time left to bird. It was about a 3 hour drive back to the airport and about half way we reached the small Castleton Botanical Gardens. It was set in a very lush valley and home to our final endemic, the Jamaican Crow. It didn't take long to find one, which is lucky because we didn't have long. Happy with our clean sweep we continued on to Kingston where we saw a few Antillean Palm-Swifts flying around the suburbs. We stopped to pick up my luggage that had just arrived at our Kingston hotel. Better late than never. One birding stop near the airport to add Royal Terns & Laughing Gulls before we arrived with plenty of time to check in for our return flights. We bid our local guide farewell and thanked him for a job well done.

BIRD LIST

Taxonomy follows eBird/Clements online checklist v2017.

Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl (Anatidae)

West Indian Whistling-Duck Dendrocvana arborea

Vulnerable. Seen at Great Portmore sewage works. **Blue-winged Teal** Spatula discors

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Tropicbirds (Phaethontidae)

White-tailed Tropicbird Phaethon lepturus catesbyi

Seen at Hector's River.

Frigatebirds (Fregatidae)

Magnificent Frigatebird Fregata magnificens

Seen in Kingston & Port Antonio.

Pelicans (Pelecanidae)

Brown Pelican Pelecanus o. occidentalis

Seen at Hellshire Hills, Kingston & Port Antonio.

Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns (Ardeidae)

Great Blue Heron Ardea herodias occidentalis

Seen at Great Portmore sewage works & Port Antonio. **Great Egret** Ardea alba egretta

Seen at Hellshire Hills, Great Portmore sewage works & Port Antonio.

Snowy Egret Egretta t. thula

Seen at Hellshire Hills, Great Portmore sewage works & Port Antonio.

Little Blue Heron Egretta caerulea

Seen at Hellshire Hills, Great Portmore sewage works & Castleton Botanical Gardens.

Tricolored Heron Egretta tricolor ruficollis

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Cattle Egret Bubulcus i. ibis

Seen at Hellshire Hills, Great Portmore sewage works, Hope Gardens & Port Antonio.

Butorides v. virescens **Green Heron**

Seen at Great Portmore sewage works.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron Nyctanassa violacea bancrofti

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Ibises and Spoonbills (Threskiornithidae)

Plegadis falcinellus **Glossy Ibis**

Seen at Hellshire Hills & Great Portmore sewage works.

New World Vultures (Cathartidae)

Turkey Vulture Cathartes a. aura

Seen at throughout.

Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)

Red-tailed Hawk Buteo j. jamaicensis

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Rails, Gallinules, and Coots (Rallidae)

Common Gallinule Gallinula galeata cerceris

Seen at Great Portmore sewage works.

Stilts and Avocets (Recurvirostridae)

Black-necked Stilt Himantopus m. mexicanus

Seen at Hellshire Hills & Great Portmore sewage works.

Plovers and Lapwings (Charadriidae)

Black-bellied Plover Pluvialis squatarola

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Semipalmated Plover Charadrius semipalmatus ternominatus

Near-threatened. Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Killdeer Charadrius vociferus ternominatus Caribbean Endemic ssp

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Jacanas (Jacanidae)

Northern Jacana Jacana spinose violacea Caribbean Endemic ssp

Seen at Great Portmore sewage works.

Sandpipers and Allies (Scolopacidae)

Least Sandpiper Calidris minutilla

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Spotted Sandpiper Actitis macularius

Seen at Great Portmore sewage works.

Greater Yellowlegs Tringa melanoleuca Seen at Hellshire Hills & Great Portmore sewage works. Tringa flavipes **Lesser Yellowlegs**

Seen at Great Portmore sewage works.

Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers (Laridae)

Laughing Gull Leucophaeus a. atricilla

Seen near Kingston Airport.

Royal Tern Thalasseus m. maximus

Seen near Kingston Airport.

Pigeons and Doves (Columbidae)

Rock Pigeon Columba livia

Introduced. Seen in urban areas.

White-crowned Pigeon Patagioenas leucocephala Near-threatened. Seen in Kingston, Hope Gardens & Goblin Hill.

Ring-tailed Pigeon Patagioenas caribaea Endemic

Vulnerable. Seen in the Blue Mountains & at Goblin Hill.

Common Ground-Dove Columbina passerine jamaicensis **Endemic subspecies**

Seen at Hellshire Hills, in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Crested Quail-Dove Geotrygon versicolor **Endemic**

Near-threatened. Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Ruddy Ouail-Dove Geotrygon m. montana

Seen in the Blue Mountains & at San San.

Caribbean Dove Leptotila j. jamaicensis **Endemic subspecies**

Seen at San San & heard near Hector's River.

White-winged Dove Zenaida a. asiatica

Seen at Kingston, Hellshire Hills & Hope Gardens.

Zenaida Dove Zenaida aurita zenaida Caribbean endemic ssp

Seen at Hellshire Hills, Hope Gardens, in the Blue Mountains & at Goblin Hill.

Mourning Dove Zenaida m. macroura Caribbean endemic ssp

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Cuckoos (Cuculidae)

Smooth-billed Ani Crotophaga ani

Seen at Hellshire Hills & Hope Gardens.

Mangrove Cuckoo Coccyzus minor

Seen near Hector's River.

Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo Coccyzus pluvialis Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Iamaican Lizard-Cuckoo Coccyzus vetula Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Owls (Strigidae)

Jamaican Owl Pseudoscops grammicus **Endemic**

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Nightjars and Allies (Caprimulgidae)

Chuck-will's-widow Antrostomus carolinensis

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Potoos (Nyctibiidae)

Northern Potoo Nyctibius j. jamaicensis **Endemic subspecies**

Seen at Hope Gardens.

Swifts (Apodidae)

Antillean Palm-Swift Tachornis phoenicobia Caribbean endemic

Seen in Kingston.

Hummingbirds (Trochilidae)

Jamaican Mango Anthracothorax mango Endemic

Seen at Hellshire Hills & Goblin Hill.

Vervain Hummingbird Mellisuga minima **Endemic subspecies**

Seen at Hellshire Hills & Hope Gardens

Streamertail Trochilus polytmus Endemic

Red-billed seen at Hope Gardens & in the Blue Mountains. Black-billed seen at Goblin Hill.

Todies (Todidae)

Jamaican Tody Todus todus Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)

Belted Kingfisher Megaceryle alcyon

Seen at Port Antonio.

Woodpeckers (Picidae)

Jamaican Woodpecker Melanerpes radiolatus **Endemic**

Seen at Hope Gardens & in the Blue Mountains.

Falcons and Caracaras (Falconidae)

American Kestrel Falco sparverius dominicensis Caribbean endemic ssp

Seen at Hope Gardens, in the Blue Mountains, Goblin Hill & Hector's River.

New World and African Parrots (Psittacidae)

Black-billed Parrot Amazona agilis Endemic

Vulnerable. Seen at Ecclesdown Road.

Yellow-billed Parrot Amazona collaria Endemic

Vulnerable. Seen at Hope Gardens.

Olive-throated (Jamaican) Parakeet Eupsittula n. nana **Endemic subspecies**

Near-threatened. Seen at Goblin Hill.

Tyrant Flycatchers (Tyrannidae)

Jamaican Elaenia Endemic Myiopagis cotta

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Greater Antillean Elaenia Elaenia f. fallax **Endemic subspecies**

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Iamaican Pewee Contopus pallidus Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Sad Flycatcher Myiarchus barbirostris Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Rufous-tailed Flycatcher Myiarchus validus Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Stolid Flycatcher Myiarchus s. stolidus **Endemic subspecies**

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Loggerhead Kingbird Tyrannus caudifasciatus jamaicensis **Endemic subspecies**

Seen at Hope Gardens, in the Blue Mountains, Goblin Hill & Ecclesdown Road.

Tityras and Allies (Tityridae)

Iamaican Becard Pachyramphus niger Endemic

Seen at Ecclesdown Road & heard at San San.

Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis (Vireonidae)

Blue Mountain Vireo Vireo osburni Endemic

Near-threatened. Seen in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Endemic **Jamaican Vireo** Vireo modestus

Seen at Hellshire Hills, in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Crows, Jays, and Magpies (Corvidae)

Jamaican Crow Corvus jamaicensis Endemic

Seen at Castleton Botanical Gardens.

Thrushes and Allies (Turdidae)

Rufous-throated Solitaire Myadestes genibarbis solitaries **Endemic subspecies**

Seen in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

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White-eyed Thrush Turdus jamaicensis Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

White-chinned Thrush Turdus aurantius Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Mockingbirds and Thrashers (Mimidae)

Bahama Mockingbird Mimus gundlachii hillii Endemic subspecies

Seen at Hellshire Hills.

Northern Mockingbird Mimus polyglottos Orpheus Caribbean endemic ssp

Seen in Kingston, at Hope Gardens & Goblin Hill.

New World Warblers (Parulidae)

Ovenbird Seiurus aurocapilla

Seen at San San & Castleton Botanical Gardens.

Worm-eating Warbler Helmitheros vermivorum

Seen by the guides in the Blue Mountains.

Louisiana Waterthrush Parkesia motacilla

Seen by the guides in the Blue Mountains.

Black-and-white Warbler Mniotilta varia

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Swainson's Warbler Limnothlypis swainsonii

Seen by the guide in the Blue Mountains.

Common Yellowthroat Geothlypis trichas

Seen in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Arrowhead Warbler Setophaga pharetra Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

American Redstart Setophaga ruticilla
Seen at Hellshire Hills, Hope Gardens & in the Blue Mountains.
Cape May Warbler Setophaga tigrina

Seen at Hope Gardens.

Northern Parula Setophaga americana

Seen at Hope Gardens & in the Blue Mountains.

Black-throated Blue Warbler Setophaga caerulescens

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Prairie Warbler Setophaga discolor

Seen at Hellshire Hills, in the Blue Mountains & at Hector's River.

Tanagers and Allies (Thraupidae)

Bananaquit Coereba f. flaveola Endemic subspecies

Seen at Hellshire Hills & in the Blue Mountains.

Yellow-faced Grassquit Tiaris o. olivaceus Caribbean endemic ssp

Heard in the Blue Mountains.

Black-faced Grassquit Tiaris bicolor marchii Caribbean endemic ssp

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Orangequit Euneornis campestris Endemic

Seen in the Blue Mountains & at Ecclesdown Road.

Greater Antillean Bullfinch Loxigilla violacea ruficollis Endemic subspecies

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Yellow-shouldered Grassquit Loxipasser anoxanthus Endemic

Seen at Goblin Hill.

Spindalises (Spindalidae)

Jamaican Spindalis Spindalis nigricephala **Endemic**

Seen in the Blue Mountains, Goblin Hill & Ecclesdown Road.

Troupials and Allies (Icteridae)

Jamaican Oriole Icterus I. leucopteryx **Endemic subspecies**

Seen at Hellshire Hills, in the Blue Mountains & Ecclesdown Road.

Jamaican Blackbird Nesopsar nigerrimus Endemic

Endangered. Seen in the Blue Mountains.

Great-tailed Grackle Quiscalus mexicanus

Introduced. Seen by the guide at the airport.

Greater Antillean Grackle Quiscalus niger crassirostris **Endemic subspecies**

Seen at Hope Gardens, Kingston & Goblin Hill

Finches, Euphonias, and Allies (Fringillidae)

Euphonia jamaica Jamaican Euphonia Endemic

Seen at Hope Gardens, in the Blue Mountains & Goblin Hill.

Waxbills and Allies (Estrildidae)

Scaly-breasted Munia Lonchura punctulate

Introduced. A flock of munias seen briefly at Great Portmore sewage works were probably this species.

MAMMALS

Indian Gray Mongoose Herpestes edwardsii

Introduced. Seen in the Blue Mountains and on Ecclesdown Road.

REPTILES

Blue Mountain Anole Anolis reconditus Endemic

Seen by the guide in the Blue Mountains.

Jamaican Giant Anole Anolis garmani

Seen in the Blue Mountains.

American Crocodile Crocodylus acutus

Vulnerable. Great Portmore sewage works.