



A Tropical Birding scheduled tour

JAMAICA: Houston Audubon Tour

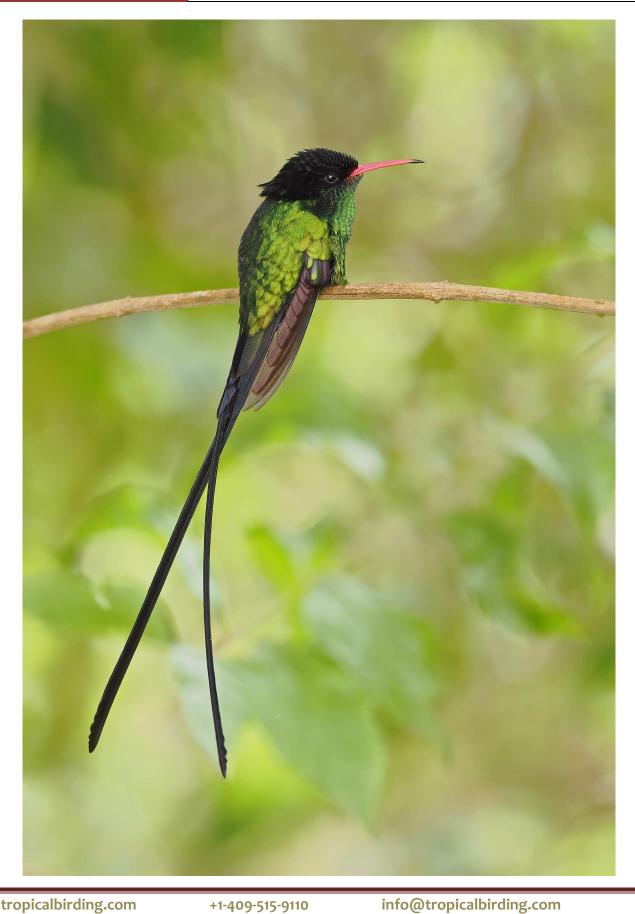
5th- 10th December 2023



Any Jamaica tour inevitably focuses on the species endemic to the island. For an island of its modest size, (it is *smaller* than the US state of *Connecticut*), Jamaica punches well above its weight. It is also considerably smaller than either of the other nearby Caribbean islands of *Cuba* and *Hispaniola* but still has a longer list of island endemic bird species, an impressive 28 in all. We saw them all during this short tour, including this very confiding Jamaican Spindalis in the garden of our chalet in the *Blue Mountains* (Sam Woods).

All photos by the guide Sam Woods

Photo Next Page: We regularly saw the country's national bird, Red-billed Streamertail or "Doctorbird", including within the garden of our mountain chalet in the Blue Mountains, where we spent 4 nights (Sam Woods).



INTRODUCTION:

The Caribbean is an extremely rich and rewarding region for birders. Many of the Caribbean islands hold a number of species found nowhere else. Jamaica is very highly ranked amongst them in this regard, holding an impressive 28 endemic bird species, which is considerably more than the nearby, (much larger), islands of Hispaniola and Cuba, and more than are found on Puerto Rico also. We got to see all of these, (and all of them well), during our 4 full days birding on this island that measures only slightly smaller than the US state of Connecticut. Within coastal thornscrub west of Kingston, we found Bahama Mockingbird and Stolid Flycatcher (A.K.A. "Tom Fool") and savored a first day when we saw no less than three different roosting Northern Potoos, as well as our first Black-billed and Yellow-billed Parrots, and interestingly named Sad Flycatchers (A.K.A. "Little Tom Fool"). During our two full days in The Blue Mountains, some went to sample their famously expensive coffee at a local estate, and we all experienced a goodly number of endemic birds coupled with the temperamental weather that these mountains so often display. We enjoyed rain, sunshine, and the mountain mist regularly rolled in regularly and enveloped us, even though we were here in one of the driest months of the year; (which are traditionally December, January, and February). However, the rain was usually only momentary, with heavier downpours being very limited, and our birding was never affected by this. The garden of our comfortable mountain chalet in the Blue Mountains was superb, with a male Red-billed Streamertail (photo page 2) hanging out there almost permanently, and highlights there included other endemics like Rufous-tailed Flycatcher (A.K.A. "Big Tom Fool"), Arrowhead Warbler, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo (A.K.A. "Old Man Bird), and the gem-like Jamaican Tody (A.K.A. "Robin Redbreast") photo below, arguably one of Jamaica's best birds of all.



PHOTO PAGE BEFORE: Jamaican Tody is one of the ultimate *must-see* birds in Jamaica. This one was photographed in our mountain chalet garden in the *Blue Mountains (Sam Woods)*.

Down the road from there the verdant montane forest yielded a nighttime **Jamaican Owl**, and two of the toughest endemics by day – **Jamaican Blackbird** foraging in its beloved bromeliads, and the "Mountain Witch", better known to us as **Crested Quail-Dove**. We also observed **Yellow-shouldered Grassquits** and a **Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo** during our precious time in **The Blue Mountains**. On our final full day of birding, we could not resist a day trip to up to **Port Antonio**, in the north of the island, where we located our final handful of endemic bird species, including **Black-billed Streamertail** and **Jamaican Crow**, and had some marvelous views of **Jamaican Mangos** too. We also got a glimpse into another part of Jamaica, where the trademark crisp and clean Caribbean beaches and bays of tourism brochures were witnessed firsthand, and we got to sample some very tasty jerk chicken and pork in **Jamaica's Jerk Capital**, **Boston**, which is birthplace of the cuisine. A great last full day to end the tour, which left us fully satiated at the end of the trip! Jamaica is an easy place to fall in love with, and I feel we all left a little piece of our hearts there once we left!



We regularly saw the country's national bird, **Red-billed Streamertail** or "**Doctorbird**" feeding on these native *hibiscus* trees, known as **Blue Mahoe** in Jamaica. This, Jamaica's national tree, was commonly encountered in the Caribbean Cloud Forests of The *Blue Mountains* (*Sam Woods*)

TOUR SUMMARY:

Day 1 (of birding): 6th December 2023 – Hellshire Hills, Great Portmore Sewage Works, Caymanas Forest Reserve & Hope Botanical Gardens, Kingston.

After a buffet breakfast at 06:30am at our Kingston hotel, we hit the road at 07:15am, and set off to the west of Jamaica's capital. Our destination was Hellshire Hills, а known stronghold for a very local Jamaican species, Bahama Mockinabird. Hellshire Hills bears down on the coast and is covered in Caribbean Thornscrub. It was already hot by the time we arrived, and perhaps this was the reason it took some time to find our main target species. However, in the meantime, we managed to find our first two endemics, with a Stolid Flycatcher and fleeting views of several Jamaican Mangos. Finally though, we tracked down a pair of Bahama Mockingbirds (photo left). which started out far off but inched their way towards us with a little encouragement from Sam's phone. With our short list of target species in hand, we then set off for Portmore Sewage Works. finding several Glossy Ibis and Spotted Sandpipers there but not much else. Therefore, we visited Cavmanas **Forest** Reserve, where two sleeping Northern Potoos (photo next page) justified its inclusion on our itinerary, and we saw our first Sad Flycatchers, which were much wanted by Sandra due to their morose moniker.





THREE sleeping Northern Potoos were seen on our first day. This was one of two seen at Caymanas Forest Reserve, and Barbara put us on to another in Hope Botanical Gardens within Kingston (Sam Woods).

After lunch in a celebrity-endorsed restaurant in Kingston (Usain Bolt, among others, was proudly displayed on the wall), we visited Hope Botanical Gardens. The gardens provides a piece of serenity within the hustle and bustle of Kingston city, and we passed the colourful Bob Marley Museum on the way there, where the world's most famous reggae singer used to reside. Once entering the gardens our focus was on finding parrots, with THREE species possible: Black-billed and Yellow-billed Parrots, and Olive-throated Parakeet. The first of these (Black-billed Parrot) is normally the toughest to find there, although you would not have known it from our experience, as Lydon Johnson, our wonderful local guide, proceeded to show us a party of them just above where we parked our van mere minutes after our arrival! Not long after, the considerably more abundant Yellow-billed Parrot (photo page 7) made the first appearance of the afternoon, with several groups seen during our 90 minutes in the gardens. We could not, however, locate any parakeets. Plentiful Zenaida Doves fed on the well-trimmed lawns in the gardens, several Loggerhead Kingbirds stood sentry at the edge of these, and one tree held a number of wintering warblers, including Yellow-rumped, Palm, Black-throated Blue, and Prairie Warblers, and American Redstarts and Northern Parulas all sharing the same tree. Barbara also found our THIRD **Northern Potoo** of the day there too. With the afternoon waning, we drove up into the *Blue Mountains*, where we were based at a mountain chalet in coffee country for four nights. We made a first try for Jamaican Owl that night in blustery conditions, to no avail, and so we vowed to give it a longer try the next night.



Black-billed and Yellow-billed Parrots were both seen at *Hope Botanical Gardens* in the heart of Jamaica's capital, *Kingston*, during our first day's birding, before we headed up into the *Blue Mountains* for an extended stay (*Sam Woods*).

Day 2: 7th December 2023 – The Blue Mountains (Silver Hill Gap, Greenwich & Section).

The first day in the *Blue Mountains* of *Jamaica* is always a heady one, as endemic birds come thick and fast, as many of them are relatively easy to find. We started our birding right on the doorstep of our mountain chalet, with a pre-breakfast hour's walk, before a 7:30am brekky at the lodge. A number of birds were buzzing around the walls of the chalet, picking off insects that had come in overnight, notably FOUR species of *flycatcher*, *Jamaican Pewee*, *Rufous-tailed Flycatcher* (known locally as "*Big Tom Fool*"), *Sad Flycatcher* ("*Little Tom Fool*"), and *Loggerhead Kingbird*, while *Red-billed Streamertails*, *Jamaica*'s national bird, buzzed around the flowers in the yard. An *Arrowhead Warbler* made it first appearance just yards from our rooms, as did our first *Ring-tailed Pigeons*. Walking the nearby road almost brought us a *big* early win, though a sneaky *Crested Quail-Dove* slipped away into the forest before most of us had seen it, unfortunately. However, better luck (and *Lyndon's* field skills) aided us in seeing arguably the toughest of the island endemics within our first few hours of birding, with a *Jamaican Blackbird* buried in a bromeliad near our hotel. A *Blue Mountain Vireo* and a sooty-black male *Jamaican Becard* also made their first appearances of the tour.

We also familiarised ourselves with some of Jamaica's most conspicuous endemics, Jamaican Woodpeckers, and the White-chinned Thrush, which was regularly seen hopping along the forest-lined mountain roads there, making it more than worthy of its amusing local name, "Hopping Dick". After a leisurely cooked breakfast, we visited the Greenwich area of the Blue Mountains, a little downhill from our lodging in Silver Hill Gap, and fixated on one very active tree that held a Greater Antillean Elaenia, a series of migrant warblers and some Greater Antillean Bullfinches. The neighbouring tree held a beautiful Rufous-throated Solitaire that had earned its name of "Mountain Whistler", with its haunting, atmospheric calls being a charming backdrop to our time in the Blue Mountains. We took lunch at the lodge, and a break after that, before birding around Silver Hill Gap and Section in the afternoon. We had some epic, photogenic Jamaican Spindalises (photo below) and Red-billed Streamertails (photos pages 2 & 9) in our hotel garden during this spell, and also saw our first magical Jamaican Tody there, undoubtedly one of Jamaica's must-see birds. However, a calling Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo frustrated us, and so we decided to try again early the next morning when it might prove more cooperative...



Jamaican Spindalises, Ring-tailed Pigeons, Red-billed Streamertails, Sad Flycatchers, Jamaican Todies, Orangequits, and Arrowhead Warblers were all found in the garden of our mountain chalet in the Blue Mountains (Sam Woods).



Red-billed Streamertail is Jamaica's national bird, and also one of the most abundant birds in the country. This one frequented the garden of our mountain chalet in the *Blue Mountains (Sam Woods*).

At night, before dinner, we made another attempt at finding Jamaica's only endemic owl, Jamaican Owl (photo below), finding it at our second stop, a short drive from the lodge. There, two birds called, and one individual was lit up by Lyndon for us to enjoy at length, a wonderful close to a landmark opening day within Jamaica's Blue Mountains.



This Jamaican Owl was seen near Section in the Blue Mountains (Sam Woods).

Day 3: 8th December 2023 – The Blue Mountains (Silver Hill Gap, Section & Woodside).

Having been exasperated by a calling **Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo** the evening before in the grounds of our chalet, we went straight about setting that record straight on this morning, when it was much more cooperative landing in some trees beside us. This, the larger of the two endemic cuckoo species we were seeking, is known in Jamaica as the "Old Man Bird", and we were still looking for its smaller cousin, the Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, which bears the local name "Old Woman Bird". Further along the road, close to our mountain chalet, we found our first **Caribbean Dove**, though were again thwarted in our attempts to track down *Crested Quail-Dove*, one of the trickiest of the 28 endemic species. We returned to the lodge on foot for a 7:30 breakfast and to connect with those who had chosen to opt out of our early morning walk. After breakfast, we drove downhill from *Silver Hill Gap*, to an area known as *Woodside* in the neighbouring parish of *St. Andrew*.

Here, the montane rainforest grows across the road creating a dark shaded area, which is good for Crested Quail-Dove (photo below), as they like to forage in dark areas, generally avoiding direct sunlight. However, our walk down this road did not initially produce this species, though more Greater Antillean Bullfinches were seen. Then, Lyndon spotted a quail-dove quietly sitting next to the road, where it stayed for the next five minutes and a round of photo-taking and celebrations! Back on the main road, birding near the town of Section, named as it lies at an intersection , we finally found a White-eyed Thrush ("Glass-eye" to locals), and a nice adult male Yellow-shouldered Grassquit (photo next page) before lunch.



The Crested Quail-Dove has perhaps the most interesting local name of any of Jamaica's endemic birds, being known as "Mountain Witch". This sorceress was photographed at Woodside in the Blue Mountains (Sam Woods).

In the afternoon, after a rest in the middle of the day when we took lunch prepared by our excellent chef and host *Harvey*, we checked an area if beautiful forest around the *Pad House* part of the Blue Mountains. There, we were rewarded with our main target, a **Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo**, the aforementioned "Old Woman Bird" that gave some stellar looks. Searches for *Vervain Hummingbird* around some mountain garden littered with flowers did not turn up that species, though did result in further sightings of **Red-billed Streamertails** and **Orangequits**.

We retired early and took an early dinner in readiness for our long day on the road tomorrow, as we were to visit Northern Jamaica and visit Portland parish in the hope of finding the final handful of endemics were missing.

Day 4: 9th December 2023 – Ecclesdown Road & Errol Flynn Marina (Port Antonio area).

We set off early from the Blue Mountains taking a winding road north out of the Blue Mountains, and drove to the Ecclesdown Road, a legendary birding site on the north coast of



Jamaica. Not long after turn onto this road a small gaggle of **Olive-throated Parakeets** was found sitting next to the road, and they were perfectly happy for us to get out and soak them up. This is an endemic *subspecies* on Jamaica, which some believe deserves full, endemic species status ("Jamaican Parakeet"). We had only brief glimpses of birds flying over calling in the *Blue Mountains*, and so were grateful for this considerable "upgrade". *Parrots* were a big feature of our time in northern Jamaica, as our third stop that morning produced perched views of both **Black-billed Parrots** and our only **Green-rumped Parrotlets** of the trip, plus close flight views of more **Yellow-billed Parrots** too. In between these parrots stops, we paused in an area of hibiscus flowers that attracted our first male **Black-billed Streamertails**, a Jamaican endemic that is confined to this northeast part of the country. Further exploration of the *John Crow Mountains* along the *Ecclesdown Road*, yielded the tiny **Vervain Hummingbird** (the second smallest bird on Earth, being only marginally smaller than Cuba's *Bee Hummingird*). At our furthest point along this narrow, meandering road we tracked down our 28th and final endemic bird species, with some vocal **Jamaican Crows** living up to their local name of "*Jabbering Crow*".

For lunch, we enjoyed an authentic meal of jerk chicken, pork and fish cooked on an open pit within the town of *Boston*, the "*Jerk Capital of Jamaica*", and where jerk originated from and was first commercially produced. Our traditionally prepared succulent jerk meals were accompanied with slices of bread fruit, "festival" (a delicious piece of soft-centred fried bread with a crispy, sausage-shaped coating), and sweet potatoes. Finally, after lunch, we visited *Errol Flynn Marina* (that actor used to live in the area) and scoured the mangroves and pink flowers for an endemic we had seen, though not well, Jamaican Mango (*photo next page*). Thankfully, the profusions of pink flowers in bloom attracted half a dozen or so birds and we were able to appreciate their bronzy plumage in good light finally, before we returned to the *Blue Mountains* for a final night. Everyone appreciated that the mountain chalet had been restocked with some local rum cake, a Caribbean specialty, which we washed down with ice cream.



All FOUR possible *hummingbird* species were seen during our final full day in the field, with this Jamaican Mango, plus **Black-billed** and **Red-billed Streamertails** and **Vervain Hummingbirds** all featuring (Sam Woods).

Day 5: 10th December 2023 – The Blue Mountains (Silver Hill Gap) to Kingston for DEPARTURES.

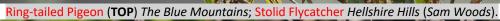
The group had afternoon flights out of *Kingston* Jamaica back to the US, and so there was very limited time to bird on our final day. We sneaked in an hour in the *Blue Mountains* around our lodge there before breakfast and then made a stop in *Kingston Harbour*, along the neck-like approach road to the airport at *Palisadoes*. We had nothing new to look for, and so enjoyed our last looks at birds like Sad Flycatchers and Black-throated Blue Warblers (*photos on next page*) hopping around the mountain chalet itself, while Red-billed Streamertail, Jamaican Oriole, and Loggerhead Kingbird foraged in the garden, along with Ring-tailed Pigeons and our final Jamaican Becard nearby. At *Palisadoes*, we found Royal and Sandwich Terns, a gliding Magnificent Frigatebird, and Ruddy Turnstone, before we connected to our flights out to Miami to end this short, though very productive tour that featured all of Jamaica's endemic birds. The airport provided us with ample opportunity to buy traditional Jamaican souvenirs of *jerk* spices, *Blue Mountain Coffee*, and virtually anything you want featuring *Bob Marley's* insignia!



Sad Flycatcher & Black-throated Blue Warbler hopped around our chalet shortly before we left the Blue Mountains (Sam Woods).











CHECKLIST:

The taxonomy of the bird list follows Clements, James F., White, Anthony W., and Fitzpatrick, John W. The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World. Cornell, 2007. This list is up to date with changes published by Cornell in October 2023.

(H) - INCIDATES A SPECIES THAT WAS HEARD ONLY. (GO) — INDICATES A SPECIES RECORDED BY THE GUIDE ONLY.

Jamaican Endemics are indicated in RED.

Pigeons and Doves: Columbidae

Rock Pigeon Columba livia

White-crowned Pigeon ("Bald Pate") Patagioenas leucocephala

Ring-tailed Pigeon ("Ring-tail") Patagioenas caribaea

Common Ground Dove *Columbina passerine*

Crested Quail-Dove ("Mountain Witch") Geotrygon versicolor

Caribbean Dove Leptotila jamaicensis White-winged Dove Zenaida asiatica Zenaida Dove ("Pea Dove") Zenaida aurita

Mourning Dove Zenaida macroura

Cuckoos: Cuculidae

Smooth-billed Ani ("Savannah Blackbird") Crotophaga ani

Mangrove Cuckoo Coccyzus minor

Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo ("Old Man Bird") Coccyzus pluvialis Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo ("Old Woman Bird") Coccyzus vetula

Potoos: Nyctibiidae

Northern Potoo Nyctibius jamaicensis

Swifts: Apodidae

White-collared Swift Streptoprocne zonaris Antillean Palm Swift Tachornis phoenicobia

Hummingbirds: Trochilidae

Jamaican Mango Anthracothorax mango

Vervain Hummingbird Mellisuga minima

Red-billed Streamertail ("Doctor Bird") Trochilus polytmus

Black-billed Streamertail Trochilus scitulus

Rails, Gallinules, and Coots: Rallidae

Common Gallinule Gallinula galeata

Stilts and Avocets: Recurvirostridae

Black-necked Stilt Himantopus mexicanus

Sandpipers and Allies: Scolopacidae

Spotted Sandpiper Actitis macularius

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers: Laridae

Laughing Gull Leucophaeus atricilla

Sandwich Tern Thalasseus sandvicensis

Royal Tern Thalasseus maximus

Frigatebirds: Fregatidae

Magnificent Frigatebird Fregata magnificens

Pelicans: Pelecanidae

Brown Pelican ("Old joe") *Pelecanus occidentalis*

Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns: Ardeidae

Least Bittern Ixobrychus exilis

Little Blue Heron Egretta caerulea

Tricolored Heron Egretta tricolor

Snowy Egret Egretta thula

Green Heron Butorides virescens

Western Cattle Egret Bubulcus ibis

Great Egret Ardea alba

Great Blue Heron Ardea herodias

Ibises and Spoonbills: Threskiornithidae

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

New World Vultures: Cathartidae

Turkey Vulture ("John Crow") Cathartes aura

Osprey: Pandionidae
Osprey Pandion haliaetus

Hawks, Eagles, and Kites: Accipitridae

Red-tailed Hawk Buteo jamaicensis

Owls: Strigidae

Jamaican Owl ("Brown Owl") Asio grammicus

Todies: Todidae

Jamaican Tody ("Robin Redbreast") Todus todus

Kingfishers: Alcedinidae

Belted Kingfisher Megaceryle alcyon

Woodpeckers: Picidae

Jamaican Woodpecker Melanerpes radiolatus

Falcons and Caracaras: Falconidae
American Kestrel Falco sparverius

New World and African Parrots: Psittacidae

Black-billed Parrot Amazona agilis

Yellow-billed Parrot Amazona collaria

Green-rumped Parrotlet Forpus passerinus

Olive-throated Parakeet Eupsittula nana

Tityras and Allies:Tityridae

Jamaican Becard Pachyramphus niger

Tyrant Flycatchers: Tyrannidae

Jamaican Elaenia ("Sarah Bird") Myiopagis cotta

Greater Antillean Elaenia Elaenia fallax

Jamaican Pewee ("Willie Pee") Contopus pallidus

Sad Flycatcher ("Little Tom Fool") Myiarchus barbirostris

Rufous-tailed Flycatcher ("Big Tom Fool") Myiarchus Validus

Stolid Flycatcher *Myiarchus stolidus*

Gray Kingbird Tyrannus dominicensis

Loggerhead Kingbird Tyrannus caudifasciatus

Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis: Vireonidae

Blue Mountain Vireo Vireo osburni

Jamaican Vireo Vireo modestus

Crows, Jays, and Magpies: Corvidae

Jamaican Crow ("Jabbering Crow") Corvus jamaicensis

Mockingbirds and Thrashers: Mimidae

Bahama Mockingbird Mimus qundlachii

Northern Mockingbird Mimus polyglottos

Thrushes and Allies: Turdidae

Rufous-throated Solitaire Myadestes genibarbis

White-eyed Thrush ("Glass Eye") Turdus jamaicensis

White-chinned Thrush ("Hopping Dick") Turdus aurantius

Weavers and Allies: Ploceidae

Yellow-crowned Bishop *Euplectes afer*

Finches, Euphonias, and Allies: Fringillidae

Jamaican Euphonia Euphonia Jamaica

Spindalises: Spindalidae

Jamaican Spindalis Spindalis nigricephala

Troupials and Allies: Icteridae

Jamaican Oriole ("Auntie Katie") Icterus leucopteryx

Jamaican Blackbird ("Wild Pine Sargeant") Nesopsar nigerrimus

Great-tailed Grackle Quiscalus mexicanus

Greater Antillean Grackle ("Kling Kling") Quiscalus niger

New World Warblers: Parulidae

Ovenbird Seiurus aurocapilla

Black-and-white Warbler Mniotilta varia

Common Yellowthroat Geothlypis trichas (H)

Arrowhead Warbler Setophaga pharetra

American Redstart Setophaga ruticilla

Cape May Warbler Setophaga tigrine

Northern Parula Setophaga americana

Yellow Warbler Setophaga petechia

Black-throated Blue Warbler Setophaga caerulescens

Palm Warbler Setophaga palmarum

Yellow-rumped Warbler Setophaga coronate

Yellow-throated Warbler Setophaga dominica

Prairie Warbler Setophaga discolor

Black-throated Green Warbler Setophaga virens

Tanagers and Allies: Thraupidae

Bananaquit Coereba flaveola

Yellow-faced Grassquit Tiaris olivaceus

Orangequit *Euneornis campestris*

Greater Antillean Bullfinch Melopyrrha violacea

Yellow-shouldered Grassquit Loxipasser anoxanthus

Black-faced Grassquit Melanospiza bicolor

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