

TORTOLA

ATLANTIC OCEAN

N

CARIBBEAN SEA

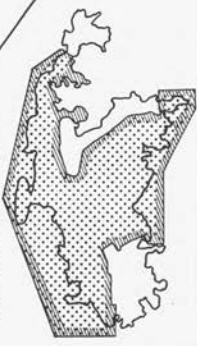
- paved road
- - - trail
- ★ campgrounds
- 🌿 mangrove

0 1/2 1 mile  
SCALE

VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK  
ST. JOHN

Map by W.O.G./D.E.L./J.L.H.

Shaded area is Virgin Islands National Park.



to St. Thomas



## BIRDING ON ST. JOHN, U. S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

by William O. Gette, Bedford

St. John, the smallest and least populated of the U. S. Virgin Islands, covers approximately twenty square miles. The feature that makes this island of particular interest to birders and nature enthusiasts is the Virgin Islands National Park, which covers over sixty percent of the island's land area. Due to the conservation efforts of the Park Service and St. John's residents, much of the island remains unspoiled tropical wilderness.

In April 1986, I had the opportunity to spend a family vacation on St. John. For eight days, we stayed at the Maho Bay Camps. The campground is located on the northern side of the island about six miles northeast of the town of Cruz Bay. Cruz Bay contains numerous shops, the ferry landing, and the Virgin Islands National Park Visitor Center.

For individuals who wish to camp so that they can be close to nature, Maho Bay Camps is absolutely fantastic. This campground provides tents erected on platforms, bedding, and a gas stove so that you can live in relative comfort. The tent platforms are connected together by a series of boardwalks leading to toilets and unheated showers, administration buildings, the dining hall, and the beach. The boardwalks are built slightly off the ground to protect the habitat from foot traffic and erosion. From these boardwalks, I was able to see numbers of Bananaquits, Pearly-eyed Thrashers, Gray Kingbirds, Antillean Crested Hummingbirds, Zenaida Doves, Scaly-naped Pigeons, Mangrove Cuckoos, and Black-faced Grassquits.



*Trunk Bay, St. John*

*Photo by David E. Lange*

I found the Maho Bay Camps an especially good base from which to make birding trips. First, the people who run the campground are genuinely interested in the beauty of their island and its natural history. Although the people at Maho are not necessarily birders, they are very willing to provide information about the island and directions to areas where they have seen concentrations of birds. This type of information can be especially helpful during the dry season when water levels recede in the freshwater ponds and the birds move to less accessible areas. It is helpful to show camp staff members pictures of the birds you want to see since most of the people know birds only by their local names, not by the names in the field guides.

A second reason for visiting Maho is the fact that the campground is only a fifteen-minute hike from Mary Point, an excellent birding area when there has been adequate rain. Mary Point is bounded on the west by Francis Bay and on the east by Leinster Bay. The Park Service maintains a 0.3 mile trail that leads from the public road, passes Mary Point Pond, and ends at a bathing area on Francis Bay. The Park Service often conducts bird walks to this area; check with the rangers at Cruz Bay for details. Despite the fact that St. John was in the middle of a dry spell and Mary Point Pond was nearly empty, my walks in this area were very productive. I was able to see Common Ground-Doves, Zenaida Doves, Black-Whiskered Vireos, Black-faced Grassquits, Smooth-billed Anis, Antillean Crested Hummingbirds, Little Blue Herons, Green-throated Caribs, plus the ever-



*Black Mangrove, Coral Bay, St. John*

*Photo by David E. Lange*

present Bananaquits and Pearly-eyed Thrashers. Northern Waterthrushes, Northern Parulas, Yellow Warblers, and Ruddy Turnstones were also present in good numbers.

The third reason for recommending Maho Bay is the fact that the camp provides convenient access to a wide variety of activities offering numerous opportunities for birding. These activities include both camp-sponsored events and programs conducted by the Park Service. One such event was an all-day snorkeling trip by power boat circumnavigating St. John. Besides the splendid snorkeling at four different locations, there was also adequate time to observe ocean birds. Although you can see Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Boobys, Royal Terns, and Brown Pelicans from many locations on the island, the boat trip offers the opportunity to see these birds in greater concentrations and at closer range. I observed the largest numbers of Brown Boobys on and around Lovango and Mingo cays. These two islands are located just off the northwest tip of St. John. Next to these two islands is Congo Cay, the reported nesting site for a small group of White-tailed Tropicbirds. The boat captain and manager of Maho Bay Camps, Bob Berner, made a special detour by Congo Cay at my request so that we could see these birds. Three tropicbirds flew off the cliffs and circled overhead. What a magnificent sight they were with their long tails streaming out behind!

Another very rewarding trip was a half-day sail in the waters around St. John, Jost van Dyke, and Tortola. On this trip, I saw eight Brown Noddys and relatively small numbers of Royal and Sandwich terns. From the park rangers I learned that the terns had just begun returning to St. John during the first and second weeks of April. Therefore, I did not see any sizable concentrations of terns.

The final camp-sponsored trip in which I participated was a tour of the island, emphasizing both its history and natural history. I feel that this tour is the best way to see the island for the first time. You can rent jeeps on St. John, but be careful! You must drive on the left, and the roads are extremely narrow, winding, and steep. The tour driver, Hamilton Eugene, does an excellent job telling about the island's history and folklore as well as pointing out much of its natural history. Hamilton was extremely helpful to me, pointing out the best birding spots and making detours on his route so that I could do some birding on my own.

The island tour began at the historic Annaberg Sugar Mill ruins on the north side of St. John. Just 0.2 mile west of the mill on Leinster Bay was an extensive mangrove swamp, which is best for birding during the rainy season. From Annaberg, we traveled east via Route 10 (Centerline Road) to the village of Coral Bay which is bordered by mud flats, mangrove swamps, and pasture land with the accompanying Cattle Egrets. Again, due to the dry conditions, birds were scarce; however, I was told that large concentrations of birds are often seen in this area. From Coral



*Magnificent Frigatebird*

*Photo by David E. Lange*

Bay we traveled south via Route 107 to the Saltpond Bay area at the extreme southeastern corner of St. John. Just 0.3 mile past the parking lot for Saltpond Bay is a large, unnamed freshwater pond. This pond proved to be a fruitful birding location. The highlights for me were eight White-cheeked Pintails, Wilson's Plovers, a Caribbean Elaenia, and Lesser Antillean Bullfinches. I also saw Common Ground-Doves, Zenaida Doves, Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers, a Northern Mockingbird, and several warbler species.

Besides being choice for swimming, the Saltpond Bay area also provides some fine habitat for birds. Salt Pond, located just behind the southern end of the beach, is a very good place for shorebirds and waterfowl. I saw several Wilson's Plovers (one pair had young) plus Semipalmated Plovers, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Ruddy Turnstones.

A Park Service tour, which I felt was very informative, was a ranger-guided hike down the Reef Bay Trail. The Reef Bay Trail is 2.5 miles long and follows an old Danish sugar-mill road. It begins at Route 10 (Centerline Road) and descends first through a shady, moist forest and then through a dry forest to Reef Bay on the southern part of the island. A small group of petroglyphs on a spur trail is well worth seeing. The park rangers do a superb job pointing out plants and animals and describing the history of the area. During my hike, I saw a Bridled Quail-Dove, Mangrove Cuckoos, Black-whiskered Vireos, Red-tailed Hawk, and numerous warblers. A real advantage of going on the ranger-guided tour is the fact that a boat picks you up when you reach Reef Bay and takes you back to Cruz Bay. If you take the hike on your own, you must walk back up the trail, a strenuous walk in hot weather.

There are other good birding spots that can be reached by regular island bus runs. Caneel Bay Plantation was the best location I found for seeing Green-throated Caribs. Throughout the island, I saw almost ten times as many Antillean Crested Hummingbirds as Green-throated Caribs; however, at Caneel I saw large numbers of both species. Also at Caneel Bay were numerous lesser Antillean Bullfinches. At Trunk Bay, site of the park's world-famous underwater snorkeling trail, I found the largest groups of Bridled Quail-Doves. In a small mangrove swamp across the road from the Maho Bay beach area, I saw Common Moorhens and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. The people at Maho refer to this beach as "Big Maho" and call the small beach at the camp "Little Maho." "Big" Maho Bay is a ten-minute hike from camp via the Goat Trail.

A trip to St. John is a wonderful experience! The Virgin Islands National Park makes it a very special place for nature lovers. The scenery, water sports, nature trails, and relative peace and quiet are delightful, and birding enhances the enjoyment. I highly recommend Maho Bay Camps, but there are other places to stay. Cinnamon Bay is a campground concession in the national park. If you wish to be fancy, look into Caneel Bay Plantation. The following addresses will be useful for further information.

Virgin Islands National Park P.O. Box 7789 Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas U.S. Virgin Islands, 00801	Maho Bay Camps, P.O. Box 310 Cruz Bay, St. John U.S. Virgin Islands 00830 800-392-9004
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OR

Virgin Islands Div. of Tourism 1270 Avenue of the Americas New York, NY 10020 212-582-4520	17-A East 73rd Street New York, NY 10021 212-472-9453
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Cinnamon Bay Campground, P.O. Box 720  
Cruz Bay, St. John  
U.S. Virgin Islands, 00830  
800-223-7637 or 800-442-8198 (NY)

#### Recommended bird books:

*Birds of the West Indies* by James Bond, Houghton Mifflin, 1980.  
*A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands* by Herbert A. Raffaele, Fondo Educativo Interamericano, San Juan, 1983. This guide contains maps for a number of birding locations on St. John, including Mary Point.

WILLAM O. GETTE is the manager of a computer products manufacturing and test facility for Honeywell in Billerica. Bill became interested in birding while working as a student assistant and boatman at the National Audubon Camp of Maine on Hog Island and is now an avid birder and field trip leader.

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#### BINOCULARS FOR SALE

Carl Zeiss-Jena, 10x50, multicoated, conventional binoculars.  
New condition: \$75. Phone 353-2955 (tape). Ned Mueller