

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON ST. JOHN

by David E. Lange, Arlington

During the summers of 1983 and 1984, I was fortunate to spend five weeks on St. John at Maho Bay Camps vacationing and teaching at two ecology workshops. I heartily agree with William Gette that St. John is a great place to vacation and learn about the Caribbean, and I offer the following additional information about the islands.

Additional species. The Park Service bird checklist lists 155 species occurring in the Virgin Islands National Park. Two of these, Puerto Rican Screech-Owl and Puerto Rican Flycatcher, are endemic to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican Screech-Owl is listed as extremely rare on St. John. (Because of its larger size and more diverse habitats, Puerto Rico supports an additional twelve endemic species.) One additional permanent resident is the Shiny (Glossy) Cowbird. I have seen a small flock of Shiny Cowbirds several times around Coral Bay. Another interesting species, the Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, apparently arrived on St. John via Hurricane Donna in 1960.

Hiking. Annaberg is a 1.3 mile hike from Maho Bay Camps, passing by the mangrove swamp along Leinster Bay. After visiting Annaberg, continue east along Leinster Bay following a dirt road for 0.7 mile to a mud flat. This mud flat may have water and thus attract waders. Birding is good all along this route from Maho. One additional hike I would recommend is to Ram Head, which is beyond Saltpond Bay. This hike (0.9 mile) is through the dry part of the island. The view is spectacular, but the hike is hot and dry, so take plenty of water.

Accommodations on St. John. Cinnamon Bay Campground is a concession in the National Park, whereas Maho Bay Camps are privately owned. Three types of accommodations are available at Cinnamon Bay: small cottages, tents on wooden platforms, and bare tent sites. Maho Bay has tents on wooden platforms. There is no running water except in the bath houses, and the water is not heated for showers but comes out of the tap tepid. Fresh water is precious on St. John and must be conserved; one is asked to take only one shower per day. The Cinnamon Bay cottages have electric lights as do the tents at Maho Bay. Cinnamon Bay Campground is at beach level, whereas Maho Bay Camps are located on a steep hillside with many steps to reach the beach, the dining hall, or your tent. The big advantage of being on a hill is that most of the tent sites have an excellent outlook, and the pavilion has a beautiful panoramic view. Cinnamon Bay has a cafeteria with breakfast, lunch, and dinner available. Maho Bay has a dining hall that serves only breakfast and dinner. Two entrees are offered for dinner. Buy your dinner ticket in the morning as they usually sell out before dinner time. Propane stoves are available at each site at

Cinnamon and Maho except for the bare tent sites at Cinnamon. More information can be found in their respective brochures. Reservations are recommended and are a must from December through April.

A few rental units can be found elsewhere on St. John. Check with a travel agent or the Division of Tourism.

Seasonal variations. The Gettes visited St. John in the spring, and I have been there in both the spring and summer. I have found the summer very pleasant as it is off-season. The average monthly temperature difference between January and July is about six degrees. The number of species of birds is less in the summer when the winter residents and migrants are gone, but most of the specialty species are permanent residents, and some, like the Antillean Nighthawk, do not arrive until late May. Late summer and fall are the wetter times of the year, but rain may occur in any season. Rain usually occurs as brief showers, often at night. Wet weather brings out the insects, and one should remember to bring along insect repellent. Mosquitoes and sand flies are the problem, and Muskol is recommended by Maho Bay Camps. A pair of long pants and socks at dinner time help protect against insects.

Snorkeling. Snorkeling St. John's waters is superb, and one can snorkel right at Maho or Cinnamon bays. Of special interest are sea turtles; the Green and the Hawksbill are frequently seen in Maho and Francis bays. A motorboat or sailboat trip offers a way to get to the best snorkeling spots. A late afternoon snorkel is a good means of cooling off.

Bookstores. The park service visitor's center in Cruz Bay offers the only real selection of natural history books on St. John. A few fish guides and local books are available at many places including the commissaries at Cinnamon and Maho. Bookstores on St. Thomas are few, and it is best to buy your field guides before you leave.

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