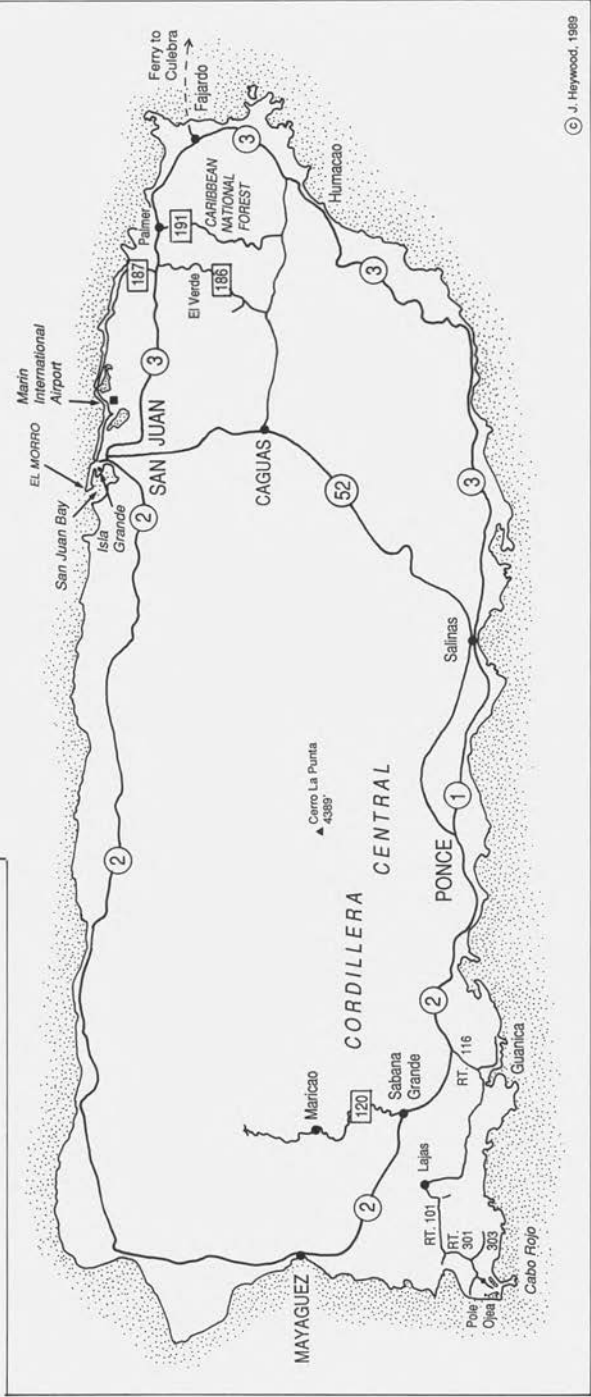
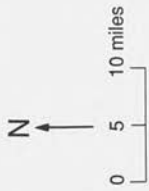




PUERTO RICO



BIRDWATCHING IN PUERTO RICO

by Brian E. Cassie

Puerto Rico offers a lot to the birdwatcher: it has a goodly number of West Indian endemics; its area is small; transportation and lodging are easily arranged; and the climate is ideal. In addition, since Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States, a U. S. citizen does not need a passport.

Puerto Rico lies at the northern end of the West Indies and is part of the island group known as the Greater Antilles. Of the four Greater Antillean islands, which include Cuba, Jamaica, and Hispaniola, Puerto Rico is the smallest, comprising 3435 square miles (less than half the area of Massachusetts). Maximum elevation is obtained in central part of the island, where Cerro La Punta rises to 4389 feet.

In Puerto Rico birdwatchers will likely concentrate most of their efforts on seeing the Antillean species, especially the Puerto Rican endemics. I have included five areas in this account which, when worked for about a day each, should yield most or all of the island's specialties. The information provided is based mostly on field work in January 1987 and February-March 1988.

San Juan and vicinity. The starting point for any trip to Puerto Rico is the Marin International Airport, which lies just to the east of San Juan. Greater Antillean Grackles are common here, as on most of the island, but there is little need to linger at the airport grounds. Take Route 26 west through the downtown area, and follow signs for Old San Juan, a historic district at the northern end of San Juan Bay. Most famous of the many landmarks of Old San Juan is the fortress of El Morro, which guards the entrance to the bay. From El Morro one can often see Brown Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, and Royal and Sandwich terns. White-tailed Tropicbirds were numerous in February but absent in January. After a walking tour of the area, travel back toward San Juan. Watch for signs for "Santurce" as you approach the bridge that crosses into San Juan, and follow them. Just across the bridge, follow the sign to the Isla Grande Airport. Pass the airport entrance, and turn at the next road to the right. This leads to the entrance to the Isla Grande Naval Reserve. This area is open to the public and comprises many acres of ball fields, lawns, government buildings, and parking lots. It serves as a sort of manicured oasis in the midst of an intensely developed capital district.

Isla Grande has two main drawing points for the birdwatcher. The first is its attractiveness to exotic birds. Puerto Rico has numerous introduced species, many more than the other Antillean islands. In a couple of hours walking the grounds, it is possible to see numbers of Saffron Finches, Singing Green Finches, Pin-tailed Whydahs, Orange-cheeked Waxbills, Warbling Silverbills,

Bronze Mannikins, and Java Finches. All of these are well established on the island. Monk Parakeets are common, and Orange-fronted and Canary-winged parakeets should be looked for. Of course, seeing a few native bird species would be welcome to the visiting birder. Mangrove Cuckoo, Smooth-billed Ani, Zenaida Dove, Gray Kingbird, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, Red-legged Thrush, Bananaquit, Black-whiskered Vireo (arrives in February), Glossy Cowbird, Stripe-headed Tanager, and Black-faced Grassquit, among others, occur here, especially in the trees along the south side of the complex. The second feature of Isla Grande of ornithological interest is its geographical position: some of the best sandbars in San Juan Bay lie just to the southwest within scoping distance from shore. Gulls are a scarce commodity in Puerto Rico, but on one February day the sandbars had Laughing, Herring, Great Black-backed, and Lesser Black-backed gulls, the latter two species supposedly vagrants to the island. If more adequately investigated, this spot would doubtless provide many interesting regional records of shorebirds, gulls, and terns.

Caribbean National Forest. Twenty-five miles southeast of San Juan are the 28,000 acres of the only tropical forest of the national forest system of the United States. This area is also known as the Luquillo National Forest (for its range, the Luquillo Mountains) and El Yunque (for the high peak near the recreation area). To reach the forest from San Juan, travel east along Route 3, the main highway, or, better, take the small coastal road, Route 187, along which Monk Parakeets nest in coconut palms. Route 187 emerges at Route 3 just south of the little town of Rio Grande.

There are two approaches to the forest. The first is Route 191, which passes through Palmer and winds up into the mountains for about six miles. Near the upper reaches of the road, there are several parking areas and fine panoramic overlooks of the forest and northeast coast. A small visitor center and restaurant are nearby. At least ninety-eight percent of the tourist traffic in the forest restricts itself to this road, and although the area is heavily forested and supports most of the Puerto Rican specialties, a birder's time is better spent in quieter surroundings. Route 186, approximately three and a half miles west of Route 191 also runs south from Route 3 and ascends into the area known as El Verde. Six miles from the highway Parador El Verde is located in a clearing on the right. This lodging is truly rustic but an excellent base for exploring the forest. The grounds of Parador El Verde are small but lush, and here and along the roadside for two miles downhill, such birds as Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Scaly-naped Pigeon, Ruddy Quail-Dove, Puerto Rican Emerald, Puerto Rican Tody, Red-legged Thrush, Black-whiskered Vireo, Puerto Rican Tanager, and Puerto Rican Bullfinch are common. A wide trail leading into the forest two hundred feet downhill and cross the road from Parador El Verde is an excellent spot for all of the aforementioned birds,

especially Ruddy Quail-Dove, and passes through the territory of a pair of Puerto Rican Parrots, one of the world's rarest birds. If you plan to stay overnight at the parador, bring along a tape of the Puerto Rican Screech-Owl. Loss of appropriate habitat has threatened this spectacular little owl, but at El Verde it is common and readily responds to a recording. (Note that tape recordings are not necessary for diurnal species.)

Culebra. Twenty minutes east of the forest along Route 3 is the town of Fajardo, jumping-off point for the ferry ride to Culebra, seventeen miles offshore. The birdlife of Culebra and its associated cays has been well documented in two articles by Robinson (1986) and the Keplers (1978). In short, this is the best seabird area in Puerto Rico, with breeding Audubon's Shearwaters, Red-billed and White-tailed tropicbirds, and Brown Boobies, as well as Red-footed and Masked boobies in small numbers, and Roseate, Bridled, Sooty, Royal, Sandwich, and Brown Noddy terns. On a late February trip our group saw numerous Brown Boobies on the crossing and small numbers of both of the tropicbirds from shore at Culebra. Visiting later in the year would ensure looks at the pelagic terns. The road system on Culebra is not extensive but leads to all the good bird habitat. Take a bus out to Flamenco Beach, where seabirds and sea turtles are visible from shore. We saw both tropicbirds and Green, Hawksbill, and Loggerhead turtles. Check ponds for White-cheeked Pintail and Least Grebe, mangroves for rails, and any flowering plant for Green-throated Caribs and Antillean Crested Hummingbirds, both of which are common here. Scaly-naped Pigeons, arboreal pigeons, typically difficult to see in the Caribbean National Forest, sit on telephone wires on Culebra. The round-trip to Culebra may be made in a day, though the island deserves a bit more time.

Southwestern Lowlands. Southwestern Puerto Rico, in the rain shadow of the Cordillera Central, presents an entirely different countryside from most of the rest of the island. Open farmland predominates, and various cacti are common. The autopista, or turnpike, gets one from San Juan to the southwest in a couple of hours. Alternatively for those with more time, Route 3 continues around the eastern and southern coasts, ending at Ponce. This route runs past cane fields (good for exotic finches, including Red-eared Waxbill and Black-headed Nun), over coastal hills, and along some fine shell beaches. The best spot for birds is a large lagoon along the highway just north of Humacao. Caribbean Coot, White-cheeked Pintail, and other waterfowl are possible here. Half an hour west of Ponce on Route 2, turn south onto Route 116 toward Guanica. Before reaching town, watch for Route 333 on the left. This leads to a series of beaches and the southern edge of the Guanica Forest Reserve. The "forest" is mainly acacia with cactus undergrowth, a good place to watch where you are walking!

An acceptable place to base at Guanica is the Hotel Copamarina, right on the beach along Route 333. The Puerto Rican Whip-poor-will is common on the north side of the road and calls most often just before dawn and just after dusk. Check out the mangrove pool adjacent to the hotel grounds early in the morning. It is often swarming with birds, including Black-necked Stilts, Stilt Sandpipers, and various other shorebirds and herons. Adelaide's Warblers are easily observed here, and the Antillean Mango and Mangrove Cuckoo are reasonably common. The main road dead-ends a few miles to the east, passing through good habitat for Caribbean Elaenia, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, and Troupial. Visitors who are here between May and August may see an uncommon summer resident and breeding bird, the Antillean Nightjar. The Puerto Rican Tody, which usually becomes everybody's favorite island bird, is common here and much easier to see than in the rain forest. In early March we saw a Plain Pigeon at the parking lot at the end of the road, a very unusual sighting for this area. Very small numbers of this species survive in Puerto Rico. If time allows, take a launch out to nearby Gilligan's Island (no kidding), where the snorkeling is great.

Other good birdwatching localities are fairly nearby. An hour's drive west of Guanica is the sweeping headland known as Cabo Rojo. To reach it, drive west from Guanica on Route 116, and at Lajas, turn onto Route 101, continuing to Route 301. Turn south, and follow Route 301 toward Cabo Rojo, also signposted as "El Faro." At Pole Ojea check the series of diked impoundments at the north end of the lagoon for shorebirds, herons, and waterfowl. Continue south to Cabo Rojo (do not turn toward El Combate). The salinas, or saltworks, just before the cliffs at Cabo Rojo are said to be great for birds. I have never seen much here, but shorebirds, including Wilson's and Snowy plovers, do occur. Brown Pelicans and one or two Brown Boobies may be expected at the cliffs. Try to be in this area in late afternoon, for this is the time to see the endemic Yellow-shouldered Blackbird. The most productive site is in the mangroves east of Cabo Rojo. Drive north on Route 301 to Route 303, turn east, and go 2.1 miles until the pavement ends at a crossroads. Turn right here, and drive an additional 2.1 miles over a hard-packed, single-lane road to its end. There is a parking area here. The blackbirds are most easily observed as they fly across the channel with numerous grackles and cowbirds in the late afternoon. Do not arrive at dusk; that is too late.

Maricao. North of Guanica and east of Mayaguez, in the hill country typical of much of western Puerto Rico, is the town of Maricao. The paradox Hacienda Juanita, a charming establishment just west of town, is the logical choice for a headquarters. To reach the area, drive north on Route 120 through Sabana Grande and twelve miles beyond, up a winding, climbing road toward Maricao. At a T intersection, turn left, and drive a couple of minutes to

Hacienda Juanita. The grounds of the parador and the adjacent hillsides (visible from the road) have some interesting bird species such as Puerto Rican Screech-Owl, Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Puerto Rican Emerald, Green Mango, Puerto Rican Tody, Loggerhead Kingbird, Puerto Rican Flycatcher, Red-legged Thrush, Black-cowled Oriole, Blue-hooded Euphonia, Stripe-headed Tanager, Puerto Rican Tanager, and Puerto Rican Bullfinch.

Another good place to see birds is the fish hatchery. Follow the main road to town. As you approach the near edge of town, look for a sign on the right for "Los Viveros," the fish hatchery. Turn right here, and drive a short distance to the hatchery at the road's end. The Lesser Antillean Pewee is regular here. Walk up the streambed behind the fish pools, and look carefully for Puerto Rican Vireo and Elfin Woods Warbler. The warbler is best known and indeed is named for its association with the elfin woods high in the Caribbean National Forest. However, the bird also occurs here in western Puerto Rico and is easier to see here than along the narrow muddy trails of El Yunque. The Elfin Woods Warbler is very active, moving continuously, though not very rapidly, through the tree foliage. I have often seen the birds in pairs. The woods along Route 120 downhill from Maricao are quite dry and not towering and provide good habitat for the warbler and many other endemics. A couple of miles down there is a short side road to the right leading to a few buildings and picnic tables. This is a good spot for the warbler.

If you have time, visit Mayaguez, where there is an interesting zoo. Hispaniolan Parakeets occur in the vicinity.

Notes on Puerto Rico's Fourteen Endemic Species.

Puerto Rican Screech-Owl. Easy to find at Parador El Verde and Hacienda Juanita.

Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo. Exhibits the cuckoo-like trait of being much easier to hear than see. With patience or luck, you should get good looks at this magnificent bird.

Puerto Rican Woodpecker. Many in the Caribbean National Forest but easier to see at Maricao.

Puerto Rican Parrot. A very small number survive in the Caribbean National Forest. Try the trail across from Parador El Verde or the visitor center early or late in the day. Do not harass birds near a nest site. Another good place to find this bird is along Route 191, in the vicinity of the restaurant in the Caribbean National Forest.

Puerto Rican Whip-poor-will. Common at Guanica. Take a flashlight along.

Puerto Rican Emerald. Easiest to see at Maricao, but common in the Caribbean National Forest.

Green Mango. Common in the Maricao area.

Puerto Rican Tody. Occurs throughout in rain forest, dry forest, scrub, and mangroves. Hardest to see in rain forest. Spectacular bird.

CHECKLIST OF PUERTO RICAN BIRDS

The following list is printed here as a convenience for birders using this where-to-go article when they visit these areas. It is not intended to be a complete compilation of Puerto Rican birds. A few birds appear on the list without any checkmarks, which indicates that the author saw them elsewhere in Puerto Rico but did not happen to find them in any of the five locations mentioned here.

*A = San Juan and Vicinity, including
Isla Verde and Isla Grande airports
B = Caribbean National Forest*

*C = Culebra
D = Guanica area, including Cabo Rojo
E = Maricao area*

	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	x					Yellow-billed Cuckoo		x		x	x
Least Grebe			x			Mangrove Cuckoo	x		x		
White-tailed Tropicbird	x	x				Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo		x		x	x
Red-billed Tropicbird		x				Smooth-billed Ani	x	x	x	x	x
Brown Booby	x	x	x			Puerto Rican Screech-Owl		x		x	x
Brown Pelican	x	x	x			Chuck-will's-widow		x			
Magnificent Frigatebird	x	x	x			Antillean Nightjar	x			x	
Great Blue Heron	x	x	x			Puerto Rican Whip-poor-will				x	x
Great Egret	x		x			Puerto Rican Emerald		x			x
Snowy Egret		x	x			Antillean Mango				x	
Little Blue Heron		x	x	x		Green Mango					x
Tricolored Heron	x		x			Green-throated Carib	x		x		
Cattle Egret	x	x	x	x		Antillean Crested Hummingbird		x		x	
Green-backed Heron				x		Puerto Rican Tody		x		x	x
Black-crowned Night-Heron	x	x				Belted Kingfisher		x		x	x
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron		x	x			Black-headed Nunbird					
American Flamingo			x			Puerto Rican Woodpecker		x			x
White-cheeked Pintail		x	x			Gray Kingbird		x	x	x	x
Blue-winged Teal			x			Loggerhead Kingbird					x
Ruddy Duck						Puerto Rican Flycatcher					x
Turkey Vulture	x	x	x	x		Lesser Antillean Pewee					x
Osprey	x		x			Caribbean Elaenia		x		x	x
Sharp-shinned Hawk (endemic resident subspecies)		x				Barn Swallow		x		x	
Broad-winged Hawk		x				Cave Swallow		x		x	x
Red-tailed Hawk	x	x	x	x	x	Caribbean Martin			x	x	
American Kestrel		x	x	x	x	Red-legged Thrush		x	x		x
Merlin	x	x		x		Northern Mockingbird		x		x	x
Helmeted Guineafowl			x			Pearly-eyed Thrasher		x	x	x	x
Clapper Rail			x	x		Puerto Rican Vireo					x
Sora			x			Black-whiskered Vireo		x	x	x	x
Common Moorhen			x			Yellow-throated Vireo		x			
Caribbean Coot			x			Golden-winged Warbler		x			
Black-bellied Plover	x	x	x			Northern Parula		x	x	x	x
Wilson's Plover		x	x			Yellow Warbler		x		x	x
Semipalmated Plover			x			Magnolia Warbler					
Killdeer	x	x	x			Cape May Warbler					x
Black-necked Stilt	x	x	x			Black-throated Blue Warbler		x	x		x
Greater Yellowlegs	x	x	x			Yellow-rumped Warbler		x			
Lesser Yellowlegs		x	x			Elfin Woods Warbler			x		x
Willet			x			Adelaide's Warbler				x	x
Spotted Sandpiper	x	x	x			Yellow-throated Warbler					x
Whimbrel		x				Prairie Warbler		x	x		x
Ruddy Turnstone			x			Palm Warbler		x			x
Sanderling			x			Black-and-white Warbler		x			x
Semipalmated Sandpiper			x			American Redstart		x	x	x	x
Western Sandpiper			x			Prothonotary Warbler					x
Least Sandpiper			x			Ovenbird		x			
Stilt Sandpiper			x			Northern Waterthrush		x		x	x
Short-billed Dowitcher			x			Louisiana Waterthrush		x			x
Common Snipe						Bananaquit		x	x	x	x
Laughing Gull	x		x			Blue-hooded Euphonia		x			x
Herring Gull	x					Stripe-headed Tanager		x			x
Lesser Black-backed Gull	x					Puerto Rican Tanager		x			
Great Black-backed Gull	x					Saffron Finch		x			
Royal Tern	x		x			Yellow-faced Grassquit		x	x	x	x
Sandwich Tern	x					Black-faced Grassquit		x	x	x	x
Roseate Tern		x				Puerto Rican Bullfinch		x			x
Common Tern	x					Troupial					x
Rock Dove	x	x	x	x	x	Black-cowled Oriole		x		x	x
Scaly-naped Pigeon		x	x			Yellow-shouldered Blackbird					x
White-crowned Pigeon						Greater Antillean Grackle		x	x	x	x
Plain Pigeon				x		Glossy (Shiny) Cowbird		x		x	x
White-winged Dove	x	x	x			Green Singing Finch		x			
Zenaida Dove	x	x	x			(Yellow-fronted Canary)					
Mourning Dove		x				Orange-cheeked Waxbill		x			
Common Ground-Dove	x	x	x	x		Red-eared Waxbill					
Ruddy Quail-Dove		x				(Black-rumped Waxbill)					
Monk Parakeet	x					Silverbill		x			x
Canary-winged Parakeet	x					(White-throated Munia)					
Red-crowned Parrot						Bronze Mannikin		x			x
Yellow-headed Parrot	x					Spice Finch					x
Orange-fronted Parakeet	x					(Spotted Munia)					
Hispaniolan Parakeet						Java Finch		x			
Puerto Rican Parrot		x				Red Bishop		x			
						Pin-tailed Whydah		x			

Puerto Rican Flycatcher. Not common but occurs at Maricao.

Puerto Rican Vireo. Same status as above.

Elfin Woods Warbler. The trails in the Caribbean National Forest are slick, but the birds can often be seen close at hand here. Your best bet is the Maricao area, where this species can often be found along the road in low trees.

Yellow-shouldered Blackbird. Difficult to find except at roost site.

Puerto Rican Tanager. Very common in the hills, both east and west.

Puerto Rican Bullfinch. Common in hilly woodland. The loud "boink-boink-boink" call is distinctive.

Useful Information.

Books. Raffaele's *A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands* has been out of print for two years but is scheduled for reprinting by Princeton University Press in the summer of 1989.

Maps. Good road maps are available on the island. *Hildebrand's TravelMap: Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, St. Croix* is available in U. S. map stores.

Tourist Information. Write to the Tourism Company of Puerto Rico, Box 4435, Old San Juan Station, San Juan, Puerto Rico 00905. The monthly magazine *Que Pasa?* is sent free of charge. Ask for information on the paradors.

References

Bond, J. 1985. *Birds of the West Indies*, fourth edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Kepler, C., and A. Kepler. 1978. "The Seabirds of Culebra and its Adjacent Islands, Puerto Rico," *Living Bird* 16: 21-50.

Raffaele, H. 1983. *A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Robinson, K. 1986. "Culebra National Wildlife Refuge, P. R.," *American Birds* 140/2: 217-223.

BRIAN E. CASSIE runs a natural history tour and book business in Foxborough, where he lives with wife Sarah Jane and children George, Jane, and Alexander. He has led tour groups of one to thirty-three persons to California, Arizona, Texas, the East Coast, Eastern Canada, Churchill, Trinidad and Tobago, Puerto Rico, Southern Mexico, the Yucatan, Costa Rica, and Australia. Brian would like to thank Bruce A. Sorrie for reading a draft of this article and for making helpful suggestions, including several additions to the checklist.

BIRD WATCHER'S GENERAL STORE

"Cape Cod's Shop for Bird Lovers"



FEATURING: The Amazing "AVIARIUM" Birdfeeder
that brings birds right into your own home. The feeder is made of mirrored plexi-glass that allows you to watch the birds for hours, but they cannot see you.

COME SEE IT IN ACTION!

Other Bird Lover Items Include:

- Bird Mugs
- Bird Pillows
- Bird Tiles
- Bird Silkscreens
- Bird Thermometers
- Bird Towels
- Bird Placemats
- Bird Sun Catchers
- Bird Mobiles
- Bird Slates
- Bird Clocks
- Bird Wallets
- Bird Prints
- Bird Notecards
- Bird Switchplates
- Bird Stamps
- Bird Coat Racks
- Bird T-Shirts
- Bird Photos
- Bird Carving Kits
- Bird Key Chains
- Bird Jewelry
- Bird Recordings
- Bird Calls
- Bird Door Knockers
- Bird Baths
- Bird Paintings
- Bird Houses
- Bird Giftwrap
- Bird Posters
- Bird Calendars
- Bird Books
- Bird Field Guides
- Bird Glasses
- Bird Bath Heaters
- Bird Fountains
- Bird Telephone
- Bird Floor Mats
- Bird Bookmarks
- Bird Pot Holders

Complete line of Binoculars, spotting scopes and tripods.

PLUS over 50 different types of bird feeders including Bluejay and Squirrel-proof feeders that work, GUARANTEED. Plus ten different types of Bird Seed.

GIFT CERTIFICATES & U.P.S. SHIPPING.

BIRD WATCHER'S GENERAL STORE

255-6974

37 Route 6A, Orleans (Across from Lobster Claw)

OPEN YEAR ROUND