

From Montego Bay to Bath...

JAMAICA IS BIRDS BIRDS BIRDS

JAMAICA IS a take-your-breath-away, solar-heated island with coast-to-coast natural riches. It has prolific vegetation with 3000-plus species of flowering plants, more than 575 species of ferns and 200 types of orchids, tropical montane and elfin forests, exotic tropical rivers, mangrove swamps, waterfalls, gorges, caves, cliffs, soft warm beaches, coral reefs, butterflies, fireflies, starfishes, sea urchins, parrotfish, sea turtles, marine

mammals, amphibians, insects, reptiles, limpets, conches, spiny lobsters, sponges, and barnacles. Everywhere a visitor is surrounded by beauty.

But most of all Jamaica has birds—more endemic bird species than on any other Caribbean island. Twenty-five species and twenty-one subspecies are found here and nowhere else. Of the 250 plus species found on Jamaica, more than 110 breed; the rest are migrants, rare winter visitors, or vagrants and include a fine variety of Greater Antillean species.

The island can be very well-birded in six to eight days and, depending upon your level of activity and perseverance, you should be able to tally 100–150 species including 22–25 endemic species and 18–21 endemic subspecies. If you bird actively in the

cool of the mornings and late afternoons, you'll have time to explore some of the inshore coral reefs in the heat of the afternoon when bird activity is very slow. Be sure to take your snorkel and mask.

The ideal time to bird the island is during April. Summer resident birds have already arrived. This is the peak of the local breeding season and most species are singing. Interesting territorial and nesting behavior abounds. Flowering trees are in bloom toward the end of this month. Many winter migrants have molted into breeding plumage and northward migration is underway. Almost all winter migrants leave the island by the first week in May.

Flights from the states land in either Montego Bay or Kingston so these

are the two most practical places to start covering the island. The route described here can be run in either direction.

FROM MONTEGO BAY

Before heading west out Route A1 along the Caribbean, you might want to drive down to Anchovy in the hills outside Montego Bay, along Route B8, to witness what has become a Jamaican institution. **Rocklands** is a private bird-feeding station owned and operated by Miss Lisa Salmon, a woman in her eighties. She has studied the birdlife of her ruinate woodlands for decades. Every afternoon from 3 to 5 p.m., wild Red-billed Streamertails, Jamaican Mangoes, Black-faced Grassquits, Saffron Finches, and Jamaican Woodpeckers come to be hand-fed while Caribbean and Common Ground-Doves wander around underfoot. Tourists, photographers, and birders sit on her veranda to watch or participate. Most people are pretty thrilled to have streamertails perch on their fingers to feed from tiny bottles of sugarwater.

If you decide to go to Rocklands, be sure to bird the woods below the house. Jamaican Becards nest within easy hiking distance and in the late afternoon you'll find Chestnut-bellied Cuckoos, Jamaican and White-eyed vireos, along with several North American migrants.

Proceed out the north coast road, Route A1, and plan to stay for a couple of days in the **Falmouth/Duncans** area. This is a good base location from which several excellent areas can be birded.

Go early one morning south from Falmouth to Good Hope. Birders gain access to **Good Hope Plantation** by calling ahead and making prior arrangements. Good Hope is an eighteenth-century sugar plantation and the old greathouse is both a private residence and luxury hotel.

Birding here is easy, pleasant, and rewarding with the endemics (about 20) less shy than in most other places.



Good Hope Plantation is brimming with wet limestone-loving species, including the Jamaican Tody, above. Photograph by Y.J. Rey-Millet. Miss Lisa Salmon, shown at left, runs Rocklands, a private bird-feeding station located in the hills outside Montego Bay. She has studied the birdlife of her ruinate woodlands for decades. John L. Tveten, photographer.

What a first-rate treat to stand at the top of the plantation drive and listen to the loudly jabbering, jamming, gobbling Jamaican Crows. Many other wet limestone-loving species can be found on Good Hope including the Jamaican Tody, flycatchers,

thrushes, Jamaican Woodpecker, Loggerhead Kingbird, and Stripe-headed Tanager.

COCKPIT COUNTRY

The wet, hilly, forested, limestone region in the northwestern part of the island is known as the "cockpit country." This area offers wonderful birding all along the roadsides traversing it. From Duncans, take Route B10 south. From Clark's Town to Albert Town bird as much as possible. This is a premier area in which to find endemics that are very difficult to spot elsewhere. This is where to find Black-billed and Yellow-billed parrots, Ja-

maican Elaenia, Blue Mountain Vireo, Stripe-headed Tanager, and Jamaican Crow. You may be lucky enough to see Olive-throated Parakeets in flight. Try to learn all of the various White-eyed Vireo songs and while you're at it look for one of the many Jamaican Tody nests in the banks along the road. If you're lucky you may spot a Jamaican Blackbird while walking.

The road is wonderful to walk in the cool of the morning. If you plan to drive, it is best tackled with a four-wheel drive vehicle. Take water: It gets very hot as the day wears on. Your bird list will doubtless soar if you can afford to spend two mornings birding the length of this road.

MANDEVILLE

Marshall's Pen, a 300-acre cattle farm and marvelous bird sanctuary, is located about three miles outside of Mandeville, at an elevation of 2000 feet. It has a delightful climate with warm days and cool nights. In the

JAMAICA



JAMAICA BASICS

POPULATION:

Estimated 2.3 million

CAPITAL:

Kingston,

population greater than 800,000

HIGHEST POINT:

Blue Mountain Peak, 7402 feet

SIZE:

At its longest, 144 miles;
at its widest, 52 miles

CURRENCY:

Jamaica dollar, currently about
J\$8 = about US\$1*

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:

English, though often patois

BANK HOURS:

Monday to Thursday 9 to 2,
extended hours on Friday

TIME ZONE:

Eastern Standard all year round

HIGH TOURIST SEASON:

December to April

AREA CODE:

809

POSTAL PROTOCOL:

Write Jamaica, WEST INDIES
on all correspondence.

JAMAICAN TOURIST BOARD:

1-800-JAMAICA

UNEXPECTED EXTRAS:

Departure Tax: J\$80, or US\$12
Room Tax: \$4 to \$12

* Prices quoted here refer to US\$

woods, gardens, and pastures many of the country's specialty birds can be seen and heard. This is an excellent place to add Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Jamaican Owl, Jamaican Potoo, Jamaican Mango, Jamaican Elaenia, Sad Flycatcher, Jamaican Becard, White-eyed Thrush, Jamaican Vireo, Arrow-headed Warbler, Orangequit, Jamaican Euphonia, Stripe-headed Tanager, Yellow-shouldered Grassquit, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Jamaican Oriole to your list. These are only a few of the birds that occur here, but a morning or two birding the property can be very exciting. Many of the island's endemic butterflies, fireflies, reptiles, amphibians, ferns, and trees can also be found here.

Birders are welcome at Marshall's Pen (Telephone: 962-2260. Address: Robert L. Sutton, Marshall's Pen, P.O. Box 58, Mandeville, Jamaica) but only through prior arrangement with the Sutton family, proprietors. Robert Sutton is a leading Jamaican ornithologist and co-author of the indispensable aid *Birds of Jamaica: A Photographic Field Guide*. A very small fee is charged to walk the property

roads and paths. The best times to bird here are between 6 and 9 a.m. and 4 and 6 p.m. If you wish to stay right on the farm, comfortable and fully furnished two- and three-bedroom apartments (with kitchens) are available at a cost of about \$20 per person per night. This is an excellent place for a small birding group to stay. Birds will be right outside your door and at night you will be lulled to sleep by a chorus of whistling frogs. Nighttime here provides one of the prime opportunities to see some of the island's 45 different endemic fireflies.

BLACK RIVER

The Black River lower morass is Jamaica's largest wetland, comprising more than 14,000 acres. It includes mangroves, lagoons, herbaceous swamps and forests, and shallow estuaries. One way to explore the birdlife and ecology of the island's longest river is to go to the town of Black River and take a two-hour boat tour up the waterway. Tours originate at the Black River Bridge. (Black River Safari Boat Tours is excellent. The guides are knowledgeable and know what birders are after. For information and reserva-

BIRDER BASICS

HABITATS:

Mangrove swamps, dry and wet limestone forests, montane forests, gardens, ruinate woods.

SUNRISE:

Winter, 6 to 7 a.m.;
Summer, 5 to 6 a.m.

SUNSET:

Winter, 5 to 6 p.m.;
Summer, 6 to 7 p.m.

BEST MONTHS FOR BIRDWATCHING:

Late March through early May,
peak is April.

RAINY SEASONS:

May and October.

BEST BOOKS:

Birds of Jamaica: A Photographic Field Guide, by Audrey Downer and Robert Sutton, with photographs by Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet. Cambridge University Press, hardcover and paperback.

Birds of the West Indies, by James Bond; Houghton Mifflin.

Also, remember to bring the North America field guide of your choice.

WEATHER

Northeast tradewinds and mountain breezes cool the coast, but a Kingston summer day can swelter, with temperatures reaching more than 90°F. Overall, between December and April, the climate is gentle, with average daytime temperatures of 70°F to 80°F, sometimes dipping to the 50s in the highest mountains. During cool evenings and journeys to the high ground you'll need a light sweater or jacket—preferably something waterproof, as short rainstorms occur frequently.

STEEL BIRDS

Though you can get a flight to Jamaica every day of the week, many require a connection to Florida. The lowest round-trip fares we found were \$277 from New York, \$425 from Los Angeles, \$371 from Chicago, and about \$205 from Miami. Of course tickets can go for much more, depending on the type of seat, the day of the week, and the time of the year. On some airlines, flights to Kingston cost slightly more than those to Montego Bay.



Air Jamaica (800-523-5585), direct from the East Coast only, also offers trans-island flights within Jamaica. **American Airlines** (800-433-7300), nonstop from New York and Miami. **Northwest Airlines** (800-225-2525), nonstop from Tampa to Montego Bay; no flights to Kingston. **Pan Am** (800-221-1111), nonstop from Miami.

Group Rates. Bird clubs or groups of eight or more may be able to arrange lower air fares and hotel rates. Call the Jamaican Tourist Board (1-800-JAMAICA) for information.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

You need no shots to go to Jamaica. The water is purified and quite safe to drink, and there are no poisonous snakes to contend with when you're out in the swamps and forests. Ticks, though they carry no disease, are one minor irritation. They occur most frequently in rural areas near livestock, and to avoid them you should cover your legs completely. The best method is to tuck your trousers into rubber boots or into high socks covered with insect repellent. To minimize contact, stay along the roads.

If these methods fail you, simply remove any ticks with your fingers or a pair of tweezers. Or, after a day of birding, shower immediately and don't wear the same clothes again. Ticks come out in the wash. In moist areas, mosquitos can come on strong so you might consider insect repellent for these situations as well.



The Black-billed Parrot, above, is virtually impossible to find anywhere except in Jamaica's "cockpit country," located in the northwestern part of the island. Y.J. Rey-Millet, photographer. Top, a group of birders flock on the beach, including Robert and Ann Sutton, and Audrey Downer. Photograph by John L. Tveten.

In Jamaica the sun is fierce, though sometimes disguised by trade winds or hazy skies. Do wear a good sunscreen. Also, take a hat and plenty of drinking water when walking in heat of the day.

Be an alert smart traveler. In Jamaica, as in most foreign countries, it's best to go about in groups, particularly at night in cities or in remote rural areas. Naturally, don't leave camera, optical equipment or other valuables exposed in your car. Aside from these typical caveats, Jamaica offers pleasant comfortable birding.

**AUDREY
DOWNER
AND
ROBERT
SUTTON**



Audrey Downer (Jamaica's premier birder), and Robert Sutton co-authored the *Birds of Jamaica—A Photographic Field Guide*. This is one of the essential pieces of equipment you will want to take to the island. In this book, all species that occur in Jamaica are mentioned, but only endemic species and subspecies are photographed, and only endemic species and subspecies or species that are unique to the Caribbean, are described in detail. You will therefore want to take one or more other guides along. The Downer/Sutton book contains photos of some species that have not previously been photographed in the wild. It gives guidelines for identification and notes on race, habits, habitat, and range for each species. We recommend it. If you are interested in traveling with a small group of birders, Mrs. Downer and Mr. Sutton are offering a few seven- and eight-day tours next year. To get further information regarding these tours, call Sutton at (809) 962-2260.

tions call South Coast Safaris Ltd. at 965-2513 or 965-2206.) In addition to seeing stately mangroves, tarpon, American Crocodiles, water lilies and hyacinths, you'll never have better views of Northern Jacanas, Least Bitterns, Least Grebes, Limpkins, and West Indian Whistling-Ducks. Of course, there are herons, egrets, coots, and moorhens galore. Listen especially for Mangrove Cuckoos.

This is a fine way to discover the unspoiled beauty of the south coast.

FROM KINGSTON

Hope Botanical Gardens (927-1257, Hope Road, Kingston, Hours: 10 to 6. Cost: about 50 cents), **Mona Reservoir** and **Mona Woods** (Mona Road in Mona Heights, west of the University of the West Indies, Kingston), and **Caymanas Dyke Ponds** (off the Spanish Town to Kingston Highway, west of Kingston), are all excellent places to bird for a few hours. They are each within easy reach of downtown Kingston and together represent a variety of habitats and avifauna.

The great green **Blue Mountains** offer breathtaking beauty and an abundance of island birds. Here find the Ring-tailed Pigeon, Common Ground-Dove, Crested Quail-Dove,

Vervain Hummingbird, Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Woodpecker, Greater Antillean Elaenia, Greater Antillean Pewee, Rufous-tailed Flycatcher, Rufous-throated Solitaire, White-eyed and White-chinned thrushes, Jamaican and Blue Mountain vireos, Arrow-headed Warbler, Greater Antillean Bullfinch, and Jamaican Blackbird.

Take the Gordon Town Road, Route B1, out of Kingston heading north toward Newcastle. Around Irish Town, find a safe place to pull off the twisting road to bird along it for awhile. This area has all of the birdlife typical of middle elevations up to about 2000 feet. As you get into the lush, mature, wet upland forests, get out more often and bird for longer distances along the road. Very exciting birding can be found along the densely wooded paths and trails of **Hollywell Forest Reserve**. Signs are obvious at the entrance. This is also a really great place to enjoy a picnic breakfast or lunch. Cottages are available at Hollywell through the Forestry Department. Move on to Newcastle, an historic fort now used as a training center for the Jamaica Defense Force. Stop here and bird the area of the fort after obtaining permission at the main office. Move on north, actively birding the area from **Newcastle to Hardwar Gap**. Here, all along the road, you should be able to find plenty of endemics. Be sure to be alert for the Jamaican Blackbird from here past Hardwar Gap. Of course, it will help enormously if you have done your homework before leaving the states by listening to recordings of the voices of the endemics. This should ensure success.

At Hardwar Gap conduct an intensive search for the rare and declining Jamaican Blackbird. It is often seen anywhere from the edges of the forest between Newcastle and the coffee plantations beyond Hardwar Gap, but this is a very likely place to find it.

This is not a flocking blackbird. It is solitary and quiet. It feeds in the



Red-billed Streamertails nest in the hills outside Montego Bay. At Rocklands, they come out to be hand-fed by tourists. Photograph by Y.J. Rey-Millet.



Marshall's Pen, a cattle farm and bird sanctuary located three miles outside of Mandeville, is one of the best places to spot Jamaican Orioles.
 Photograph by Y.J. Rey-Millet.

moss and bromeliads at the base of tree-fern fronds. One of the first hints that this bird is present might be a deluge of debris being tossed from the bromeliads as the bird forages. The endemic Bromeliad Crab is one of its favored foods.

ANNOTTO BAY AND BUFF BAY

Of course there are numerous other fine sites you could easily bird if you happen to be nearby. The area called **Strawberry Fields** west of Annotto Bay on the northeast shore holds up to 50 species. Cover the back roads and farm ponds along the roadway as well as the bay front. Look especially for the locally common Yellow-breasted Crake on pond edges, streams, and wet meadows. If in Buff Bay, go to **Crystal Springs Theme Park** which includes botanical gardens, an orchid forest, a spring-fed stream, and a bird sanctuary spread over its 156 acres. Mangoes and hummingbirds are numerous here as are many other species.

Bath, about 50 miles east of Kingston, is the site of the **Bath Botanic Gardens**, which are more than 200 years old. Look for the Black-billed Streamertail here in the flowering plants and along the road leading to the historic mineral baths. ■

ENTERING JAMAICA

To enter Jamaica you need a ticket for onward destination (return ticket home) within six months and proof of citizenship, which includes a passport, or, along with laminated pic-

ture I.D., an original certified copy of a Birth Certificate, Naturalization Certificate, or Alien Card. However, a passport is absolutely the preferable means, as it will save you time getting in and out of the country, and through customs.

ON THE OPEN ROADS OF JAMAICA

RENTAL CARS

There is no way around it—to bird Jamaica, you need to travel by car. In this category, there are essentially two choices: Rent a car, or (preferably) hire a driver.

Rentals are somewhat costly. A bare-bones economy car runs from \$320 to \$450 per week. Upgrade to automatic transmission with air conditioning, and you'll pay upwards of \$550—not including 10% tax or the \$1000 held on your credit card until you return the vehicle.

Many of the major rental agencies have offices in Jamaica, but it is *absolutely essential* to book a car way in advance as they sell out quickly. Be sure to get a confirmation number and confirm the price before you go. Avis (800-331-1212), Dollar (800-800-4000), National (800-328-4567), Island (in Kingston, 926-8012; in Montego Bay, 952-5771). (Of note: Your U.S. or Canadian driver's license is valid for three months. Also, some companies rent to only those between 25 and 65 years of age.)

ON THE ROAD

In Jamaica, driving is on the left side. Remember to stay there! Though speed limits are 30 mph in urban areas and 50 mph on highways, some complain that Jamaican drivers are a bit reckless—a subjective matter, of course. Mountainous terrain and narrow roads can make driving a real adventure. However, if your nature is cautious in these regards, you might be a good candidate for the following.

HIRED DRIVERS

By all means, do consider hiring a driver to take you around Jamaica, particularly if you are traveling with a group.

For about \$1400, JUTA Tours will assign a knowledgeable driver to pick you up at the airport and be at your disposal for an entire week, chauffeuring you in a fully-equipped mini-bus comfortable for 10 people with luggage. All gas and insurance is included; however, a tip is customary. Smaller groups can be chauffeured by car for \$150 per day.

For information or reservations, call 952-0813, or fax 952-5355.

JAMAICAN CUISINE

Brace yourself for some wonderful spicy food. The following is just a sampling, so you can study up on the native specialties before you go.

Ackee, the fleshy yellow part of a tree pod boiled and cooked with fish and seasonings.

Bammy, a muffin-shaped fried roll containing cassava, a starchy root vegetable of the West Indies.

Escoveitch fish, fresh fish marinated in lime juice, salt, pepper, oil, onion, and seasonings, served hot or cold.

Pepperpot soup, an absolutely famous Jamaica soup made with coconut milk, pork, beef, and vegetables.

Plantain, a fruit similar to bananas, ripened and fried.

Fish tea, a conch soup made with pumpkin.

Jerk, pork, beef, chick, or fish seasoned with hot pepper, pimento, nutmeg, cinnamon, and onions, then barbecued slowly over green pimento wood.

Red Stripe beer, the favorite local brew.