**JAMAICA**

Familiarization Tour

November 10 – 18, 2015

Jim and I left for Jamaica from the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival. On Sunday, Nov. 9, we finished RGVBF at around 5:00, drove to the Uebersetzigs to finish packing and left there around 6:00 PM. We drove to the San Antonio Airport Comfort Inn, checked in and checked email before going to bed around midnight.

**Monday, Nov. 10** We woke to the alarm at 5:00 AM, left the hotel around 6:15, turned in rental car and checked in at the Delta counter. We received notice of our upgrade to business class 3 or 4 days ago – both legs of the trip - sweet! Very little layover time in Atlanta with just enough time to walk to the boarding gate, first ones on the plane when they started boarding a few minutes later. We arrived in Montego Bay at 3:00 PM but had to return to the immigration line 3 times because we 1) filled in only one form as instructed by Delta flight attendant and 2) didn’t have an address for our hotel in Jamaica. A gentleman at the Tourism desk let us get online and we printed our Hotels.com confirmation for the first night at Relax Resort, which was enough to get us through immigration. After all of that hassle, our rental SUV had not been returned so we had to wait for the vehicle. Our Alamo reservation was serviced by Island Car Rentals. We drove straight to our hotel only a few miles away, had dinner delivered to our room (good jerk chicken, dry rice and beans, cole slaw with no dressing -$16 pp). After nearly a week of festival activities that included early morning outings in cold and wet weather, we found it easy to go to bed early – we fell asleep watching a Seinfeld rerun before 8:00 PM.

**Tuesday, November 11** We drove to Green Castle Estate, stopped in Ocho Rios to meet with Ricardo for lunch at the Jerk Center there. Our rented GPS didn’t recognize Green Castle Estate, so we entered coordinates to get directions. The GPS took us on several back roads to get there, which wasted a bunch of time, not to mention a lot of discomfort on some pretty terrible roads. We arrived at Green Castle at around 3:45, and Dwayne was waiting for us. We birded about 1 1/2 hour on the beginning of Waterfall Trail and got several endemics: **Jamaican Woodpecker, Red-billed Streamertail, Jamaican Mango, White-chinned Thrush, Jamaican Oriole**, and female **Orangequit**. Dinner was prepared for us by Stacy, delicious coconut rice, jerk chicken, and salad. We plan to meet Dwayne for birding at 6:00 AM to bird on the property.

**Wed, Nov. 12** We were ready at 6:00 but Dwayne didn’t show until about 6:40 – he had left his bins at home and had to walk all the way back to get them.

Today was a good day of birding, this time walking the Waterfall Trail much farther and adding another group of endemics to our list: **Jamaican Tody (!!), Jamaican Elaenia, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Sad Flycather, Rufous-tailed Flycatcher, Jamaican Becard, Jamaican Vireo, Jamaican Spindalis, Jamaican Euphonia.**

Not endemics, but we also got great looks at **Loggerhead Kingbird, Zenaida Dove, Ruddy Quail-Dove, Mangrove Cuckoo, Greater Antillean Grackle, Black-faced Grassquit** and an assortment of North American warblers including **Worm-eating, Black-throated Blue, American Redstart, Prairie, Northern Parula, Black-and-white, Northern Waterthrush.** We saw Caribbean Dove, but not well.

This morning we were accompanied by Spencer, Dwayne’s very shy dog who finally allowed Jim and me to pet him. In the afternoon we drove to the orchid (ginger) farm and then walked to a reservoir where we saw some fairly common water birds. Dwaye got a lifer there – **White-rumped Sandpiper!**

**Thurs Nov.13** – We birded with Dwayne until breakfast at about 9:30 - picked up **Yellow-shouldered Grassquit and Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo** – much effort put into said cuckoo, but it was well worth the effort.

Another light lunch, shower and then we departed for Mockingbird Hill – we did not use the GPS this time. We stopped for lunch at Frenchman’s Cove -$20 to enter the area, just for lunch! We checked on lodging there and at Goblin Hill before going to Mockingbird Hill – both were nice, with the forest and mangroves around Frenchman’s Cove making it appealing, but we really liked the lodging and meal situation at Goblin Hill better.

When we arrived at Mockingbird Hill, we met Shareen, who showed us around a bit and then we walked some of the trails on the property. Meals at Mockingbird Hill are quite elegant, unfortunately not my preference on birding trips. We had what I call a fru-fru dinner - way too much food and some of it inedible. The meal started with a bloody Mary and toast with tomato/olive gluck on it. The waiter, Jason, served a nice basket of assorted breads with 3 kinds of butter (herb, garlic, hot pepper). Next was an appetizer of warm tomatoes and jerk sausage, a serving that was really enough to serve as dinner. Then two huge smoked pork chops with some mashed stuff that we couldn’t identify, and a salad with 3 of the weirdest dressings I’ve ever been offered –something with coconut and something with lemon and a balsamic something that was really thick and brown. I could not eat most of the meal, but I’m sure it would appeal to others more than it did to me because I am a bit of a picky eater. Dessert was sorrel gelato – it tasted like medicine!

We finished dinner about 8:20 - straight to bed so we could be ready for 5:00 AM departure to Ecclesdown Rd with Roger.

**Fri Nov. 14** - Roger was on time and was waiting for us in the dark parking lot when we got there, accompanied by the night watchman. We waited in parking lot for a short while to try to find the resident owl before we left, but no luck with the owl this morning, probably because of the rain that fell overnight.

It rained off and on, sometimes hard, all day. The road was narrow and Jim hugged the left side like he does when driving on the left side of the road. This was OK going in, a bit scary coming out. At one point, the left front wheel went off the “soft” side of the road, on drop-off side – enough to garner a word of caution from Roger. We added some good endemics in spite of the weather – **Jamaican Crow, Ring-tailed Pigeon, Black-billed Parrot, Blue Mountain Vireo, Arrowhead Warbler, White-eyed Thrush**. We got the vireo just as it started to rain the second time – I saw it but Jim didn’t.

We returned to Mockingbird Hill around 1:00 PM and ordered lunch. I don’t think they were expecting us, and there was a long wait for our meals to arrive. $32 for 2 sandwiches – we could have paid the $20 to get into Frenchman’s Cove, bought burgers, and still come out ahead.

Jim took a nap and I went out to try to photograph the Streamertails in better light. I foolishly wore sandals and didn’t re-apply repellent. We had heard of the recent outbreak of Chickungunya when we arrived, and I had been very careful up to now, so I was dismayed when TWO of the easily identified tiger mosquitoes landed on my arm. I got one as it bit me, got the second one before it could bite. I had just looked up what they looked like before I went outside, but the internet said they are daytime biters (versus dusk), so I thought it was safe because of the late afternoon timing.

We told Jason that we needed a smaller meal tonight, so dinner was much better this time. It started with a tiny appetizer - fried pepper dumpling with pepper jelly – very tasty. We didn’t order a first course, but I asked to taste the coconut garlic soup out of curiosity. Jason brought a tiny bit, which was good but a bowl would have filled me up. We had boneless jerk chicken with homemade pasta and a small salad, and much less bread was delivered to our table tonight. We wasted very little food this evening, and felt much better for it.

Shareen has arranged for us to meet our birding guide, Lyndon Johnson (that’s right), on Harwar Gap tomorrow at 7:00, which requires a 5:00 AM departure.

**Saturday, Nov. 15** We were supposed to meet Lyndon at the school in Cascade, but he was past there and tried to give us instructions on how far to go to find him. This was a bit confusing, and it took over a half hour to find each other, with him calling us on the cell from above us on the road. Lyndon is a park ranger in Blue Mountain National Park, a very good birder and a really nice guy.

We got the **Blue Mountain Vireo** right away, then as we walked along the road, **Crested Quail-Dove**. Almost tame, he allowed me to approach pretty close. Right after that, the **Jamaican Blackbird** showed up and then a **Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo** right above us. We had a good morning of birding with rain on and off, finished at The Gap Café for lunch. It rained hard right after we used the restrooms there and we hurried back for an early lunch. We tried to bird after lunch, but it started raining again, so we got directions from Lyndon and drove on to Forres Park – almost 2 hours of driving on really narrow, winding, pothole-flled roads. We arrived there around 2:30 and we were given the Hummingbird Suite – very nice.

The Forres Park property is older, a bit rustic. Kerry and Shanoi are very nice and very helpful. Colin, our birding guide, will arrive near dinner time, and he should be able to direct us to the best birding sites, perhaps locate a Jamaican Owl for us.

Jim took a short nap so I went outside with my camera again. I heard parakeets as soon as I walked out the door but they were high in a gumbo limbo tree and badly backlit. I found **Cape May, Black-throated Blue and Prairie Warblers, Redstarts, Jamaican Euphonias**, and then Jim came out. I pointed out the parakeets and then together we found **Jamaican Woodpeckers**, followed by more individuals of the same species I had seen earlier. We saw the first swifts of the trip but could not identify them.

Other notable birds today included **Rufous-throated Solitaire** and **Greater Antillean Bulfinch**.

**Sunday, Nov. 16** Colin picked us up at 6:15 AM, just a 15-minute drive to entrance of Old Mine Road. We parked at a wide spot in the road and then began walking on the old mining road. The trail was very busy at the beginning with **Ring-tailed Pigeons**, lots of warblers, **Jamaican Tody** (yay!), other birds we’ve already seen. I got the best looks I’ve had of the very common **Orangequit** male, but still no photo. Some good photo ops for **Spindalis** but lighting was difficult. I was able to photograph **Arrowhead Warbler** from a distance. We only need the owl and Yellow-billed Parrot to have all 29 endemics, and Colin says the best place to see the parrots is back at Forres Park. He will return to the lodge this evening to help us find the owl, and will meet us here at 4:00 AM tomorrow morning if we don’t find one tonight.

After breakfast at 9:30 AM, Jim did some computer work while I went out to photograph streamertails that are always present in the parking area and to try to see the Mango that had been there when Jim came into the room earlier. He was asleep when I came back in, so after we took a short rest we took a walk to see what we could find. **Jamaican Todies** right behind the kitchen! From the deck, we saw **Vervain Hummingbird** – so tiny it looked like a bug! In one tree covered in lichens, **Tropial Parula, Black-throated Blue, Prairie, Magnolia Warblers, Jamaican Euphonias** (male and female). The Streamertails won’t allow the Vervains or the female streamertails to feed on their flowers, and they also chase Bananaquits away as soon as they see them.

Colin called to say he wouldn’t be here until 8:00 PM, so we returned to the room so Jim could follow the end of the Homestead race on the internet while I finished this report. We must find that owl tonight so we can sleep in a bit tomorrow before the long drive back to Montego Bay.

We hung around the dining area when Colin returned, but there were several people having dinner there, so we really couldn’t look for the owl until they left. Once they were gone, Colin had Kerry turn off the lights on the deck. We sat there for quite awhile and were about to give up when a Jamaican Owl flew right over our heads. Jim had his eyes closed, so he missed the bird in flight, but we could hear it calling from the other side of the entrance road. We walked down the road and eventually found not one but two **Jamaican Owls** perched together in a tree. We said our goodbyes to Colin and went to the room, very satisfied that we had just one endemic left to find – the Yellow-billed Parrot.

Monday, Nov. 17 We lounged around a bit this morning and didn’t take off for Kingston as early as we had planned. We said some long good-byes to Kerry and Shanoi, who by now felt like friends. We didn’t arrive at Hope Gardens until around 10:00 AM and then learned that the Yellow-billed Parrots are relatively easy to find early and late in the day, but not so much in between. We spent a few hours walking around the gardens but did not find any parrots. All of the birds seen while there and en route to Montego Bay were species we had already seen on this trip. We drove to the all-inclusive resort we had booked for our last night and checked in. It was quite windy, so we didn’t go to the pool or beach.

Tuesday, Nov. 18 Our flight isn’t until afternoon, so we enjoyed a few hours in the pool before showering and heading to the Montego Bay airport for our return flights.