

Lesser Antilles

St. Vincent, Dominica, St. Lucia

January 8 - 15, 2024

8 Days/7 Nights

\$3775*

Single supplement \$200

*Price is for groups of 10 – 12; small-group surcharge of \$200 will apply for groups of 8 - 9.



The Lesser Antilles is comprised of a chain of largely submerged mountains running north to south in a double arc. The outer arc from Anguilla to Barbados is comprised of low, flat islands with limestone surfaces, while the inner arc, where our tour will take us, is made up of a series of volcanic cones. St. Vincent, Dominica, and St. Lucia are the three islands boasting the largest number of endemics and near-endemics to be found in the region, so it is these three islands we will visit on this tour, our first to the islands. Each is home to at least one critically endangered endemic Amazona parrot, along with a wonderful supporting cast of Warblers, Tremblers, Thrashers and Hummingbirds found nowhere else on the planet. St. Vincent is a lush, heavily forested volcanic island with primarily black-sand beaches and vast sprawling wilderness. Dominica, with its innumerable waterfalls and a river for every day of the year coursing through vast tracts of primary rainforest, is the island regarded by many as the “Nature Lover’s Caribbean Island”. St. Lucia’s human population is concentrated along the flat coastal areas while the interior is defined by mountainous terrain that is impractical for large-scale development, thus preserving the extensive pristine habitat so essential for the multitude of bird species that thrive there. As we bird these island paradises, strolling along some of the most stunning coastlines on the planet and walking through pristine forests, we can expect to see upwards of 100 species, many of whom are endemic to one of the islands, to the Lesser Antilles, or to the Caribbean. Possible endemics include **10** island endemics, birds found nowhere else on Earth other than the island we are on when we see them, an additional **16** birds found only in the Lesser Antilles, and another **5** that are found only in the Caribbean. On top of that, there are over 40 subspecies we could see that might some day be recognized as a separate species.

Join us as we explore the very best of what the Lesser Antilles has to offer!

DETAILED ITINERARY

Day 1, January 8: ARRIVAL, ST. VINCENT

Touching down at the recently completed Argyle International Airport on the island of St. Vincent, we are met by pre-arranged transport and taken in air-conditioned comfort to our beachfront accommodation - a local family-owned hotel, on the southwestern and only white-sand shoreline of the island. After checking in and having a bit of time to freshen up, we will convene in the lobby for a stroll through the gloriously manicured gardens, alive with a variety of flowering tropical plants. Here we should enjoy encounters with species that thrive in this southern corner of the Lesser Antillean chain. The all-black endemic subspecies of **Bananaquit** dancing amongst the brilliant yellow Alamandas, the **Spectacled Thrush** gorging itself on Christmas Palm berries, cooing **Eared Doves** perched in mighty Tamarinds, and the unmistakable call of a near-endemic *Myiarchus* - the **Grenada Flycatcher** – flitting expertly from low-lying limbs to pluck insects out of mid-air.

From the gardens we make our way onto the poolside deck where (cocktail in hand, should you wish) we gaze out across a tranquil bay at glistening turquoise waters and anchored yachts bobbing gently on the rhythmic swells of the Caribbean Sea. Overhead **Magnificent Frigatebirds** soar by effortlessly, while at eye level small teams of **Brown Boobies** and the odd lone **Brown Noddy** skim the surface of the sea. As the sun begins to set over the water, it signals the arrival of the nightshift – **Yellow-crowned Night Herons** stealthily emerging from the forested shoreline to pursue crabs along the shore

We dine tonight in the hotel's open-air, oceanfront restaurant. The vast majority of food consumed on St. Vincent is locally grown and produced, and the wide variety on the menu is testament to the plethora of vegetables, pulses (beans, chickpeas, lentils) and ground provisions (yam, dasheen) that thrive in the rich volcanic soils of the island. Try the tantalizing saltfish buljol as a starter - delicious.

Day 2., January 8: ST. VINCENT

Today we will have the privilege of being one of the few groups of people on the planet to observe flocks of **St. Vincent Parrots** filling the skies around us. We will leave our hotel before dawn to make for a site known only to a few local forestry officers, and one that sees our vehicle cross the same river seven times at different locations, until we reach a secret and truly remote area deep in the heart of the densely forested north. We will strategically select our spots atop a high ridge, and from here wait for the raucous



St. Vincent Parrot

parrots to emerge from their roosts in the lush forests around us. This spectacularly plumaged species has long been on the verge of extinction (still listed on the IUCN most threatened species on the planet), and the opportunity to have incredibly close views of this number of wild birds in their natural habitat is one of the highlights of the trip. We will spend the first couple of daylight hours today simply basking in their company. Given the time of year, in addition to witnessing this clever bird feeding and drinking from rainwater pooled in magnolia flowers, we may also have the opportunity to see pairs engaging in courtship behavior.

Following our treasured time with the parrots, our van will descend the mountain, pulling over at select sites, where the ever-present mangoes and guavas prove an irresistible lure to **St.Vincent Tanagers**, **Lesser Antillean Bullfinch**, **Smooth-billed Ani** and even **Yellow-bellied Elaenias** (drawn to the fruit flies on the ripening fruit).

After a local lunch, we will enter the lush rainforests of towering Mt. Soufriere. Here, we will bird along forest paths lined with wild *Begonia*, *Cecropia* and *Ficus* to the best sites to see the critically endangered **Whistling Warbler**, along with a wonderful selection of other near endemic, as well as indigenous regional species, such as the stunning **Purple-throated Carib**, dainty **Antillean Crested Hummingbird**, and the first sighting of what on this trip will be two species of marvellous **Tremblers** endemic to the Lesser Antillean region. We will end



Purple-throated Carib



Antillean Crested Hummingbird

our walk at a dry riverbed, above which regularly circle **Common Black Hawk** as well as the endemic subspecies of **Broad-winged Hawk**. We will need to be sure to guard our freshly picked fruit snack from inquisitive sapphire-headed St. Vincent Anoles determined for a taste.

After our early start today, by early afternoon we will return to our hotel, where we'll have the option of swimming in or just lounging by the pool, sitting in the gardens with a good book, descending the short wooden staircase to the beach and sinking our toes into the warm white sands, or (for those feeling adventurous) joining our guide for a gentle snorkeling excursion over nearby reefs teeming with a variety of tropical fish species.

Another sumptuous dinner at the hotel will be enjoyed tonight.

Day 3, January 10: DOMINICA

At 9 a.m. we will take the short flight to Dominica, the "Nature Lover's Caribbean Island". This island offers a snapshot into what many of the more developed islands of the region would have resembled in years gone by.

After pausing at a roadside stand to sample a selection of homemade tamarind and golden apple juices, our vehicle will climb high during this, our initial foray into the island's Northern Forest Reserve. We will not have been travelling far before the mellifluous calls of an array of different species give us cause to pull off the track to investigate. Birds including **Zenaida Dove** and the **Scaly-breasted Thrasher** provide excellent views by perching conspicuously in sparsely leafed mangoes, while pairs of delicate **Plumbeous Warblers** leap along the creeping vines dangling tantalizingly close to our heads and **Black-faced Grassquits** and **Common**



Lesser Antillean Euphonia

Ground Doves flit along the grass edge at our feet. This forest is also home to a significant population of stumpy-legged Red-rumped Agouti.

These species are wonderful, and as the vehicle meanders ever higher, we will continue to be greeted by the cast of ever more brightly colored characters whose preference it is to inhabit even loftier climes. We can hope to see the delightful **Lesser Antillean Euphonia** delicately plucking the tiny fruit of a mistletoe and the resplendent **Eastern Red-legged Thrush** seemingly determined to catch a glimpse of us as we make our way through one of the highest small holdings on the island. This is a wild and largely unspoiled land where the vast majority of the population is still rural and make their living from harvesting ground

provisions such as dasheen and pineapple that grow rapidly in a rich volcanic soil.

Our quaint family-owned hotel is perched high atop a 100-foot cliff offering breathtaking views of a vast expanse of Caribbean Sea. Here we will enjoy Creole cooking prepared by experienced local chefs.

Day 4, January 11: DOMINICA

This morning we wake to the smell of rich Dominican coffee as we set off at dawn in order to give ourselves the best opportunity to see one of the rarest species, not only in the region, but on the entire planet – the

majestic **Imperial Parrot (aka Amazon)**.

Perched overlooking deep verdant valleys and with the distant sound of thunderous rivers coursing far below us, we will scan the canopies of towering emergents for the undoubted monarch of this land. It's more gregarious cousin, the **Red-necked Parrot (aka Amazon)**, provides more frequent entertainment as small flocks awaken to flutter from one fruiting tree to another, while behind us, the trapline habits of the near-endemic **Blue-headed Hummingbird** ensure that we regularly turn our attention to small patches of *Costus spictatus*. Fifty-five species of butterflies, including regional endemics such as Dominican Hairstreak, Godman's Hairstreak, Godman's Leaf



Imperial Amazon (Imperial Parrot)

and St.Lucia Mestra, have been recorded on Dominica, and these, along with more wide-ranging Caribbean Buckeye and Cassius Blue, ensure that our eyes are drawn to every sunlit area of forest floor during our time in the forest. But it is the Imperial Parrot (aka Amazon) we are here to see, and with a population of less than 50 individuals, patience will be needed, but ultimately rewarded if the tell-tale call is heard.

Creeping ever so silently through the forest, it can sometimes be possible to track the call to the very tree in which the bird is perched. It is truly wonderful to hear this unique and oddly unnatural sound (that of a creaking rusty metallic gate swinging open) emanating from the canopy overhead and resonating out across the valley floor below. Click here to hear the sound: [Imperial Amazon \(*Amazona imperialis*\) :: xeno-canto](#) [Imperial Parrot - eBird](#) (click on the “listen” button)

When such patience is rewarded and those rich dark purples and scaled bronze neck and head of this truly majestic bird are first seen, the elation and unbridled joy to be felt simply cannot be matched. This is the mighty **Imperial Amazon** - national bird of Dominica and one of the undoubted stars of our trip!

On the topic of rarities, our vigil this morning will also target a bird that has only recently been sighted on the island after a long hiatus. The bizarre habits of the **Black-capped Petrel** lure breeding birds to the high mountainous regions of Dominica. As our tour sees us on the island in the middle of breeding season, we will have as good a chance as possible for sightings of ghost-like apparitions winging their way from roosting and nesting sites to the sea to feed. It must be stressed that, although we will be in the right habitat and at the right time, the likelihood of sightings of petrels remains low due to the vast expanse of habitat and extremely low numbers of birds that have returned to once again call Dominica home.

Our picnic lunch is as local as it gets – your choice of delicious curried beef, vegetarian or goat rotis, enjoyed at an abandoned visitor centre in the middle of the forest. We will continue birding for the remainder of the day, where encounters with other indigenous specialties including **Forest Thrush**, **Pearly-eyed Thrasher** and the endemic subspecies of **Antillean House Wren** are but a few of our targets.



Pearly-eyed Thrasher

Day 5, January 12: DOMINICA

The waters surrounding these islands are amongst the most beautiful and idyllic in the world, and what better way to enjoy them than to set sail!

A significant number of species of whale and dolphin have been sighted in Dominica’s waters, and we will set out to find them by joining an experienced captain and crew on a quest for ocean giants! Large pods of **Short-finned Pilots** are the most commonly seen, while other larger species such as **Humpbacks** and **False Killers** have also been spotted swimming above this island’s deep oceanic trenches. There is even a strong possibility of an encounter with the island’s resident population of **Sperm Whale**, for Dominica is the only country in the world whose waters are home to mothers and calves year-round. In addition to these behemoths, a large number of dolphins are also regularly drawn to the deep ocean chasms that surround this volcanic island; several species, including **Fraser’s**, **Spotted** and **Spinner Dolphins** could be seen during our trip. While on

our quest for marine mammals, we will take advantage of our time out on the water to scan the seas for pelagics - from **Cory's Shearwater** to **Wilson's Storm Petrel** and several species of gulls and terns.

After our adventure on the seas, we will return to while away the afternoon at our hotel, or should you prefer, descend the path to the wilds of a rocky shoreline, where we can enjoy a relaxed stroll and fly-bys of squadrons of **Brown Pelican**. Should we not have seen a particular target species on either of the previous two days, we also have the option of returning to the montane forest, a mere 20-minute drive away, for another try before dinner.

Day 6, January 13: ST. LUCIA

From the moment the dark green silhouette of volcanic St. Lucia comes into view, you know you are in for something special. The view from our plane window confirms that towns and settlements are very much concentrated along the flat coastal areas, while the interior is defined by mountainous terrain, impractical for large-scale development. Such a topographical deterrent has been instrumental in preserving the extensive pristine habitat so essential for the multitude of bird species that thrive here.



St. Lucia Warbler

Upon arrival at the regional airport in Castries, the vibrant, pulsing and history-rich capital of St. Lucia, we will take time to explore the third-largest open-air market on the planet, selling almost everything that the diverse and varied islands in the Caribbean chain have to offer. We will sample fresh fruit and local culinary delights as we meander through the plethora of goods and wares on offer from hundreds of artisans and vendors.

From Castries, we will drive to the remote hillside village of Bouton. Near this close-knit Rastafarian community exists a unique ecotone, an area known to harbor species

unique to this tiny island gem. It is no exaggeration to state that here numerous species of tropical birds will join the myriad Gulf Fritillaries, Cloudless Sulphurs, and Great Southern Whites flitting all around us.

Overhead, **Lesser Antillean Swifts** manipulate the air currents while amongst the trees colorful **St. Lucia Warblers** peer underneath leaves in search of gorging caterpillars. Overhanging tree limbs represent perfect vantage points for **Lesser Antillean Flycatchers** to launch attacks on winged insects, and an abundance of fruits ripening in the tropical sun prove an irresistible lure for opportunistic **St. Lucia Orioles**. We may even be fortunate enough to enjoy an audience with the much-coveted **Bridled Quail Dove**; the north of the island remains one of the few remaining areas where this secretive forest dweller can still be found.



Bridled Quail Dove

On the way to our hotel, we will stop at the sprawling Aupicon Wetlands where yellowish stems of the sedge that dominate this largest marsh on the island are seemingly ablaze in the orange glow of a late afternoon tropical sun. The marsh is inhabited by a wide variety of wetland species, and we will enjoy stunningly close views of nesting **Pied-billed Grebes** and the Caribbean races of **American Coot** and **Green Heron**. As we take up our vantage point atop a small hillock perfectly placed to the east of the main body of water, we are treated to a display of birdlife in perfect light - the return of hundreds of **Cattle** and **Snowy Egrets**, winging their way low over the water and into a roost in the center of the wetland. These are soon joined by **Great Egrets**, **Tricolored**

Herons, and **Little Blue Herons**, which each serve to further saturate species sightings already dominated by **Blue-winged Teal**, **Lesser Scaup** and the entertaining **Belted Kingfishers**.

An idyllic, locally run, small hotel, surrounded by forested hills and offering a stunning view of a glittering sheltered bay is our home for the next two nights. The Inn is owned and managed by a lovely couple. The lady of the house handles the business side of things, and her partner prepares the fine cuisine, having trained and worked in Paris as a chef for many years. Prepare your taste buds for a treat! All of the food for our meals is locally sourced, and the fish is bought directly from the market at Dennery, supporting this local community.

Day 7, January 14: ST. LUCIA

This morning, we will enjoy a leisurely buffet breakfast on the sweeping open-air veranda, which will include locally grown pineapple, golden apples and mango as well as free-range eggs and local bacon and sausage. We will have a short 10-minute drive to see a rapidly vanishing habitat, the tropical dry broad-leaved forest. Over the years, this primarily coastal habitat has tended to be the first to be destroyed in order to make room for prime beachfront property. Here on St. Lucia, this unique habitat now protects the last remaining populations of one of the rarest species we will see on the trip, the **White-breasted Thrasher**, along with a number of other curious inhabitants such as the brazen **Lesser Antillean Saltator**, curious **Mangrove Cuckoo** and endemic **St. Lucia Blackfinch**.

From here, we will make for the island's showpiece natural attraction – the sprawling Des Cartiers Rainforest. Des Cartiers is dominated by numerous towering trees, including the majestic and aromatic Lansan, the impressive Sandbox and towering Caribbean Royal Palm. Along with the emergent trees, we'll find gargantuan Tree Ferns and tiny bromeliads and orchids, all indigenous to the region. We will spend a wonderful morning here, walking the well-maintained trails and learning about the wondrous diversity of life all around us.

Our forest walk will culminate at an observation area where we are afforded excellent views of the island's national bird (and most colorful of all Amazonas) – the magnificent **St. Lucia Parrot**. We will watch the birds coursing across the valley below us, moving diligently from one fruiting tree to another. At this idyllic site, we

are also continuously in the presence of a myriad of other deep forest dwellers. Sightings of the ethereal **Rufous-throated Solitaire** flitting from liana to liana are intermingled with appearances by near endemic **Grey Tremblers** probing their long bills into palm husks for unsuspecting prey. **Caribbean Elaenias**, and bedazzling **Green-throated Caribs** are also possible.

As dusk approaches, excitement builds as we make use of our 4x4 vehicles to negotiate a largely unused track in the rural Northeast to access a vast grassland dominated by pockets of Shak Shaks (*Albizia lebbeck*) and White Cedar (*Tabebuia pallida*). This is the land of the Nightjar. Undoubtedly one of the most challenging of the St.Lucian endemics to see, the **St.Lucia Nightjar** will require we set up our positions long before the birds' haunting calls begin. As night falls, we will use the calls to hone in on their location. Before we head back to our hotel we will take time to scan the coves of trees for Lesser Antillean Iguana and opossum.



St. Lucia Parrot

Day 8, January 15: ST. LUCIA

There are few places on the planet that can match the remarkable beauty and incredible variety of the Caribbean, and as is the case with the other Lesser Antillean islands on this trip, St. Lucia's small size means that, for a birder and nature enthusiast, a good birding site is seldom far away.

So it proves on our final full day of birding, when after a leisurely breakfast, we will leave our quiet Inn and head to a nearby coastal site where sea spotting can reveal **Great** as well as **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, **Red-footed Booby**, **Royal Tern**, **Roseate Tern**, **Laughing Gull** and even some pelagics fond of circumnavigating St.Lucia, an island well-placed for sightings of these wonderful winged wanderers. From here we will make the short 15-minute drive to the top of one of the highest points on St. Lucia, where, standing on an exposed plateau, we are treated to numerous fly-bys by the stunning **Red-billed Tropicbird**. Brilliant, gleaming white bodies followed by long streamer-like tails whistle by at eye level. With a backdrop of a deep, navy-blue Atlantic Ocean stretching to the horizon, we will bid a fond farewell to the magical islands of the Lesser Antilles.

As midday approaches, our van will begin its descent toward the international airport a mere 10 minutes away, where we will catch our flights home.



Red-billed Tropicbird

Price Includes:

- ~ Lodging in comfortable hotel/lodges
- ~ Breakfast, lunch, dinner every day beginning with lunch on day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 8
- ~ All ground transportation and entrance fees
- ~ Internal airfare: St. Vincent – Dominica – St. Lucia
- ~ Airport transfers
- ~ Bottled water
- ~ Services of an expert birding guide and two *Cheepers!* Tour Leaders (Jim & Cindy Beckman)
- ~ Pre-trip gift package, including customized checklist
- ~ Post-trip digital photo collection
- ~ Post-trip electronic copy of final checklist

Price does not Include:

- ~ International round-trip airfare to St. Vincent and from St. Lucia
- ~ Alcoholic drinks
- ~ Travel insurance (***highly*** recommended)
- ~ Gratuities
- ~ Expenses of a personal nature (laundry, phone calls, extra soft drinks and snacks, etc.)

Cancellation policy:

Cancellation must be made in writing (email or snail mail)

More than 6 months prior to departure – full refund of deposit

Between 4 and 6 months prior to departure – 50% refund of deposit

Less than 4 months prior to departure – No refund of deposit

If cancellation occurs after full payment is made, a refund will be given only if the vacant spot is filled.

Trip insurance is *highly* recommended.

You can compare prices offered by various trip insurance companies at these websites:

http://www.quotewright.com/?sub_id=6056 www.insuremytrip.com

Cheepers! Birding on a Budget LLC reserves the right to make changes in the itinerary if the need should arise due to unforeseeable circumstances such as weather, landslides, and other natural phenomena, as well as suggestions by local guides in order to take advantage of an unusual birding opportunity. Lodging is subject to change based on availability.



In the event restrictions associated with the Covid 19 pandemic require that the tour be cancelled or rescheduled, registrants will receive a full refund of deposit and payments. If desired, payments may be applied to a future tour.