

St Lucia, 10th – 18th December 2013 Peter and Rosemary Royle

INTRODUCTION

My husband (Peter) and myself (Rosemary) visited St Lucia for a “sunshine birding break” having got rather fed up with the wet weather in October in the UK.

We signed up for a very reasonably-priced all-inclusive package with Saga, and stayed at the Bel Jou hotel on a hill above Castries. (The hotel is owned by Saga) We rarely made use of the included lunch but certainly did make full use of the included rum punches and other rum-based drinks! The package included flights with Virgin and a car pickup from our home in west Wales and we could not fault the hotel or the Saga service in anyway. We did not take part in any excursions as we hired a car for most of the time we were there and on the remaining day we did a guided bird tour (see below).

The car hire was with “24 hour Car Rental”, which we booked using email. They were very helpful with queries and delivered the car to the hotel. We hired a Daihatsu Terios, a small 4-wheel drive which was not very powerful on the steep hills but did the job. The 4WD was essential not so much for the “4WD” but for the ground clearance and robust suspension, so it was able to handle the often very fierce potholes without damaging the car. It also gave us much more flexibility when choosing spots to turn round (something we did pretty often) and passing on narrow roads. The high ground clearance is also needed to get to the Des Cartiers trail as the last 1km of track has high grass growing down the middle.

Driving in St Lucia is easy in some ways – driving is on the left, the roads are surfaced and there is not much traffic. However, there are some suicidal overtakers (often fuelled by drink I think – we saw a number of serious accidents despite the low level of traffic). There can also be traffic jams in Castries. The biggest problem is the complete lack of signposting, except at major junctions. We had a reasonable map, supplied by the hire car company, and used this in conjunction with details from trip reports and occasionally just asking people. We managed to get to the main trails - Union Forest, Millet Trail and Des Cartiers Trail but it was not straightforward so there are some detailed notes below to help others who follow us.

The weather was wetter than it should have been – the rainy weather should have finished but we apparently experienced the “Late Rains” which sometimes occur. It was mostly showers – some of them extremely heavy – and there was no pattern to the wet weather at all – it could be at any time of day. Rain capes came in very handy. The temperatures were warm to hot but it was never unpleasantly hot.

It was not a good time of year to visit St Lucia from a birding point of view. It is at the end of the wet season and just before the main breeding season which is roughly Jan – April and forest birds were not singing at all (apart from the warbler). Also the Caribbean Martin and Black Swift are not present. However we were prepared to sacrifice a few ticks in order to get away in December! We had never visited the Caribbean before so many of the birds were lifers for us. Our biggest dip was the St Lucia Oriole, which is apparently getting rarer and more difficult to see each year. A full list of what we saw and perhaps, more interestingly, what we didn't see, is provided below.

Despite the above, which meant that the birding was a bit challenging, we thoroughly enjoyed the trip. We managed to get 22 lifers which was about what we expected. Also the food and friendly Caribbean ambience was enjoyable.

Some birds described in other trip reports as “common” were definitely not common for us – I suspect your view of what is common depends on where your hotel is located and what the garden is like. I think Caribbean Elaenia and Scaly-breasted Thrasher may be “garden” birds in some hotels – they weren't in ours! (even though we had quite a good garden) And one report mentions the introduced Collared Dove as common – we did not see it at all.

We employed a birding guide for one day towards the end of the trip to help us find the hard birds which we knew we could not find on our own and also those that we had failed to find. We had booked a day (actually just a very long morning starting at 5:30) with Adams Toussaint by email toussaintadams@yahoo.com but he rang us at the hotel to say that he could not make it as he had to go to a family christening and another chap called Vision would be taking his place. Vision was a very pleasant chap and seemed to know his stuff (despite presenting a rather formidable appearance with his Rasta hair up in a big woollen hat). The guides seem to have a standard route which includes the sites for the White-breasted Thrasher and other dry forest birds including the Oriole, along the road south of Dennery, then on to the Des Cartiers trail to the lookout for parrots, pigeons and other rainforest birds, then on to the south of the island for seabirds (we did not do this latter part, instead opting to try again for the Oriole and Scaly-breasted Thrasher). Vision used very loud pishing to call out the birds and this seemed very effective. However overall this guided day was not quite as productive as I had hoped – the rainforest was extremely quiet and the St Lucia Oriole would not respond to pishing (it usually does apparently) – in the event we only got 4 new species which were White-breasted Thrasher, Caribbean Elaenia, Antillean Euphonia and Rufous-

throated Solitaire. We looked for Quail-doves, Swifts, Bare-eyed Robin and the Oriole but did not find them. The guided trip including transport etc cost US\$100 per head.

The various forest centres seemed to be in a state of semi-abandonment. The offices were rarely manned, and although we were asked to pay at Millet and Des Cartiers (25 EC\$ per head), we were told that "there was no receipt book at the moment" so we were not sure where the money ended up!. (We only had to pay at Des Cartiers as we happened to meet a guide in the car park just as he finished guiding a group). Most of the signs directing visitors to the reserves were old, damaged or had fallen down. However, the trails were all maintained – we met a party of maintenance workers at Millet and there were fresh repairs elsewhere – and somebody is supplying fresh coconuts to the feeders at Millet. And although the zoo at Union is abandoned there are still some parrots in cages – they look very healthy so they are obviously being fed. The garden just inside the forest was derelict.

A few practical footnotes:

Money – many reports indicate that Eastern Caribbean dollars are not required and that US dollars can be used – this is true but your change will be in EC\$. And I think it is vaguely insulting to the St Lucians to expect them to accept foreign currency just because visitors cannot be bothered to change currency.

Departure Tax – mentioned in some reports but no longer exists

Driving licence – the temporary driving licence required in St Lucia is easily issued by your car hire company. An International Driving Licence may be acceptable as a substitute.

Safety – St Lucia seems quite a safe place (apart from the road accidents). Obviously you don't walk around back streets in the dark and don't flaunt cameras etc but it did not feel threatening. There was some hassle in the small fishing villages from locals who wanted to act as a guide but this is only to be expected.

Local colour – Dennery, Micoud and Soufrieres are well worth visiting to get a feel for local Caribbean culture.

Insects I am very attractive to biting insects and did indeed get quite badly bitten. I think the bites were mostly obtained around the hotel and on the beach where I did not use repellent. I suspect the problem is much reduced in drier weather.

Reference Material:

We used only one reference book, "Birds of the West Indies" by various authors.

The following trip report was used extensively and I have not repeated above all the useful information supplied within it: St. Lucia March 31 - April 3, 2008 published by Jim Holmes
http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=1423

Also a more recent report by Richard Sutton http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=2315

Also referenced were trip reports by Paul Noakes and John Kirby.

We downloaded and printed (at A4 size - A5 size is unreadable) the **Lonely Planet PDF chapter on St Lucia**.

For calls and songs we downloaded a number of tracks from Xeno-canto which we used to identify and sometimes to call in birds.

BIRDING SITES

In the notes below the following common birds are not mentioned explicitly: Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Bananaquit, Zenaida Dove, Grey Kingbird, Carib Grackle, Cattle Egret, St Lucia Warbler.

Millet Trail

I have included here an updated set of directions from Jim Holmes report:

The office can be contacted at 758-451-6168. There is a US \$10 (25 EC\$) fee/person for going on this trail and there may be a guide available if you want one. Despite other reports to the contrary, we were not charged for a guide when we said we didn't need one.

Directions: Head south from Castries on the main north-south road that goes along the west side of the island and up and over the hill through La Croix Marigot. Go past the turn for Marigot Bay (just past the Marigot Bay exit was a

wet field with lots of egrets). After passing the turn for Marigot Bay, the road drops down and crosses a flat valley. You will cross a small bridge. Just past this small bridge/river, there is an obvious tarmac road to the left at a yellow bus stop with a blue roof. There may be a sign for Millet (not when we were there) Take this left turn through banana plantations and then through villages and carry on until at 3.5km you come to a T intersection (well, it is not really a T intersection, you will just bear right on it). Go right at the T intersection. Take this road for about 6km to the end and you will arrive at the Millet Nature Reserve/Trail. (Along the way, there will be a paved road that breaks to the right and one that drops to the left – do not take these. You will pass a disused quarry on the right and go across a bailey bridge over the river on the left. The road will be in poor condition in places.)

The trail is quite strenuous, especially the last part and took us 4 hours at birdwatching speed. The first part of the trail has many bird feeders which consist of half coconuts on poles. These are extremely popular with LA Bullfinches, but persevere and look at every bird and you will probably find a Black Finch – we did. Apart from the plumage (see notes below) they were notable for being more flighty and less tame than the Bullfinches.

We did not see or even hear a single parrot on the trail. (There seemed to be little fruit in the forest and I suspect they were feeding in the surrounding plantations) However we did see St Lucia Black Finch, St Lucia Warbler, Grey Trembler, Mangrove Cuckoo, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, all three hummingbirds and brief flying views of Scaly-naped Pigeon.

Des Cartiers Trail

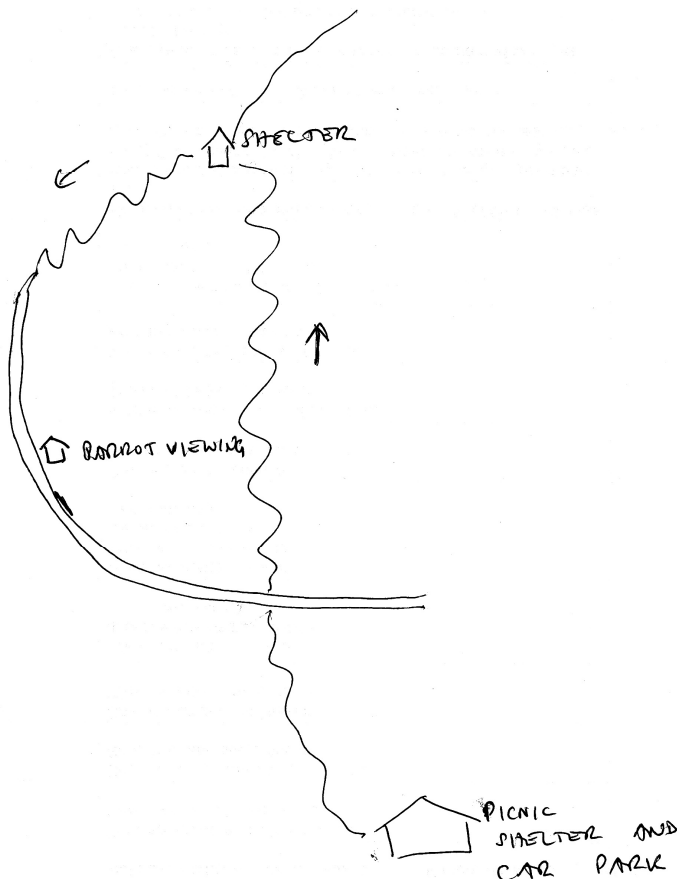
Directions: From Castries, go south then take the main road across the island towards Dennery. Go south on the main coast road until you reach the village of Micoud. Just after Micoud turn right at quite a major-looking road. (There was a sign for the trail which had been knocked over and was on the ground when we were there). Fork right shortly after leaving the main road, and go through the smart village of Ti Roche. Keep going straight on and eventually out of the village, After about 6km look for a turning to the right which cuts back sharply and turn along it. If you start to descend through villages and head eastwards you have missed the turning. (When in doubt you should always be heading upwards and towards the distant forested hills.) After about 2kms turn left up hill – this turning had a small sign when we were there (otherwise we would never have found it) then shortly turn right (again signposted) along an extremely narrow and unlikely road which turns into a track with tall grass in the middle. The Des Cartiers trail and small car park is at the end of this track.

Note that on the map there appears to be an alternative route to Des Cartiers on a road which goes past La Tille falls – do not try it as we did as the road disappears completely into a huge landslide!

The full Des Cartiers trail is quite strenuous - you head straight up a long set of steps after the trail crosses a track

and then return eventually along that track from the left. It took us about 3 hours at birdwatching speed. We heard many parrots all along the trail and had some brief flight views. About 1.3 km from the end of the trail, where the track contours around the hill, there is a parrot viewpoint with a shelter and seats. Unfortunately tree ferns have grown up in the clearing so there is not really any view. However, a bit further on there is a fenced bit of path which goes across the top of a landslide and this provides excellent views right to the bottom of the valley across a cleared area with forest on either side. Two parrots and two pigeons flew across the gap and we had good views of their upper plumage. (We had heard that you need to be early to see parrots but this does not necessarily seem to be the case as we were there at 12:30). We also had splendid views of a circling Broad-winged Hawk.

We subsequently came to this spot with our guide, by walking to the left along the track where the trail meets it (reversing the trail in fact) and we had excellent views of just one parrot which flew across at eye level (there should have been many more at 9:30 but it was windy and the birds were very quiet)



Other birds at Des Cartiers were: Lesser Antillean Flycatcher, St Lucia Pewee, Grey Trembler, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, various hummingbirds.

Union Forest

Again, an amended version of Jim Holmes' notes:

The Union Forestry trail is easily reached from the Castries/Rodney Bay area. On the road from Castries to Rodney Bay, you will go through a roundabout with signs to Union. Take the roundabout's east exit towards Union (this is the Babonneau highway). This exit has a small shopping centre on the southeast side of the roundabout (it is actually set back about 100 meters from the main road). This shopping centre has a cinema and a Domino's Pizza. From the roundabout, it is 2km to the right turn to the Union Forestry Building. There is a very weathered sign for the Forestry Building at the turn. (also look for signs to the Montessori school) If you get to a Rubis filling station you have gone too far. After a short distance down this road turn right into a concrete road with a metal drainage grid across the bottom – this did have a sign but it was lying on the ground. The car park is 50 metres on the right. There is one nature trail leading off from behind the building on the left.

It seemed very quiet here but it was a convenient place for us to go before breakfast as it was close to Castries. The abandoned garden just inside the forest was a good place to watch for birds. We did have our best views of Scaly-naped Pigeon here and we saw the Pewee very well on both visits (just at the beginning of the trail near the garden) Also Lesser Antillean Flycatcher. On our first visit there were several Tropical Mockingbirds around the car park but not on the second.

Pigeon Island: We spent a few hours here in the middle of the day but did quite well for birds. Note that there is no signpost off the main road to Pigeon Island – the main road just carries straight on and peters out so you can tell you have gone wrong! We walked up the track to the top and saw Lesser Antillean Saltator, Black-faced Grassquit, American Kestrel and Common Ground-dove as well as good views of hummingbirds. Out on the sea were a Brown Booby and in the car park were Shiny Cowbirds.

Mamuka Gardens: These gardens are on the east coast south of Dennery. We walked up the northerly track to the top of the hill, which goes up alongside a small stream and saw Scaly-naped Pigeon and St Lucia Pewee. There may have been more birds here but most of the garden was closed due to a wedding.

Diamond Gardens and Falls: It was raining when we went here (eastwards out of Soufriere and look for signs on the right) but there are lots of interesting plants and it looks a good spot for hummingbirds (we saw Purple-throated Carib here at virtually sea level)

Rainforest Tram and zip lines: This commercial outfit is at Chassin Babonneau. Unsurprisingly we did not see many birds, just a few hummingbirds, from the aerial tram, though a couple of Scaly-naped Pigeons flew through and there were hummingbirds and an Elaenia in the gardens. They offer a bird-watching trek which departs early in the morning and lasts for 3 hours.

Hotel garden: In our quite small but well planted hotel garden we saw: Bananaquit, Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Zenaida Dove, Grey Kingbird, Carib Grackle, Tropical Mockingbird, Broad-winged Hawk, Antillean Crested Hummingbird, Green-throated Carib and eventually a Scaly-breasted Thrasher.

BIRD LIST

Brown Booby One bird circling the bay and feeding at Pigeon Island

Magnificent Frigatebird Seen offshore and soaring over fishing villages

Great Egret One seen in flight

Little Blue Heron Two birds seen very close, fishing from shoreside rocks in Castries harbour

Cattle Egret Very common, sometimes even perched on telegraph wires! There was an active breeding colony with small nestlings on two small trees next to an ornamental lake in front of Auberge Seraphim on Castries bay.

Broad-winged Hawk Seen briefly on several occasions in forest and over gardens: best views were of a soaring bird below us at the parrot viewpoint at Des Cartiers.

American Kestrel Quite common in urban areas and by roads. They were nesting in the tower of the cathedral in Castries – from the noise I assume they had well-grown nestlings.

Laughing Gull Two non-breeding birds seen offshore

Scaly-naped Pigeon The old name of Red-necked Pigeon seemed more appropriate for the only bird we saw perched at the Union Trail. We had short flight views whenever we were in forest, even at the Rainforest tram, but perched birds were difficult. They were just beginning to call at Union Forest and Mamuka Gardens but not in the highlands. We had good flight views at the parrot viewpoint at Des Cartiers.

Zenaida Dove Very common especially near the coast. More attractive than the picture in the book suggests – the black marks on the wings were more like checkers.

Common Ground Dove Small flocks were seen several times, in bare or grassy areas near the coast.

St Lucia Parrot Only seen at Des Cartiers where many birds were heard and seen briefly in flight, and then good flight views were had at the parrot viewpoint on two dates at 9:30 and 12:30.

Mangrove Cuckoo One bird seen in the forest at Millet

Purple-throated Carib Numerous at flowers in high elevation forest but also seen lower down, e.g. at Diamond Gardens. The green flash along the wing is distinctive even if you can't see the throat.

Green-throated Carib Common at lower elevations e.g. in gardens, but also seen in high elevation forest

Antillean Crested Hummingbird Truly small and very fast moving. Seen everywhere but difficult to get a really good view as it hardly ever seems to perch.

Caribbean Elaenia This supposedly fairly easy bird eluded us for days. We eventually saw several with Vision in the eastern dry forest and then one more at the Rainforest tram. They are not small and have a nice little call so I don't know how we missed them.

St Lucia Pewee We had some really good close views of this bird in forests – e.g. Union (near the beginning of the trail), Des Cartiers and Mamuka Gardens. It came in to its own song and also to virtually anything else! (This contrasts with another trip report which said that the Elaenia came in to the Pewee song) Our best view was when one flew across the path and caught an insect with an audible snap; it then proceeded to perch on a stump only 6 feet away.

Lesser Antillean Flycatcher Seen twice – once high up in the canopy at Union, the other low down close to the path at Des Cartiers. There were obviously more of them up in the canopy as we could hear the loud, sharp call.

Gray Kingbird The first bird we saw in St Lucia, perched on the wires. Very common in gardens, villages and forest edges. They are also nocturnal, taking advantage of street and garden lighting to catch moths. A trilling call.

Tropical Mockingbird Seen several times e.g. in the hotel garden and at the Union Forest car park, but strangely not seen at all in the last few days of the trip.

White-breasted Thrasher Several birds called up by Vision using loud pishing at a roadside site near Dennerly.

Gray Trembler Several pairs seen in the mid-canopy in the forests.

Scaly-breasted Thrasher Another supposedly easy bird which eluded us. One came in to pishing when calling the White-breasted Thrashers – we ignored it (Vision said we would see plenty more) and concentrated on the White-breasted. Mistake! We did not see another one and when we returned to try and re-locate the bird all we got were more White-breasted! We eventually tracked down one single bird which passed briefly through our hotel garden on our penultimate day. The small dark beak and the wing bar are very distinctive – we thought we may have been mis-identifying Pearly-eyed Thrashers but once we had seen a Scaly-breasted we knew that we had not.

Pearly-eyed Thrasher A few seen, often in pairs, in the highland forests. Their harsh jay-like screeching gives them away. We also saw one in the dry forest south of Dennerly with Vision – he was very surprised saying that he did not usually see them in that habitat.

Rufous-throated Solitaire We heard this bird at Des Cartiers – the haunting minor key flute-like notes are very distinctive – but could not see it or call it in. On our second visit with Vision we had fantastic views of a bird at eye-level which came in near the parrot viewpoint – we did not need to call it in though I understand the guides can do this.

St Lucia Warbler A very attractive little bird, seen mostly in the highland forest but also in the dry forest and at sea-level in a bush in a hotel garden next to the beach. This was the only bird which was actually singing – it sounded like a short version of a UK Wren – and we did get one to respond to a recording.

Bananaquit Common

Antillean Euphonia Two birds seen at a considerable distance on mistletoe at the parrot viewpoint at Des Cartiers

Black-faced Grassquit Seen several times along roads and by paths, at Pigeon Island, Marigot Bay and Dennery, not necessarily in grasses.

St Lucia Black Finch Two birds seen at the coconut feeders at Millet, in amongst hundreds of Bullfinches. The pink legs are distinctive in the male, and the female has a very grey head, neck and throat and looks surprisingly different from a female Bullfinch (they look the same in the book). Also seen in the dry forest near Dennery.

Lesser Antillean Bullfinch Extremely common, ranging from breakfast tables to deep forest.

Lesser Antillean Saltator Seen several times at Pigeon Island, then in the dry forest near Dennery.

Carib Grackle Common

Shiny Cowbird A flock in the car park at Pigeon Island were the only birds seen.

BIRDS WE DID NOT SEE:

Various waders – we didn't look for these at all

Eared Dove – apparently they are in the far south of the island

Quail Doves – Ruddy and Bridled. We looked hard for these but Vision said they are difficult unless they are calling, which they had not started to do yet.

Rufous Nightjar – we did not look for these as we understood they are almost impossible unless calling and it was the wrong time of the year

Lesser Antillean Swift – we looked for these but did not see them. Vision expected to see them whilst driving around the Des Cartiers area along the ridges as the cloud was low, but there was no sign of them.

Caribbean Martin – wrong time of the year

House (St Lucia) Wren Not seen – they are in the NE dry scrub which we did not visit

Brown Trembler According to Vision these are now very rare in St Lucia

Forest Thrush Very rare

Spectacled Thrush/Bare-eyed Robin This is not an uncommon bird around plantations etc. but it was not singing and they are much easier to find when singing. Other visitors have found them in the forests but we did not.

Black-whiskered Vireo Supposedly fairly common but there was no sign of them - do they move away from the island at this time of year? They are migrants in other places but they are supposed to be resident in St Lucia.

Yellow Warbler Not seen - perhaps we did not visit suitable mangrove habitat.

Grassland Yellow-finch According to the book this bird is on St Lucia but we did not see it

St Lucia Oriole Undoubtedly our biggest dip. Vision was unable to call up the “reliable” bird near Dennery and we had no sightings anywhere else.

Footnote: There are some notice boards in the forest areas with pictures of the various birds. Most of the pictures are quite good but there is one picture of what seems to be a Lesser Antillean Flycatcher described as having yellow underparts, which is entitled “Lesser Antillean Pewee”. There is no picture with the caption “Lesser Antillean Flycatcher”. Even if you assume that the Pewee is not split, there are still two species – Lesser Antillean Flycatcher and Lesser Antillean Pewee, and only one is illustrated. The confusion extends to the guides – our guide at the Rainforest Tram described the Pewee as having yellow underparts which it does not – they are distinctly rufous.