

## **Puerto Rico & Lesser Antilles Cruise December 2015**

### **Wilton Farrelly**

This was a family Christmas cruise with a few days holidaying beforehand in Puerto Rico. It was taken in the period 21st December to 2nd January. Birding was worked around family time and activities. Indeed cruises are not great for birding in that ships arrive in the centre of towns and birding sites are rarely close by. However I had pre-booked local bird guides in St Lucia and Grenada. I have below also mentioned a number of wildlife related activities that we took up.

#### **Puerto Rico**

21st December to 26th December.

Gran Melia, Rio Grande to 25th. Sheraton San Juan night of 25th. Boarded cruise ship lunchtime 26th.

Key sites birded: Gran Melia grounds, El Yunque forest (best area is around the visitor centre), around the Sheraton Hotel (Isla Grande) and San Juan old fort. Highlights:

Gran Melia: Zenaida Dove, White-winged Dove, Smooth-billed Ani, Magnificent Frigatebird, Caribbean Coot, Wilsons Plover, Green-throated Carib, Puerto Rican Stripe-headed Tanager, Greater Antillean Grackle, Black-faced Grassquit (Kildeer, Snowy Egret, Great White Egret, Pied-billed Grebe, Cattle Egret, American Coot, Brown Pelican, Royal Tern, Osprey, Gray Kingbird, Northern Mockingbird, Merlin, Bananaquit). There is a possibility that some of the Coot seen at the golfing lakes were also hybrids! This is an excellent resort for a birder to bring their family - you cannot beat watching Pelicans fish from your beach hammock. However it is worth noting that the majority of Puerto Rican endemics are actually in the opposite west side of the island.

El Yunque: Spent one morning with the family walking some trails. I also managed two early morning 90 minute birding spells along the roads etc. The reception centre does not open until 9 and I was stopped from entering one morning. However I managed to bird the parking lot on another morning and this parking lot easily produced the best birds! Birding the rain forest is challenging and my lack of experience in local calls and time pressures meant that I no doubt missed a number of species. After 11am the whole place is very busy. I wanted to do the El Toro trail for the Elfins Wood Warbler but this trail seems to be closed. Not sure if it is possible to get the Elfins anywhere else. Highlights however were: PR Lizard Cuckoo, PR Tanager, PR Tody, PR Woodpecker, Ruddy Quail-Dove, Red-legged Thrush, PR Bullfinch, PR Oriole, Loggerhead Kingbird (Other birds seen included Chesnut-sided Warbler (rare?), Black & White Warblers, American Redstart).

Los Cobaras: Did a Kayaking evening tour for the bio-luminescence bay. Only birds of note were a few Brown Booby's.

Sheraton Hotel, Convention Centre - for an urban location, there was actually plenty to see. I managed a few hours birding in the area. Highlights were PR Woodpecker, Gray Kingbird, Green-throated Carrib, Blackfaced Grassquit, Common Ground Dove, Pin-tailed Wydah, Saffron Finch and Monk Parrot!

San Juan Fort: Relatively quiet. Had a Monarch Butterfly.

The afternoon of the 26th December was spent boarding and on the cruise ship (Adventure of the Seas).

### **St Thomas**

St Thomas, 27th December: Went on a snorkel trip to see the Turtles at Buck Island with Fury Charters. Excellent and great views had. They were also very responsible in ensuring no touching of the Turtles and the Coral. Only birds of the trip were Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Boobys. Seas were 'dead'. Took a wonder around woodland next to the harbour. Nothing new for the trip except a Peregrine over and a Spotted Sandpiper at the harbour (great to see the winter plumage inc very yellow legs and wing length. Still had a few spots inc undertail coverts). Gray Kingbird and Zenaida and White-winged Doves only other birds of note.

### **St Croix**

St Croix 28th December. Even before I got of the ship I could tell there was more here than at St Thomas. We docked at Frederickstad. Around the boat were Magnificent Frigatebirds and the pier had numerous Royal Terns, Little Blue Heron, Turnstone and plenty of Brown Boobys. We headed over to Christianstad on a taxi and walked the waterfront. Plenty of White Capped Pigeons were the only birds of note.

We then took a taxi back to Frederikstad and hit the far end of the beach. It was busy and I walked back along the main road to the harbour. Birds seen on the way included Pearly-eyed Thrasher, Caribbean Martin and Yellow-crowned Night Heron.

### **Antigua**

Antigua 29th December and we docked at St Johns and we're off at 8:30am. We had booked a morning Stingray / snorkel experience a few weeks prior to travel via the ship. The interaction with the Stingrays was excellent and they were roaming free and clearly were not under duress. Bird wise there was little apart from White-capped Pigeons and Royal Terns. Back in St Johns whilst everyone else went shopping, I walked to a mangrove lagoon north of the ship and then in the grounds of the Cathedral and a nearby school. Birds seen included Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Nutmeg Mannikin, Antillean Crested Hummingbird and Carib Grackle. Also new for the trip was a Lesser Black-backed Gull, two Gull Billed Terns, Tricolored Heron, Sharp-shinned Hawk and Collared Dove.

Lesser-black backed Gull, Antigua. One of only two birds I photographed (phone to bins) during the whole trip:



### **St Lucia**

St Lucia 30th December. Had booked Stephen Lesmond via Birding Pal ([stephenlesmond@live.co.uk](mailto:stephenlesmond@live.co.uk)) for a days guiding. Due to ship arrival departure times this

was in effect time from 8:30am to 3pm. We headed to the main prize first, St Lucia Parrot in the high rain forest. It was good to learn that numbers were increasing and were up to 1500+. We seen circa 10 birds, mainly in flight but also had one relatively close along one of the trails. Other highlights in the high forest were Rufous-throated Solitaire, St Lucia Pewee, Purple-throated Carib, Scaly-breasted Thrasher, Gray Trembler and Caribbean Elaenia. We then headed to a lower level dry forest. We immediately had the impressive White-breasted Thrasher. After an hour of hard work by Stephen we had Black Finch and Lesser Antillean Saltator. However the star of the show was a St Lucia Warbler. Like all the *dendroica*, it is a stunning warbler. We also had a Mangrove Cuckoo and plenty of Leaser Antillean Bullfinches.

## Grenada

Grenada on the 31st December. I had booked a guide, Jerry Jeremiah ([tonydove200@yahoo.com](mailto:tonydove200@yahoo.com)) in advance. I met him at 8 am at the port and capital of Grenada, St Georges and he left me back at 1:30. The key target was one of the rarest birds in the world, Grenada Dove. On the way to Mount Hartman to search for them, we stopped at a drainage channel to successfully 'twitch' a Striated Heron. Green Heron was also present. Reaching Mount Hartman we went to the visitor centre (closed). Fruit-eating Bats were under the eaves. We immediately heard two doves calling but could not see them. It would then be another two hours before we would see one along the trail very close to the centre. The bird showed very well about 8 feet off the ground.

Grenada Dove, the rarest bird I have seen:



During our time walking the trails we also had Tropical Mocking Bird, the black Bananaquit sub species (although I do not know how this is not a full species), Grenada Flycatcher, Black-faced Grassquit, House Wren and Scaly-napped Pigeon.

We then stopped to look at a mangrove lagoon where we had Least, Spotted and Semi-palmated Sandpipers, Semi-palmated Plover, Smooth-billed Ani, Osprey and Turnstone. A lagoon behind Sasages Bay held Caribbean Coot. A trip up the mountains was disappointing with no birds of note. A stop at Jerry's garden feeders produced the impressive Lesser Antillean Tanager. Back at the harbour I had nine Laughing Gulls. All in a good day but disappointing that eg Cocoa Thrush and some other common mountain birds were not seen.

### **At Sea - 1st January**

We travelled the open sea from Grenada back to San Juan. Birding tropical oceans is mind numbing and this was no exception. Whilst on the ship and taking breaks to bird, ;I managed 3 Red-footed Boobies, 1 Tropicbird sp, 1 Magnificent Frigatebird. Flying Fish and one probable Humpback were the only other highlight.

All in a highly enjoyable trip with a primary focus on family activities but a good mix of birding with about 38 lifers (I had previously birded Tobago, Trinidad briefly and the US):

Lifers seen:

Caribbean Coot	Gray Trembler
Scaly-napped Pigeon	White-breasted Thrasher
White-winged Dove	Scaly-breasted Thrasher
Common Ground-dove	Pearly-eyed Thrasher
Grenada Dove	Rufous-throated Solitaire
Zenaida Dove	Red-legged Thrush
St Lucia Parrot	St Lucia Warbler
Puerto Rican Lizard Cuckoo	Antillean Euphonia
Mangrove Cuckoo	Puerto Rican Stripe-headed Tanager
Puerto Rican Emerald	Lesser Antillean Tanager
Green Mango	Puerto Rican Tanager
Antillean Crested Hummingbird	Greater Antillean / Puerto Rican Oriole
Green Throated Carib	Greater Antillean Grackle
Puerto Rican Tody	Saffron Finch (I)
Puerto Rican Woodpecker	Puerto Rican Bullfinch
Grenada Flycatcher	St Lucia Black Finch
Loggerhead Kingbird	Lesser Antillean Bullfinch
Caribbean Elaenia	Nutmeg Mannikin (I)
St Lucia Pewee	(Bananaquit - black subspecies)
Caribbean Martin	

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