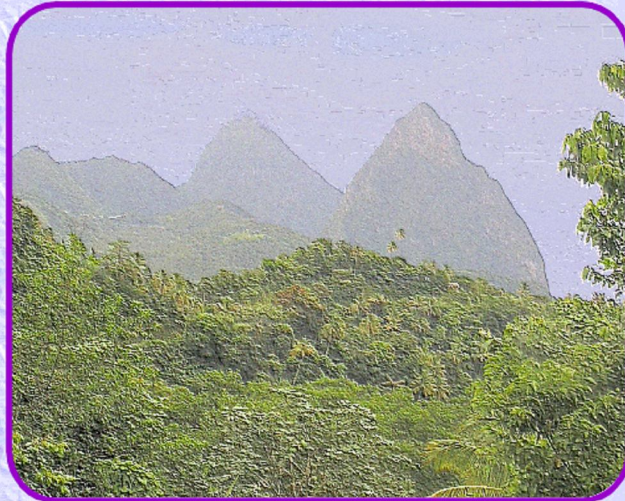
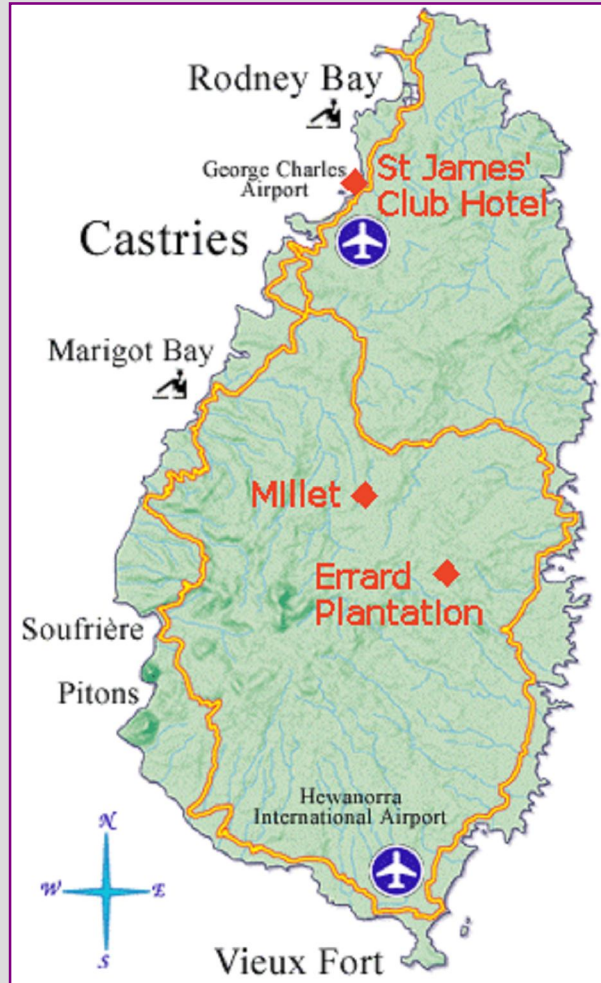


# St. Lucia



1<sup>st</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2004



Tuesday, 5 <sup>th</sup>	Tour to Soufriere, including volcano and catamaran	6:00 - 11:45
Thursday, 7 <sup>th</sup>	Millet Forest Trail	8:00 - 16:30
Friday, 8 <sup>th</sup>	Whalewatch	9:00 - 12:00
Wednesday, 13 <sup>th</sup>	Tour to Errard Plantation	7:45 - 12:30

# St. LUCIA

1<sup>st</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2004

## Introduction

After an enjoyable holiday in Antigua two years ago, we decided to follow up in the Caribbean with 2 weeks in St. Lucia. The former provided some good, generally common endemics, where I was able to walk into the forested hills from the hotel. St. Lucia is a few islands further South in the Caribbean islands chain, and the scenery and geography are quite different to that of Antigua. In size, it is a little larger, but the main difference is that the whole of the island is mountainous, and almost all covered in thick forest, which includes a fairly sizable rain forest in the South. October was chosen by default, following the departure of both children to University in September, and work commitments in late October. The main downside of this is that it falls towards the end of the hurricane season, and this was a significant threat, since Hurricane Ivan had severely damaged Grenada (only a couple of islands further down the chain again) a few weeks before we were due to depart. We were fortunate, although part of the reason for the lush vegetation on St Lucia is the amount of rainfall it receives (we had our fair share), and it is likely to occur at any time of the year.



As with most of the islands in the Lesser Antilles group, the number of species which can be seen is limited, although the islands do offer an interesting range of species restricted yet common here (such as Carib Grackle, Tremblers, Antillean Crested Hummingbird & 2 Caribs, Zenaida Dove, and 2 localised Thrashers). In addition, St Lucia is probably the best island in this area for the Holy Grail of birding – true endemics. St Lucia Parrot, Oriole, & Pewee are only found here, and all can be seen relatively easily in the rainforest. In addition, apart from on St Lucia, Adelaide's (superspecies) Warbler is only found on Barbuda / Puerto Rico, and Grey Tumbler and White-breasted Thrasher on Martinique (the latter is very rare, and a birding guide is probably needed to see them).



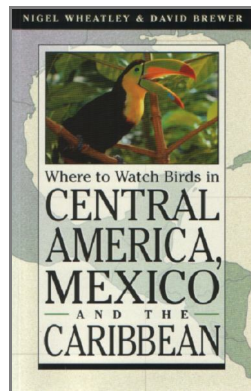
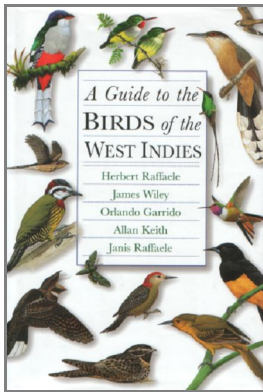
Choice of hotel was the St James' Club at Morgan Bay, which is only a mile or two North of the capital, Castries. Almost all of the major hotels on the island are situated in the North-west, which is about 1½ hours from the southerly situated international airport – a vestige of the building by the USA in the second world

war. We chose the St. James due to a reasonable price, and the fact that it lies in 22 acres of land, and this surrounded by trees. This means that even sitting by the pool or beach can be interesting for birds, most of which are the common lowland and / or dry forest species, although I did see all 3 species of hummingbird in the grounds, as well as Scaly-breasted Thrasher and Lesser Antillean Saltator (all multiple sightings while sipping on a rum punch next to the adults only swimming pool).

To get more from the birds of the island, at least one visit to the rain forest must be made. Car hire is readily available, although I am not sure how expensive this proves to be, or the quality of the cars. To rent a car, either an international driving permit must be produced, or an additional license must be bought from the rental company. I decided not to hire a car, since I am not convinced that the entrances to the rain forest walks can be easily found – signposts are almost a myth, and roads are poor, although I did see signs to a couple of the major walks in the South-east on the return to the airport. Instead, the Virgin rep at the resort arranged a trip via the Forestry Department (permission is always needed from these for any foray into the rain forest), and she also sorted out the taxi to and from the walk. I had intended to do a rain forest walk per se, and spot any birds as I went along, but these normally require a minimum number of people (often 10+), but she happened to speak directly to a birder, and they arranged a morning trip just for me, specifically to see St Lucia Parrots. Price was US\$30 for the guide, and US\$80 for the taxi, who waited at the site for me (a chap called Winston, who has covered this route many times).

Practical points for the trip are that sunrise and sunset are both just before 6 o'clock. The currency on the island is the East Caribbean Dollar (EC\$), but it is a reflection of the modern age that they readily accept the US\$, which has a fixed rate of around US\$1 = EC\$2.7. I found a decent pair of walking shoes to be useful, since the year round rainfall can make some of the tracks a little on the soft side.

## References



For identification, Raffaele's "Guide to the Birds of the West Indies" seems to be the best, if not a little on the large size (Princeton Press). It covers all of the Caribbean (apart from Trinidad & Tobago), with a reasonably accurate distribution table at the back of the book.

Sites on the island are found in Wheatley & Brewer's "Where to Watch Birds in Central America and the Caribbean" (Princeton Press).

## Sites

### St James' Club, Morgan Bay

Set in 22 acres of land, and situated on the beach, the hotel is in itself an enjoyable area to see birds. The immediate area outside of the hotel grounds was not worked, but seems to be fairly busy, with a main road alongside, and a reasonable amount of habitation.

The hotel grounds are well manicured, but there are a variety of trees and flowering shrubs throughout. Caribbean Grackle, Zenaida Dove, Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Bananaquit, Grey Kingbird, and Tropical Mockingbird are very common throughout, and

can even be seen pilfering within the restaurants and from the room balconies.



There is a choice of two swimming pools – a larger one situated right next to the main bar, which we kept our distance from, and a smaller adults only pool at the top of the resort. This was an excellent spot – no kids, fairly quiet, and the raised deck directly overlooked the surrounding woods, with some trees within the perimeter fence also of value. From one sun lounger I saw all three species of Hummingbird, Scaly-breasted Thrasher, Green Heron, American Kestrel, and Lesser Antillean Saltator.

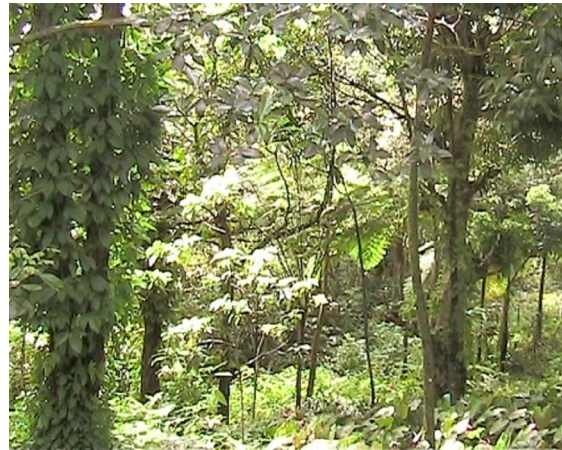


Sitting on the beach could also provide plenty of interest. A few waders braved the crowds (Turnstone, Semipalmated plover, and Spotted Sandpiper), and were usually best early morning. Most numerous herons were Cattle Egrets, particularly before sunset when they would fly by in good numbers going to roost. A handful of Little Blue Herons also went to roost at this time, usually flying much lower over the water than the Cattle Egrets. Further out to sea, Brown Boobies were often seen plying to and fro, and occasional Brown Noddies were a little further out. Two raptors (of the 3 on the island) were also from the beach – occasional Osprey over, and a female American Kestrel occasionally hunted the area (successfully) for small lizards.



## Millet Forest Trail

The tour companies at the hotels do run some trips into the rain forest but I found these didn't quite offer what I wanted, as some were for just three quarters of an hour, with others a full day including Jeep ride. One company did offer a tour called rain forest wonder which was a ¾ to three hours walk in the rainforest, but as usual, this needed a minimum of a certain number of people to run.



However, the Virgin representatives managed to book a Forestry Guide and the taxi to one of the areas where St Lucia parrots were fairly easy to find. So, at 5 o'clock in the morning, I was picked up by a driver called Winston, who was going to drive me there and back for 200 East Caribbean dollars. The drive took about 1 hour, and it was light when we arrived at the reserve entrance. I was met there by Charmaine, who was to be the guide, and Davidson who assisted in cutting down some of the plants on the path. We walked what was only a short way, after being dropped off on a rough track by Winston. Apparently, this area actually belongs to the father of Charmaine, and amongst the rainforest itself, which is fairly open here, they do have a banana plantation and mango trees, which fruit earlier in the season. When we had walked about 400 metres, we were overlooked by the forest clad peak, which had parrots flying around it even before we stopped. Rather than this being the rainforest walk, it was more of a rainforest watch, which suited, because Winston cleared a small area for the telescope and the plan was to sit and watch for the birds that appeared.



It is likely that the forestry are rightly proud of their St Lucia parrots, and this is the main quarry at this particular spot. The best time to see them is in the mango fruiting season when they come down very close and are quite easy to approach. However, views of these birds flying around the peaks were good enough for such a rare species. We stood in the same spot and watched for birds for about three hours. Predictably, Bullfinches and Bananaquits were very common here but as time progressed, many more species not only showed but were quite close. In the trees surrounding the spot we have

chosen, we had good views of the surrounding forested hills which, because it was a rain forest, were a wonderful verdant green and almost totally covered with trees. We were also fortunate that, despite being in a rain forest, the weather held out and was bright and sunny for all of the stay, with just a few clouds appearing overhead. It made for much easier bird watching.

Early on St Lucia Warblers started to appear as well as frequent Lesser Antillean Saltators. Frustratingly, many birds were seen further up the hillside flying in and out and were likely to include both Pearly-eyed Thrashers and Tremblers, but could not be seen well enough to identify positively. Lesser Antillean Saltators were much more obliging closer in, and fed on the fruited trees in our surrounds. Hummingbirds were very common, here particularly the two Caribs, but also Antillean Crested as well. Later on in the morning swifts appeared overhead, most numerous were the buzzing Lesser Antillean Swifts, but higher up were also Black Swifts and these showed flight comparison very well.



Scaly-naped Pigeons also appeared on fly pasts. Towards the end of our stay here, a pair of St Lucia Orioles were quite close by and added to the two I had seen as soon as we had arrived at 6 o'clock next to the headquarters. Many other birds were heard and either not identified or seen in many cases, and these included what apparently were Trembler and even Euphonia above us.

At just before 9:30, we walked back past the workers in the banana plantations the few hundred metres to the taxi again. Winston drove us the short distance back to the office, and I spent another half to three-quarters of an hour here looking into the trees (or garden as Charmaine called it) with the hope of finding Pearly-eyed Thrasher. None were here but two or three Tremblers were present. Good views were had of these, but with no comparison it was difficult at the time to identify which of the two Tremblers they were. Initial thoughts were Grey Trembler, since they seemed to lack the Rufous tinge that would be present on Brown Trembler. It was surprising that Charmaine thought there was only one Trembler on the island, and pointed to a poster in the office which showed that Trembler was outlined as a single species. Also while here, some very close views of St Lucia Oriole, and yet more good views of both Carib hummingbirds and single Caribbean Elaenia in canopy.

### Whale watching trip



I was surprised to find out that there was a good chance of seeing cetaceans at this time of year – the estimate is around a 75% chance of finding them. We arranged a trip through the Virgin rep (a little pricey at US\$60 each), but this included transport to the dock, a full morning trip, and all drinks. If we had done the trip a little later in the holiday, we would probably have caught the local bus into Castries (EC\$1.5 each way) and walked to Capt Mikes boat and paid directly. Suffice to say that the trip was a huge success – 4 Sperm Whales were seen within metres of the boat, and we were surrounded

by a school of Spotted & Common Dolphins later on. Flying Fish were also seen. An additional birding benefit of this trip is that the boat goes far enough out into the Caribbean Sea to pass feeding seabirds. Most of these are Brown Boobies, with lesser numbers of Brown Noddies, but a Booby which passed over the boat was a juvenile, and the amount of white on it indicated a probable second species.

## SPECIES SEEN

### **Brown Booby**

*Sula leucogaster*

These were seen regularly, both from the land and sea. Up to 10 were seen passing the hotel on any one day, but best numbers were from the Catamaran on the 5<sup>th</sup> (30) and the whale watching trip (10). One juvenile seen on the latter seemed to have too much white in the plumage for Brown Booby, so it is likely that other species can also be seen from the islands at this time of year



### **Magnificent Frigatebird**

*Fregata magnificens*

Small numbers seen only, with a maximum of 5 on the whale watching trip on the 7 days that they were seen. A few odd birds did pass over the hotel grounds

### **Little Blue Heron**

*Egretta caerulea*

These were most commonly seen in the area of the hotel, and all here were either feeding on the rocks next to the beach, or passing over the sea (both through the day and to roost). Amongst the birds were at least 2 white juveniles. 1 bird was fishing in the main harbour at Castries



### **Cattle Egret**

*Bubulcus ibis*

Extremely common throughout the island, and predictably the first species seen – from the plane on landing. The most pleasant time to see them was when they were flying past the beach either singly or in small groups just before sunset



### **Green Heron**

*Butorides virescens*

A single bird was seen regularly (on 7 separate days) below the deck of the adult swimming pool, or flying past just below tree top level. It was sometimes picked up by the noisy squawk often made in flight

### **Yellow-crowned Night-heron**

*Nycticorax violacea*

One bird only was seen flying into a tree in the next bay from the hotel room balcony

### **Osprey**

*Pandion heliaetus*

Single birds seen on 3 separate days

### **Broad-winged Hawk**

*Buteo platypterus*

5 birds were seen throughout the trip, all in the South of the island. 3 were at Millet over the rain forest, and singles were seen while travelling on the Soufriere road from Castries, and from the Land Rover on the way to Errard Plantation

### **American Kestrel**

*Falco sparverius*

What was probably the same bird was seen twice on the beach of the hotel, the first time seen from the water while waiting for my turn water skiing, and both times it seemed to be hunting for small lizards (successfully on one occasion when it landed for a short time



with its catch in the palm trees overhead). 3 more sightings of this species were made on separate days around the hotel grounds

**Semipalmated Plover**

*Charadrius semipalmatus*

What was probably the same individual each time was feeding along the sandy beach of the hotel, and this was on 5 occasions



**Spotted Sandpiper**

*Actitis macularius*

3 sightings of an individual feeding on the hotel beach

**Turnstone**

*Arenaria interpres*

Up to 4 birds were feeding on the hotel beach on most days, and usually could be seen flying to roost in the next bay on an evening

**Laughing Gull**

*Larus atricilla*

Only seen once – a group of 3 flying South from the hotel on the 8<sup>th</sup>

**Brown Noddy**

*Anous stolidus*

I had suspected that it was this species that I occasionally saw from the balcony of the hotel room early in the holiday, although they were a little too far out for even a telescope to help identify. However, over 100 were seen from the returning catamaran on a trip to Soufriere, some in large groups and close to the boat, and ~50 were similarly seen from the whale watch

**Royal Tern**

*Sterna maximus*

A small group of these returned to feed over the sea in front of the hotel on regular occasions (on 5 different days), usually being outnumbered by Sandwich Terns. Highest count was of ~12 from the boat on the whale watch

**Sandwich Tern**

*Sterna sandvicensis*

Regularly seen feeding over the sea from the hotel, with a maximum of ~50 birds on any one day

**Scaly-naped Pigeon**

*Patagioenas squamosa*

4 were seen flying over the rain forest at Millet

**Zenaida Dove**

*Zenaida aurita*

Extremely common and very tame – some were almost stepped on in the resort grounds



**Common Ground-Dove**

*Columbina passerina*

Not as common as expected. They were only seen on 3 days, all in the hotel grounds, and were small numbers (2 on 2 days, and 4 on the other). They are also a lot less approachable than the numerous Zenaida Dove

**St Lucia Parrot**

*Amazona versicolor*

This is probably the most prized of the endemics, and even the general population of the island are aware of their presence and importance. Numbers on the island fall short of 4 figures, but my impression is that they are not too difficult to see if the rain forest is visited. My trip to Millet seemed to be specifically for this species, and ~12 birds were duly seen. However, I arrived there shortly after first light, and the last of the birds was seen around half an hour later (probably before 7am). I was taken on a short walk from the forestry office to a point which is fairly open, and overlooked by a tree shrouded peak. All of the parrots were plying to and fro around this peak. Apparently, they are

seen much closer to in the mango season (January to May), when they are too busy gorging on the fruits to worry about human intrusion

**Black Swift** *Cypseloides niger*

~12 birds were seen over the rain forest at Millet, some of which were flying around the peak earlier populated by parrots. They are noticeably larger than the accompanying Lesser Antillean Swifts, with a much less fluttery flight

**Lesser Antillean Swift** *Chaetura martinica*

~50 over the rain forest at Millet. Some of these birds were directly overhead at treetop level

**Purple-throated Carib** *Eulampis jugularis*

This was the one Caribbean hummingbird of the 3 that I had missed in Antigua, but was quite easy to catch up with on St Lucia. Despite the information in the books that stated it was more of an upland species, I saw it in all habitats – including my first and some subsequent sightings in the hotel grounds. When the light strikes the seemingly black throat, the sheen looks more of a red than purple. 14 birds were seen in all, with most being present at Millet (up to 6 birds here)



**Green-throated Carib** *Eulampis holosericeus*

12 birds were seen through the week, and were seen in a variety of habitats and altitudes. The guides seem to point at the bill shape as being different to the Purple-throated Carib, but this can be difficult to use as a field mark at first. When the sheen on the throat is not seen (obviously diagnostic), the green on the back of the head and mantle compare easily with the black on the other Carib species



**Antillean Crested Hummingbird** *Orthorhynchus cristatus*

This is a much smaller bird than the two Caribs, and at 28 birds seen over the trip, more commonly seen than either of them. The subspecies on St Lucia has a green sheen on the crest of the male, looking otherwise black all over. While most were seen around the hotel grounds, 2 were present at the higher altitudes of Millet

**Caribbean Elaenia** *Elaenia martinica*

Only 1 seen – on the canopy of one of the trees overlooking the forestry office at Millet

**Lesser Antillean (St Lucia) Pewee** *Contopus latirostris latirostris*

I had thought that this endemic would have been easier to see, but the guide at Millet mentioned a bird that had been present in the area a few days earlier, seemingly indicating that sightings were notable. However, since the single bird that I saw was in the bushes adjacent to the mansion house at Errard Plantation, my guess would be that any reasonable time spent in the rain forest would pick this species up



**Grey Kingbird***Tyrannus dominicensis*

Not only are these birds very common and approachable, but they occur at all altitudes and habitats that I visited. Maximum number was ~50 on the day of the visit to Millet, where they were almost constantly in sight throughout the trip

**Tropical Mockingbird***Mimus gilvus*

These were seen on every day but one, with a maximum of around 8 birds on one day, this being a day when we didn't leave the hotel grounds. They were very easy to see at the hotel, and could usually be heard singing towards the end of the day

**Grey Trembler***Cincloerthia gutturalis*

One or two were possibly seen while watching the parrots at Millet, but could not be pinned down for even half decent views. On the return to the office, at least 2 birds were eventually seen in the trees overhead very close to. They have only recently been split from Brown Trembler, which occurs a lot more widely in the Caribbean than the restricted St Lucia / Martinique range of Grey Trembler. They also don't appear to have any diagnostic marks, but thankfully the St Lucia form has a much cleaner lighter breast than the more rufous coloured Brown Trembler, and is the only one of the two species on this island likely to occur in rain forest

**Scaly-breasted Thrasher***Allenia fusca*

These are quite a common bird on the islands, but I had only found one pair on Antigua – in the hills – so had assumed they were not too easy to see. The pair of birds watched gorging on berries at the adult pool disproved this, and they were seen almost daily. 3 were also present at Millet, where I unsuccessfully waited to try for Pearly-eyed Thrasher, which is reputed to come to feed around the forestry office

**Black-whiskered Vireo***Vireo altiloquus*

2 well marked birds were seen at Millet

**St Lucia ("Adelaide's") Warbler***Dendroica delicata*

The Adelaide's super-species is not endemic to St Lucia, but its strange distribution restricts it to only 2 other islands – Barbuda and Puerto Rico, which are much less likely to be visited than here. It is not surprising therefore that the 3 have recently been split into separate species – the ones on St Lucia predictably being named St Lucia Warbler. After an initial bird was seen on a sightseeing trip to the volcano above Soufriere, ~8

birds were seen at Millet, most of which were very close to while feeding actively in nearby trees and low vegetation

**Bananaquit**

*Coereba flaveola*

Very common



**Lesser Antillean Bullfinch**

*Loxigilla noctis*

Commonly seen, particularly around the hotel grounds

**Lesser Antillean Saltator**

*Saltator albicollis*

The first birds were around half a dozen in the rain forest at Millet, feeding on berries and quite close. I had thought they would be a species only seen when leaving the hotel, so was surprised at the 2 individual sightings on separate days from the comfort of one of the adult swimming pool loungers, the birds being just beyond the perimeter fence (about 10 metres from me)



**Carib Grackle**

*Quiscalus lugubris*

Abundant everywhere, and noisy with it!

**St. Lucia Oriole**

*Icterus laudabilis*

The third (or fourth, depending on status of St Lucia Pewee) of the endemics. They are only usually seen in the higher altitude rain forest, and I was lucky to see my first almost as soon as I stepped out of the Land Rover on arrival at Millet. This is an excellent spot for them, not only because they are quite easy to see (9 were seen during my stay), but they can also be very approachable, particularly around the forestry office, where they can tend to come to feed in the 'garden'



**TOTAL SPECIES = 38**