

BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 2/2013:

MARTINIQUE IN DECEMBER 2012



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On December 15th, 2012, I arrived in Fort-de-France, Martinique, on American Eagle flights from Santo Domingo and San Juan, with a 10 hour transit in Puerto Rico. My original direct flight had been canceled by Air France, without compensation. To add to the insult, Europcar Martinique did not deliver my car at the Lamentin Airport, as agreed and confirmed. I was consequently stranded there at midnight and had to take a taxi to Villa Bleu Marine, my hotel in La Trinite, arriving there by 1.40 AM. The following morning I returned to Lamentin to pick up the car. The mistake in updating my car reservation was acknowledged by the Europcar staff, but not by the person responsible. I therefore now have another reclamation processes under way with EU Customers Rights Admin. The return taxi cost €140.



Fig. 1. The location of Martinique, as portrayed at San Juan international airport, Puerto Rico.

Otherwise, I had no negative experiences in Martinique. The new Renault Clio was more than adequate and cost €160 for six days. My accommodation was economical by local standards, €64 per night in a two storey flat with a small kitchen, three beds and AC for nights. Villa Bleu Marine is strategically well located in the green and peaceful part of La Trinite, at La Crique. Its helpful and resourceful manager, Mme. Marie Luise Leti (villa-bleu-marine@wanadoo.fr; www.villa-bleu-marine.com) was fast in replying my email enquiries (mostly in Google Translate French). She also spoke English quite well, just like the majority of French people I met in Martinique.

The first morning, while waiting for the return taxi, I saw my first Martinique Oriole right at the Villa Bleu Marine, flying between two trees along a small stream which runs next to it. No stress for this endangered endemic! Carib Grackles were abundant everywhere around human settlements, and there were many Lesser Antillean Bullfinches, Black-faced Grassquits, Bananaquits, Green-throated Caribs, Tropical Mockingbirds, Grey Kingbirds, Zenaida Doves and Eurasian Collared Doves around, as well. A colony of some bats, most likely Mexican Free-tailed Bats, occupied the hotel roof structures and left them at sunset. They did not bother the inhabitants in any way but added character to the place.



Fig. 2. Secluded parking, garden and a swimming pool; Villa Bleu Marine, La Crique, La Trinite.

I found my Martinique target species in two days and therefore had plenty of time to adjust myself to the climate and time zone, in the beginning of a more extensive Caribbean tour (Guadeloupe & the Dominican Republic). What is more, I had time to consider the logistics of birding on the island. La Trinite was found to be a great strategic location to stay because driving both to the Caravelle Peninsula and to the mountains took only 25 minutes, one way. In regard to the mountains, I mean the closed highway D1 which ends in a landslide right next to Plateau Boucher, soon after the eastern entrance of Trace de Jesuits hiking trail on the Morne du Lorraine mountain range.



Fig. 2. The ground floor of my flat a Villa Bleu Marine; the main bedroom is upstairs.



Fig. 3. A Green-throated Carib, a common species of lower elevations, at its guard post.

Most of the meals were cooked by myself in the accommodation (salt requested from Mme. Leti). Make sure to keep all the food at the fridge or seal the packages well. Otherwise tiny ants, the curse of the tropics, will arrive and spoil it. There is a large supermarket in Lamentin as you leave the airport, soon after the first roundabout, on the left. The ones in La Trinite are nothing special but there is a great one close by, at Sainte Marie, right by the main highway in the town center, again on the left. Fruit, smoked fish etc. is often sold at roadside stalls and markets. Cash was no problem as Euro is the currency in this department of France and readily available at airport ATMs, for example.

SITES AND SPECIES

Chateau de Dubuc, Caravelle Peninsula

For maps, check out the excellent Lesser Antilles report at the norththailandbirding.com website. The access has altered since some of the previous information. On the road from La Trinite, via Tartane, one needs to park by the start of the Chateau de Dubuc access road. The low parking lot right in front of the Chateau de Dubuc gate, from where the nature trail starts, is reserved for staff parking. Otherwise, driving from Tartane, one enters the gravel part of the main road, continues through the first gate (invariably open), past a viewpoint, and parks where the gated entrances to the ruins road and a lighthouse road (continuation of the main road) start. From there, it is a few hundred meters downhill on a paved track to the Chateau de Dubuc.

Birdwise, there is absolutely no sense in entering the ruins themselves (entrance €4), during their midday open hours. Go left to the nature trail (signposted next to rubbish bins) and enter the ravine. The first hundred meters down and up is very productive, as well as the Y-crossroads little bit further on. It was there where I spent most of my time during four visits, three in the morning and one in the late afternoon. All of the visits were quite productive.

In the morning, it pays to arrive early (by sunrise) because the nature trail is quite popular with hikers and people looking for a secluded beach lower down. The parking area gets full in an hour or two. On the other hand, the birds are consequently well habituated to the presence of humans. The main target species can be seen any time of the day in December but birding is more enjoyable during the more peaceful hours between 6 and 9 AM. After 9 AM, the staff and their private guests at the ruins start making noise (generator, cars, music, loud talking etc.), more so than the visitors.

The most conspicuous bird at the site is the White-breasted Thrasher, which also is the most critically endangered and sought-after bird of Martinique. Internet information speaks about 40 breeding pairs. My best count between the main road parking area and the Y-crossing was 19 definitely different individuals; a sign of good breeding success? More than ten were easily seen – first heard – on each visit.



Fig. 4. A pair of White-breasted Thrashers, observing their territory at Chateau de Dubuc.



Fig. 5. A male Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, subspecies *noctis*.

The species was commonly seen also along the access road, all the way up to the gate. They go through the leaf litter, make plenty of noise, and also claim their territories by singing and observing their surroundings from tree branches, occasionally relatively high in the canopy.

Another endangered species, Martinique Oriole, is present, but not as easy to see, not to mention see well. The problem with the species is its preference to thick canopies and close to the trunk positions. One is therefore most likely to see the orioles in flight between two such locations, rather than perched on exposed branches.

At the main road gates parking, a single oriole was encountered once. Another one was seen by the ruins parking area. The ravine at the beginning of the nature trail had one and then a party of four, three of which stood a moment on a semi-open branch right in front of me. The fact that I have no photos of the species in this report is due to the simultaneous appearance of four French tourists, who loudly discussed something and managed to scare the birds off a split second before I was able to focus on them!

Scaly-breasted Thrasher was common, mostly in middle or upper canopy, slumbering around in a clumsy manner typical of the species. They are easy to locate because of the noise and movement they create in the trees, but may look surprisingly uniform, thrush-like. Bare-eyed Robins, on the other hand, moved low in the forest and were recorded only four times, with excellent views on individual birds either down in the ravine or along the paved access road.

A single Pearly-eyed Thrasher, an uncommon species in Martinique, was once present at the Y-crossing. Lesser Antillean Bullfinches (subspecies *noctis*) and Lesser Antillean Saltators were both tame and plentiful, together with Whiskered Vireos, Mangrove Warblers, Black-faced Grassquits and Caribbean Elaenias. Scaly-naped Pigeons, Ruddy Ground-Doves and Mangrove Cuckoos were also observed a few times.

Once I bypassed Tartane along the parallel Morne Pavillon road, through some rural settlements. The road had a few interesting spots, notably with some Purple-throated Caribs, in addition to already seen species such as Caribbean Elaenias. The best discovery was, however, three Lesser Antillean Swifts in a valley above Tartane. The species proved to be scarce, with only two records in six days. One really needs to scan the sky on a regular basis to score with this swift, which could however be encountered just about anywhere on the island.

Seabirds were scarce along the coast, with single Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds. Herons and egrets were mostly presented by the ubiquitous Cattle Egrets. On the 18th, I did some reconnaissance along the coast north of La Trinite, up to Le Lorraine and back. The best discovery was a single Bridled Tern, and my first Common Ground-Dove (many seen later on).

Closed Highway D1, Morne du Lorraine

From La Trinite bypass, take the Grosse Morne road and leave it after one kilometer, turning right towards Bois Lezard. In the first Y, turn right and keep on going straight until at a four-way crossing at the edge of the village of Bois Lezard. Go left and immediately to the right (sign *Route Barree*). Driving through the settlements, the road eventually meets another road to Grosse Morne (to the left). Soon after this, an ascent to the mountains really starts, along a slope with plenty of bamboo. A viewpoint (on the right) will follow and a picnic shelter soon afterwards, at a Y-crossing. You have arrived in protected forests of Morne du Lorraine, with little human presence.

Only small cars may pass the gate to the last section. The forest is doing its best to swallow the abandoned D1. The tarmac is, however, in perfect condition and there are several places for a U-turn. First, one encounters the trailhead of Trace de Jesuits, with an information table. A curve with great views over the northern part of the island (one of the best birding spots on the road) will soon follow. One may observe both Mt. Peleé and the island of Dominica from there. Later on, there is another wide spot with running water, a stream with a bamboo 'hose'. The road ends close to Plateau de Boucher, where a high fence and a concrete barrier have been erected to prevent people from wandering forward into a dangerous landslide area. Needless to say, some hikers have broken the fence to gain access there.



Fig. 6. The end of the D1, with a fence and concrete barrier. Prime habitat for Grey Tremblers.



Fig. 7. Another Route Barrée sign at the picnic shelter Y junction, 2 km before the final barrier. Road narrows, being fine for Renault Clio but a size too small for some larger vehicles.

In my mind, it is not a bad strategy to stay at La Trinite, or close-by, and gain fast access to not only the Caravelle Peninsula but to D1, as well. The popular option to go to the other side of the landslide involves, after all, double driving time, negotiating through Fort-de-France, heavy traffic and muddy trails instead of the pleasant tranquility of D1. On each visit, between zero and three cars were encountered on the road, mostly people hoping that D1 would go all the way through (it does, on most maps), despite the several road signs stating the opposite. During my six visits there, equally in the morning and afternoon, short showers were encountered once. The mornings tended to be cool and overcast, and therefore less productive than the afternoons. The passerines were clearly more vocal sunny afternoons, between 2 and 4.30 PM, but doves and pigeons preferred the mornings.

At least three pairs of Grey Tremblers occupied to mixed bamboo-broadleaf forest on the last two kilometers of D1, but were relatively difficult to see. Cracking views but no photography opportunities were available twice about 100-150 meters before the final barrier. The species was readily identifiable by light grey belly and either white or pale yellowish white eyes. On the 20th Dec, two juvenile birds with an adult appeared to have dark eyes, as far as I was able to see in the gloom of the forest. Single Bare-eyed Thrushes were repeatedly seen on the roadside, inspecting leaf litter, at the first bamboo slope, at the last Y-crossing and towards the end of the road.

Two Martinique Orioles were present at the section after the 'jesuit trailhead', one singing and another seen, typically, in flight between two trees covered by vines, at the lookout spot. They brought my oriole total to ten individuals.

On the 18th of December, a single Bridled Quail-Dove was calling in the forest soon after the trailhead. The species apparently is rather rare in Martinique. Otherwise, the mountains only had a few Scaly-naped Pigeons and a single Ruddy Quail-Dove. The scarcity of native doves and pigeons, and their shy behavior, must indicate some significant hunting pressure. Up to five Martinique Swifts were also present at the lookout, but only during one afternoon visit. Are they really so scarce or do migrate somewhere in winter?

The most difficult species to locate in Martinique proved to be, somewhat surprisingly, the Lesser Antillean Flycatcher. A single roadside bird was seen above Bois Lezard and another one was singing higher up, but that was all in six days! Also Lesser Antillean Pewee was more difficult to spot than expected, with a single well seen individual singing actively at the D1 viewpoint (last section) on the first afternoon visit, and two others responding to it. Later, only two singing males were recorded. In comparison, Caribbean Elaenias seemed to be everywhere. The attractively colorful Rufous-throated Solitaires (subspecies *genibarbis*) were quite common along the D1, with one or two birds visible in the roadside trees and bushes on each visit. It is important to realize, that the species' favorite perches oftentimes are rather low, and not in the canopy.

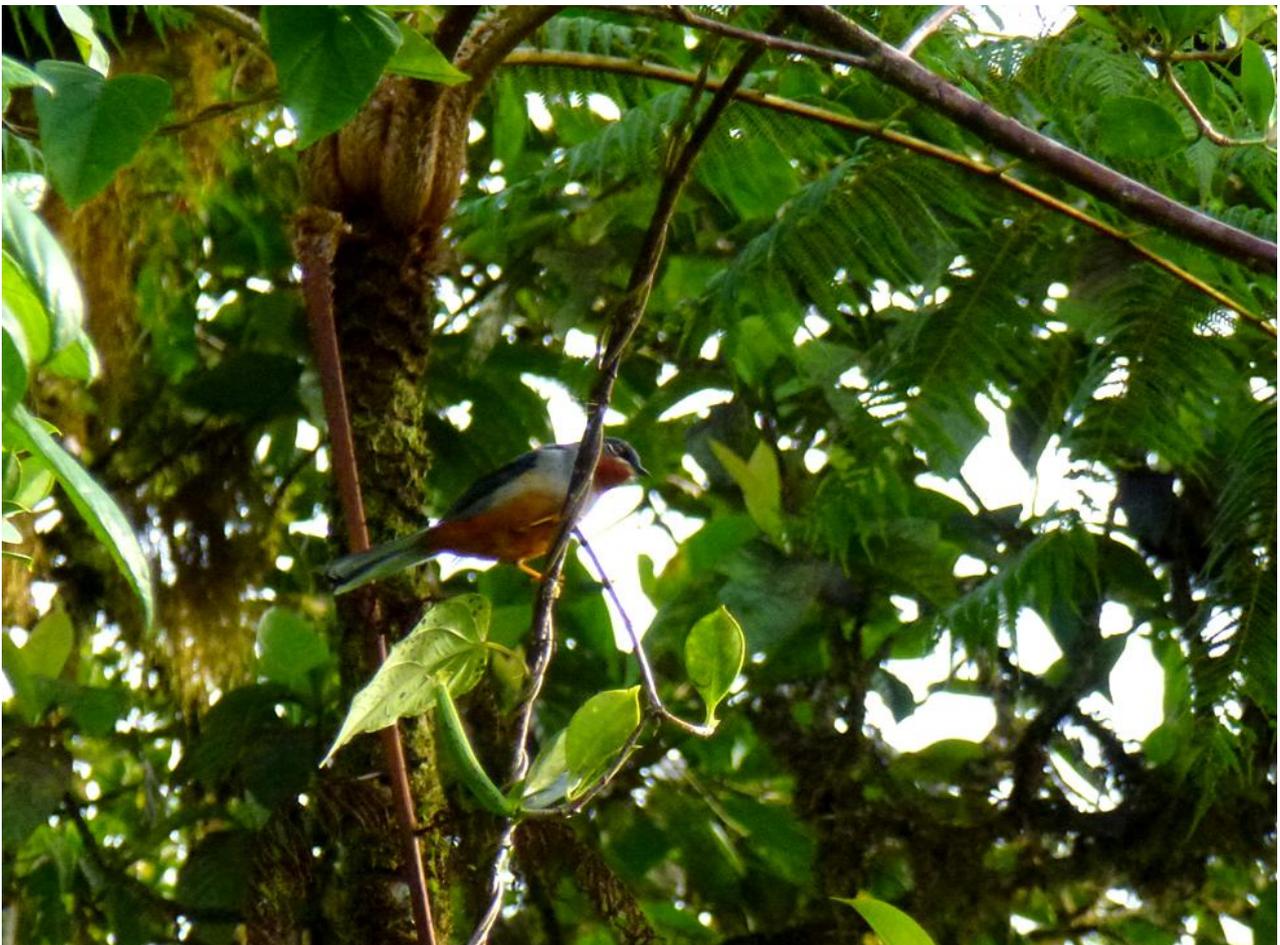


Fig. 8. One of the many Rufous-throated Solitaires at D1; a pleasure for both eyes and ears.



Fig. 9. A scene from the viewpoint, Mt. Peleé on the right.



Fig. 10. A Purple-throated Carib in shadows; in sunlight, the breast is fiery red.



Fig. 11. My car was examined in detail, both outside and inside, before a 'pass' was declared.

Antillean Crested Hummingbirds, Green and Purple-throated Caribs were common at flowery spots on the way to Morne du Lorraine, and the last species also on the high mountain, where single Blue-headed Hummingbirds could be seen on each visit. Broad-winged Hawks, a Merlin and American Kestrels were seen from D1 on a few occasions, the first species being relatively common. A Ringed Kingfisher and a male Red Avadavat were recorded at Bois Lezard.

Twice, I also explored the left fork of the last Y, by the picnic shelter. The area looked promising and had some interesting birds (e.g. Mangrove Cuckoos, calling Grey Tremblers, Rufous-throated Solitaires, a lone Chestnut Mannikin).

The highlight was, however, a tame and inquisitive Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, which eventually entered my car and had to be rescued from there by hand. It was not looking for food, as the scraps of bread I offered to her were disregarded, but appeared to be keenly interested in all the details of the vehicle, which received a thorough inspection which lasted for almost an hour! Strange little fellows, these Lesser Antillean Bullfinches (see also my Guadeloupe report, with the Corossol bird).

Manzo Reservoir and Pointe Camphre, Le Francois

On the 21st of December, I vacated my Villa Bleu Marine room at noon, and did a trip to the southern part of the island in order to spend time before a late evening flight to Guadeloupe. The reservoir itself did not hold much to see, just Pied-billed Grebes. A residential road (Chemin Rural la Saint Pierre) along its western shore had, however, a grassy spot with interest for feral cage birds, between two houses under construction. The spot had no less than 40 Orange-cheeked Waxbills, 5 Black-rumped Waxbills and 9 Chestnut Mannikins. European Collared Doves were particularly common there.

After the town of Le Francois, I accidentally ventured on private estate land at Pointe Camphre, a grassy peninsula next to some high end tourism island enclosures. It was a pleasant spot with an Osprey and a Sandwich Tern, among other species.

L'Etang des Salines, Ste-Anne

Looking for a nice spot for seabird observations, I ended in spending the late afternoon at L'Etang des Salines, at the southernmost tip of the island. St. Lucia was well visible from there but seabirds were relatively scarce, with the exception of Royal Terns, which were common. Additionally, a pair of Red-billed Tropicbirds and an American Oystercatcher were observed between the mainland and the island of Cabrits.

A surprising find was, however, the wetland reserve of L'Etang des Salines, with its boardwalks and observation platforms. Checking satellite images at home, I found out that there had been sweet water ponds, as well. The salt lake had Royal Terns, a Tricolored Heron, Snowy and Great Egrets, a Green Heron and a Great Blue Heron. A close-by field had eighty wintering Barn Swallows and a lone Caribbean Martin. All in all, my Martinique list had 56 species in the end, including the feral Rock Pigeon.

The afternoon traffic to Fort-de-France was jammed and slow, but I eventually made it to the Europcar depot in Lamentin on time, and had no hurry in catching my next flight in the Lesser Antilles.





Fig. 12. A map of the L'Étang des Salines, a bird sanctuary.



Fig. 13. One of the Snowy Egrets at the salt lake.