

St. Lucia 8-15/2 2014

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History and some facts

England and France was fighting for the domination of St. Lucia during the whole of the 15th century and until the early years of the next. The island change owners 14 times during this period.

Great Britain took full control over the island from 1814 until 1967 when St Lucia got autonomy and then finally got independently 1979.

The population is around 170000 and the size of the island is 620 km².

St. Lucia is belonging to the Lesser Antillean in the Caribbean Sea and situated in the south end of the row of these small islands.

It has long been a holiday destination for UK citizens. St. Lucia has been living on the income from the banana export, mainly to Great Britain, but also from the tourism and some cocoa and coffee plantations.

The island has a number of sought after species for the keen world birder, such as St. Lucia Parrot, White-breasted Thrasher, Gray Tumbler, St. Lucia Black-finch and St. Lucia Oriole to mention a full hand of tricky endemics or near endemics.

This was the third leg of our family vacation, therefor no early mornings except the morning we went out together with a local guide.

(The previous weeks we had visited Trinidad&Tobago one week each, see separate trip report).

Accommodation

We stayed the whole week at Fox Grove Inn. We found this guesthouse mentioned in other trip reports as a recommended place to stay. It is St. Lucia/Swiss owned and the hosts are very care taking and helpful with all kind of needs a tourist asks for.

The inn is situated close to hot spots for both the St. Lucia Parrot and the White-breasted Thrasher. No long drive from/to the airport either.

This is absolutely a place to recommend to other birders, also those with families in company. Just leave the family at the pool side and go birding. Besides that they serve very good food.

Visit their web page <http://www.foxgroveinn.com> or email Esther foxgroveinn@candw.lc



Fox Grove Inn

Esther herself does know what birds that turns up in the neighborhood, well aware of the oriole, trembler and other species.

Guide

We used Stephen Lesmond. He lives in the nearby village named Praslin and can be contacted on phone +001 1758 1717 0798 or email Esther on Fox Groove Inn and she will be assisting with the contact. Email address above. Esther arranged the guiding for us.

Note that Stephen, as well as some of the other guides, works for the forest administration and therefore mainly only do guiding on weekends. He was a really good guide, with sharp ears and eyes and he is more than willing to share his birds with others.

We paid 70US\$ each for almost a full day birding (we went back to Fox Grove for lunch) and that included rainforest fee and transportation.

Litterature and tapes

The field guide that we used was Birds of the West Indies, H Raffale et al, reprinted 2011.

We bought a Gizi Map from the Swedish company Kartbutiken www.kartbutiken.se as we were going to rent a car, this had a very good scale; 1:50000, and the map itself was excellent.

Also a small number of trip reports, with various amount of information, were found on websites like www.club300.se and www.surfbirds.com

A few bird calls were found on Xeno-canto, but the few times I tried there were no respond at all from any bird, "pishing" worked out good for Stephen so I used that instead.

Driving around

We rented a car, pre booked on the internet, from ST Lucia International Car rentals. It was the cheapest option we could find, but at the end maybe not the best. We found out they did not have the car I have pre booked and they seemed not to have so many cars. From the beginning they did not include the last, but not full day. When leaving the car back they wanted to charge for an extra day or at least some hours, which we denied. I had an offer of the full price for exactly the days and hours we wanted to use the car.

Even Esther at Fox Grove looked a little disappointed around what car they rented us. Another couple at Fox Grove got a much smaller car than they had booked.



Not really what I call a rental car!

Driving was on the left side and even a non-automatic gear caused us no problems. Towns and villages are often with narrow streets and roads, cars parked on the wrong side and a little everywhere, one way streets not so obvious signed and not the main roads either.

At the end we can recommend driving on your own.

Don't forget to arrange with an international driving license, St Lucia is the first country I have visited where they really asked for it and wrote down the number on the rental contract. Also be aware of that price for rent a car increases with driver's aged over 60.

Visited Sites and places

Quillesse Forest Reserve – Des Cartiers trail

This is a rainforest reserve around 30 minutes' drive from Fox Grove, most known for easy access to the St Lucia Parrot. No signs tell you where to turn off from the main road, even though the last two turn offs are nowadays signed. Once been there it's easy to go back on your own.

If one do so, be prepared to pay an entrance fee of 10US\$ each.

We did the whole 4.3 km walk around the well maintained track on our own on the second visit. It's an absolutely amazing forest to walk through. Even though it's not crowded with birds, but those found are all of interests.



Part of Des Cartiers Trail



View from the parrot look-out.

Praslin

A small village just 5 minutes' drive north of Fox Grove. Here is a small roadside patch very reliable for the sought after White-breasted Thrasher, but also for the tricky St. Lucia Black-finch.

Easy to find once been there.

Our guide Stephen Lesmond lives in Praslin so he always has up to date news.

Aupicon Pond and Beach

The pond is St Lucia's biggest fresh water pool. For now the pond is on private land and access is only possible if joining a local guide or one speaks the local creole dialect. Rumors say that the birders are trying to open up the area for public access.

It's easy to see from the main road, situated on the right, towards the sea, around a 10 minute drive from the airport.

Pay a small fee to land owners when leaving, 5US\$ could be worth a visit.

The beach held a small flock of waders and our guide said it's a good beach for waders. We arrived when the tide was high so most birds had disappeared.

Fox Grove Inn

The surroundings of the Inn was mostly banana plantations with fragmented patches of forest, but obviously good enough to produce quite a nice list of birds. We recorded all sought after species in this area except the parrot, euphonia, the solitaire and Pearly-eyed Thrasher.

Between the Inn and a private house there is a short track that leads to the "Banana Track" from where one can walk in both directions. Keeping to the right and walk for 15-20 minutes and one will reach Mamiku Botanical Garden. On the other side of a small bridge just before the garden there is a fenced off road to the right to Mamiku Estate. No problems to walk here and bird.

Mamiku Botanical Garden

We spent one afternoon here just walking around. As with all botanical gardens there is always a potential for seeing birds. Maybe an early morning start would be better though we did not see that much. Best bird was our first Lesser Antillean Flycatcher.

Vieux Fort

South and west of the air strip there are a number of small pools and a ditch. Others have seen a variety of wetland birds here. I had a brief visit here without seeing anything special.

Drive south of town towards the towers on the southern tip, called Cape Moule á Chique. Up the hill are a good parking lot and an ocean view. Check to water around the cliff to the left and there is a number of Red-billed Tropicbird breeding on the backside, out of sight from the lookout but easily seen when flying on and off around the cliffs.

Diamond Botanical garden

We walked around here for a little more than an hour, mostly in rain. From a birders point of view not much was seen except very close sightings of several Purple-throated Caribs. Better weather would probably show more birds. The garden is a popular destination for the passengers on the big luxury cruise ships, making their stop in Castries harbor, and will therefor get crowded from time to time.

Pigeon Island

Is a 40-acre (160,000 m²) islet located in Gros Islet in the northern end of St. Lucia. Once isolated from the country the island was artificially joined to the western coast of mainland in 1972 by a man-made causeway built from dirt excavated to form the Rodney Bay Marina. Composed of two peaks the island is a historic site with numerous forts such as an 18th-century British fort and Fort Rodney both used by the British to spy on French Ships from neighboring Martinique. In 1979 it was named a national park and again in 1992 it became a national landmark under the control of the Saint Lucia National Trust.

Some lines around the history of Pigeon Island:

The Arawak people, the original inhabitants of Pigeon Island, were driven out by the Caribe people around 1000 A.D. The Caribe people lived in caves along the shore of the island, and hunted for fish, shellfish, small animals and birds. They also foraged for plant food. In the 16th century, a French pirate, François le Clerc, used Pigeon Island as his base. He forged an agreement with the Caribe people, so that they would not attack his ship.

In 1778, Admiral George Rodney took over Pigeon Island, expelled the natives, and built a fort on the smaller of the two peaks. This fort is

known as Fort Rodney. To establish clear sightlines, Rodney ordered all trees on Pigeon Island to be cut down. From the higher peak, Signal Hill, Rodney was able to observe the French naval base on Martinique.

Over the next several years, the British built other structures on Pigeon Island, including two barracks, a mess hall and a lime vat.

In 1782, Admiral Rodney sailed from Pigeon Island to confront the French fleet, which he defeated in the Battle of Saints. In 1824, a barracks which had been destroyed by a hurricane in 1817 was rebuilt.

(Text from Wikipedia).

From a birders perspective there is not much to expect. Our only safe identified Shiny Cowbirds was seen here, as was Brown Booby and Eurasian Collared-dove. Two saltators and a Scaly-breasted Thrasher was maybe the most interesting species.



Signal Hill on Pigeon Island



One of the Piton's

Some thoughts around birding on St. Lucia

For a keen birder that just wants to fill in the gaps in the list a whole week is to long time. Depending on how many of the local species one need I would say 3-4 days would be enough. The fourth day as a spare day if something goes wrong, heavy rain or other unexpected things happens. I would recommend arriving on a Thursday (or Friday) use a guide during the weekend to optimize the chance for tricky endemics.

We managed to find all species on the wish list except the Lesser Antillean Swift, could just not find them. A total of 57 species were seen so don't expect a long species list.

Daily log

8/2. Travelling day from Tobago to St.Lucia, via Trinidad, where we were told that our flight to Vieux Fort, St Lucia was delayed a couple of hours. Therefore we arrived late to Hewanorra airport but our pre booked taxi was waiting for us. The ride up to our pre booked accommodation – Fox Grove Inn – took around 30 minutes. We went to bed just before midnight.

9/2. At six o'clock Stephen Lesmond picked us up for a full day of birding with break for lunch. We started at the Des Cartiers Trail for the parrots and went lucky. We also had very good views of a St. Lucia Oriole and some other species. Drove then to his Praslin site for White-breasted Thrasher, but only got brief and bad sightings, and no black-finches!

After lunch he took us to a nice inland pond called Aupicon where we were lucky to find Caribbean Coot, Pied-billed Grebe and a Sora, together with a variety of herons.

10/2. Went out and birded around Fox Grove an hour before we had breakfast. At 10pm our pre booked rental car arrived, well car it was actually an old pickup truck. Anyway we had to follow to the office near the airport to sign the papers. From there we drove to the lookout point south of Vieux Fort and had a look at the Red-billed Tropicbirds around their breeding cliffs.

11/2. After breakfast we left for a day of leisure and sightseeing. We drove south, past the airport and continued towards Soufriere. First stop was a nature trail called Tet Paul. We paid the entrance fee of 5US\$ each and walked to the viewing point and looked at St. Lucias most famous landmark, the pitons; Gros Piton and Petit Piton – two sugar top mountains that reaches a little more than 700 meters above sea level.

Continued to the Sulphur Springs where we just made a U-turn and left this overcrowded touristy sulphur smelling bath. Instead we drove to Soufriere and the Diamond Botanical Garden, paid the 6US\$ entrance fee each and had a good look around the trees and plants.

Since the day had given us a good portion of rain on and off we thought this was enough and drove the same way back. Before ending the day I went back to the Praslin site for the thrasher and had a very good hour with excellent views of two White-breasted Thrashers together in the open for quite a time.

12.2 After breakfast we left for another walk at the Des Cartiers Trail. This time alone and we did walk the full loop in a wonderful rainforest, and yes we had excellent views of a perched parrot at a fairly close range. But no black-finches!! In the afternoon I spent an hour at the Praslin site and ended the day with a walk in the neighborhoods of the Inn.

13.2 Had a lazy morning with breakfast around 8 pm and afterwards we drove to very north of St. Lucia, up to Pigeon Island. Up in the north it's much more touristy (read Rodney Bay). Pigeon Island got a small restaurant, a nice public beach and good parking space.

We ended the day with some birding around our accommodation.

14.2 Woke up early from a heavy rain shower, relaxed and had a late breakfast. Drove south to Vieux Fort and looked around the pools at the western end of the airstrip, had a lazy walk on a public beach. On our way back to the Inn we stopped at La Tille Waterfall and had a cup of coffee, a look at the waterfall, enjoyed a short walking track down to the stream and had a nice chat with the land owner.

As usual we ended the day with some birding around Fox Grove Inn.

15.2 Our final day, but the flight did not depart until 8 pm so we had a full day that was spent around the Inn. We walked the fenced off track leading up to Mamiku Estate. Nice view of a Mangrove Cuckoo was the best bird of the walk. Had a late lunch, packing and around 5.30 pm we drove back to the car rental company and returned the pick-up and had a lift to the airport for the overnight flight back to Europe.

16.2 We arrived to Gatwick in the morning and after some waiting both here and at Arlanda in Stockholm we arrived back to our home late in the evening.

Species list

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

1 Aupicon Pond 9/2.

Rare visitor.

Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*)

Around 15-20 seen from the lookout Cape Moule á Chique, south of Vieux Fort 10/2.

They breed on the cliffs below and are easily seen although a little distant without a scope.

Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*)

3 Aupicon Beach 9/2, 2 Vieux Fort 10/2 and 1 Pigeon Island 13/2.

Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*)

5 seen outside Pigeon Island 13/2.

There is a small, naked islet just out in the sea to the north. This islet was more or less covered in white and I guess it is a major roosting cliff for this species and maybe other seabirds as well.

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)

1 Aupicon Pond 9/2, 1 roadside bird 9/2 and the same bird seen 11/2. 1-2 also seen just outside the airport fence Vieux Fort 11-12/2.

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*)

10-12 Aupicon Pond 9/2, 1 Vieux Fort 10/2 and 1 at the small bridge near Mamiku Botanical Garden 10/2.

Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*)

5 Aupicon Pond 9/2, 1 Vieux Fort 10/2, 1 seen when driving through Castriers 13/2 and 1 at the small bridge near Mamiku Botanical Garden 10/2.

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)

A locally common roadside bird.

Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)

1 near Mamiku Botanical Garden 10/2 (in the same small stream as the Snowy Egret and the Little Blue Heron) and 1 roadside bird seen 11/2.

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

2 Aupicon Pond 9/2 and 1 Fox Grove Inn 10/2.

Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*)

3 seen soaring Des Cartiers Trail 9/2 and up to 3 seen Fox Grove Inn 12-15/2. More birds also seen as roadsides.



Broad-winged Hawk

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)

1 Fox Grove Inn on several occasions during our stay, 1 Vieux Fort 10/2, 5 roadside birds 11/2 and 1 roadside bird 13/2.

Sora (*Porzana carolina*)

1 Aupicon Pond 9/2.

A rare visitor to St. Lucia.

Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*)

Around 140 Aupicon Pond 9/2.

Caribbean Coot (*Fulica caribaea*)

20 Aupicon Pond 9/2.

Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

20 Aupicon Beach 9/2.

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*)

1 Aupicon Beach 9/2.

Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)

10 Aupicon Beach 9/2.

Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*)

5 Soufriere harbor 11/2.

Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*)

4 Vieux Fort 11/2 and 4 Pigeon Island 13/2.

Domestic Dove (*Columba livia domestica*)

Fairly common in the cities.

Scaly-naped Pigeon (*Patagioenas squamosa*)

1 Praslin 9/2, 1 Fox Grove Inn 9-10/2 and 15/2, 3 Des Cartiers Trail 12/2 and 1 La Tille Waterfall 14/2.

Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

2 Pigeon Island 13/2.

Zenaida Dove (*Zenaida aurita*)

1 Praslin and 1 roadside bird 9/2, 1 Mamiku Botanical Garden 10/2, 1 heard Praslin 12/2, at least 15 Pigeon Island 13/2, 4 Vieux Fort 14/2 and 1 La Tille Waterfall 14/2.



Zenaida Dove

Eared Dove (*Zenaida auriculata*)

1 Vieux Fort 12/2 and 2 Vieux Fort 14/2.

Common Ground-Dove (*Columbina passerina*)

Common.

Ruddy Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon montana*)

1 flushed from the trail well after the second (old) lookout Des Cartiers Trail 12/2.

St. Lucia Parrot (*Amazona versicolor*)

6-8 seen flying, one perched shortly before disappearing into a Mango tree 9/2 and 6-8 seen flying, and one perched prolonged and gave us amazing scope views of this colorful parrot 12/2. Both observations were made along Des Cartiers Trail.



St. Lucia Parrot, image taken through my Swarovski scope.

Mangrove Cuckoo (*Coccyzus minor*)

1 Vieux Fort 10/2, 1 Fox Grove Inn 14/2 and 1 Fox Grove Inn 15/2
(probably two different birds)



Mangrove Cuckoo

Purple-throated Carib (*Eulampis jugularis*)

2-3 Des Cartiers Trail 9 and 12/2, 10 Diamond Botanical Garden,
Soufriere 11/2, 1-2 Fox Grove Inn 14-15/2 and 1 La Tille Waterfall 14/2.



Purple-throated Carib

Green-throated Carib (*Eulampis holosericeus*)

1 Vieux Fort 10/2, 1-2 Fox Grove Inn 10-15/2, 1 Tet Paul 11/2 and 1 Dennery lookout 14/2.

Antillean Crested Hummingbird (*Orthorhyncus cristatus*)

Common, seen almost everywhere except in the interior rain forest.



Antillean Crested Hummingbird

Belted Kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*)

1 male Aupicon Pond 9/2.

Rare visitor to St. Lucia.

Caribbean Elaenia (*Elaenia martinica*)

Fairly common, easily detected by the call.

Lesser Antillean Pewee (*Contopus latirostris latirostris*)

1 Des Cartiers Trail 9/2, 1 Praslin 9 and 12/2, 1 along the small roads around (locally named the Banana Tracks) Fox Grove Inn 9/2 and 15/2, 2 Fox Grove Inn 12-13/2 and 1 La Tille Waterfall 14/2.

Clement's still not recognize the St. Lucian group as a full species, as the authors of the field guide does.

Lesser Antillean Flycatcher (*Myiarchus oberi*)

1 Mamiku Botanical Garden 10/2, 1 Des Cartiers Trail 12/2, 1 Praslin 12/2 and 1 Fox Grove Inn 14/2.

Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*)

A very common species, always there on the wires along the roads.



Lesser Antillean Pewee (St. Lucia Group)

Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo altiloquus*)

2 Des Cartiers Trail 12/2 and 1 Fox Grove Inn 12/2.

Caribbean Martin (*Progne dominicensis*)

5 Vieux Fort 10/2, 2 roadside birds 11/2 and 2 Fox Grove Inn 14/2.
Not as common as expected, maybe still a little early for this migrant.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

5 Aupicon Pond 9/2 and 5 roadside birds 11/2. 2-3 were also seen during the stop over on our way to Trinidad&Tobago 25/1.

Rufous-throated Solitaire (*Myadestes genibarbis*)

5, 1 seen + 4 heard Des Cartiers Trail 9/2 and 3 heard there 12/2.
A really good looking species, the painting in the field guide does not give justice to this bird.

Spectacled Thrush (*Turdus nudigenis*)

2 Fox Grove Inn 9-15/2 and also seen on a few other spots but not at all as common as thought.

Tropical Mockingbird (*Mimus gilvus*)

2 Fox Grove Inn 9-15/2, 1 Vieux Fort 14/2 and 2 La Tille Waterfall 14/2.

White-breasted Thrasher (*Ramphocinclus brachyurus*)

3 Praslin 9/2, 4 Praslin 11/2 and 1 there 12/2.

The Praslin site mentioned in other trip reports are still reliable, but for how long?

Stephen Lesmond mentioned that he was going to a work shop around this highly endangered species with a researcher (or maybe a team) trying to give more protection to the population in St. Lucia.

Scaly-breasted Thrasher (*Alenia fusca*)

3 Des Cartiers Trail 9/2, 2 Fox Grove Inn 9/2, 1 Mamiku Botanical Garden 10/2, 1 Tet Paul 11/2, 1 Praslin 12/2, 2 Fox Grove Inn 13-15/2 (but note that in very different areas around Fox Grove) and 1 Pigeon Island 13/2.

Pearly-eyed Thrasher (*Margarops fuscatus*)

1 Tet Paul 11/2.

The field guide gives this species the status common, but obviously there is some doubt about this for St. Lucia, or were we so unlucky with this species.

Note the white (not yellow/orange) eye and size compared with previous species, as well as the tail pattern.

Gray Trembler (*Cinclocerthia gutturalis*)

1 Des Cartiers Trail 9/2 and 1 pair Fox Grove Inn 9-15/2.

Esther told me that they "are always breeding somewhere near the guest house". Taking the woodpeckers place here.



Gray Trembler

St. Lucia Warbler (*Setophaga delicata*)

Common where there were forest, both dry and wet.



St. Lucia Warbler

Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*)

Annoyingly common.

The St Lucian ones (whole Caribbean group?) sings more like a Black-faced Grassquit and have a short, red stripe at the lower mandible.

Lesser Antillean Saltator (*Saltator albicollis*)

1 Praslin 9/2, 1 Fox Grove Inn 9-15/2 and 2 Pigeon Island 13/2.

Note that there were most likely different birds every day at Fox Grove as we went to different areas around the guesthouse.

Black-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris bicolor*)

Common.

Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla noctis*)

Common.

St. Lucia Black Finch (*Melanospiza richardsoni*)

1 female Praslin 12/2 and 1 female Fox Grove Inn 14-15/2.

I was lucky to find a female colored bird late in the afternoon 14/2, at that time the bird even sang ones. Do females sing among this species? The day after I found the bird again feeding on the ground, very quietly. Though we slowly walked Des Cartiers Trail alone all the way around and also visited the Praslin site several times without finding any black-finch.

It seems that this species is very hard to find without help. If the Praslin site gets trickier this can be a tough one to catch up with. Population is said to be of a maximum of 1000 birds.



Lesser Antillean Bullfinch



St. Lucia Black Finch

Carib Grackle (*Quiscalus lugubris*)

Common.

Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*)

15 Pigeon Island 13/2.

Only safely identified here, though we saw a few possible roadside birds on a few spots, but not common as mentioned in other trip reports.

St. Lucia Oriole (*Icterus laudabilis*)

1 Des Cartiers Trail 9/2, 1 Praslin 9/2, 2 Des Cartiers Trail 12/2 and 1 Fox Grove Inn 14/2.

Is said to be the tough peace to find in the St. Lucia cake, so we were very lucky with this I guess. Esther said she see them around the guesthouse regularly.



St. Lucia Oriole

Antillean Euphonia (*Euphonia musica*)

2 heard calling Des Cartiers Trail 9/2 and 12/2.

Easily recognized on a short, protruding and very sharp tic-tic call. Once heard one will remember this call the rest of the stay (at least).

Mammals

The only mammal we recorded was the introduced mongoose

Indian or **Small Asian Mongoose** (*Herpestes javanicus*)

Seen with up to 4 along the way to Des Cartiers Trail 12/2, also seen with single animals on 3-4 other occasions.

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