



## BARBADOS, JULY 2015



**Fig. 1.** A **Barbados Bullfinch**; the number one reason to visit Barbados, if one is a birder.

### A PRELUDE

On the 20th of July, 2015, I was seated on an American Airways plane in Miami. It was a full flight and we were ready to hit the runway, in order to fly to Hewanorra International Airport, Vieux Fort, St. Lucia. From there, I had planned to take a one-and-half hour transit taxi to Castries, to the domestic airport, in order to catch my LIAT flight to Bridgetown, Barbados. Suddenly, everything stopped. A pushback tractor, which had started to push us off the gate, had broken the light of the plane's nose landing gear. It would take 45 minutes to replace the lamp, our captain informed. After an hour, another announcement was given: The replacement they had received was not a correct one. We had to abort the flight.

A six hour delay followed, during which the AA staff appeared to be just as confused as we were. At one point we moved to the other end of the airport, in order to board another plane, which had recently arrived from Caracas, and was now vacant. Then we were told to return to the original plane, in which our baggage still remained. The correct replacement lamp had arrived.

For me, it was already too late to meet the LIAT flight to Barbados. After plenty of communication and negotiations with the AA people, including the captain of the delayed flight, a positive solution surfaced. The captain agreed to personally find my bag in the main baggage compartment. That happened just before the rest of the passengers finally started their journey to Hewanorra. I stayed in Miami and got a direct AA flight to Barbados, even though they had not been responsible for the last LIAT leg. On their second request, after everything was clear, I also accepted their meal voucher, and had a proper dinner at a Cuban restaurant. That is the best feature of the Miami Airport; they actually have edible food there, not just the substandard trash food fodder.

On my two month round-the-world private birding tour, this was a do-or-die moment. As I had explained to AA people, I had four LIAT flights in succession, and not arriving in Barbados on the 20<sup>th</sup> July could have had serious consequences to my timetable in general. I believe that the positive response to my requests was based on the RTW status, rather than on my priority OneWorld status. I had a total of six AA legs in my RTW schedule.

In Bridgetown, at 20.30, I was lucky enough to find a LIAT representative who confirmed that the rest of my LIAT reservations still existed. A taxi was waiting for me, after a call from Miami, courtesy of the American Airlines, too, to my accommodation which had arranged the ride. I stayed in Barbados just for one night, in order to see the one and only island endemic, the **Barbados Bullfinch**, before returning to the airport the next morning. The following texts will describe how I organized the visit, for the inspiration of others on an equally busy schedule.

One could try to score at the airport (as some birders have successfully done), during a transit between the flights, but considering the frequent delays in the Caribbean, this could easily lead in a failure. To be on a safer side, I would recommend staying at least one night in Barbados.



**Fig. 2. Shiny Cowbirds** are actually rather handsome birds, with interesting social behavior.

## ACCOMMODATION AND TRANSPORTATION

For my limited needs and a short stay, I needed a bed to sleep, a toilet and a shower. In regard to transportation, I required a ride to the accommodation and back, in the next morning. Most importantly, the accommodation had to be in an area, where a short morning walk was likely to produce a **Barbados Bullfinch**. Fortunately, the island endemic is not very selective in regard to its habitats but could be expected to be seen just about anywhere where grass and bushes existed.

After some information search in the Internet, the Knights and Queens Apartments ([knightsandqueens@hotmail.com](mailto:knightsandqueens@hotmail.com); tel. 246 2630360/28200007), on the Lot 3 Lodge Road, Newton, became my choice number one. It is a former home for retired people and has flats for rent. I reserved a room with a shared bathroom, but was upgraded to a second floor flat with a kitchen, bedroom and private toilet/shower. The night cost USD 42.60 (a shared bathroom rate), which could be paid either in US or Barbados dollars.

I did the reservation at Booking.com but was soon contacted by Karen Bourne, by email which included helpful details. The people at Knights and Queens also arranged the airport transfers, for lower than average rates. On arrival, I paid USD 16 for a ride in a local taxi, their partner. It is a five minute drive towards Bridgetown. On departure, I got a ride in a Knights and Queens car, for USD 8.00.

There was no air-conditioning but the fans did the job. At night, there were some barking dogs in the otherwise peaceful neighborhood. Earplugs may therefore be a good idea, as they often are in the Caribbean. There is a small shop close by and food could be prepared in the flat's kitchen.

Personally, I relied on snacks, water and a can of energy drink (Chinese Red Bull), and had my flying fish (a local favorite) lunch later at the airport, while waiting for a LIAT departure to Grenada. In there, one had to wait till 11.00, because the canteen did not serve lunches earlier. Most of the food joints at the airport were closed and the choices were limited.

Birdwatching was great right in the Knights and Queens premises, which had a good variety of species and, most importantly, many **Barbados Bullfinches**. In fact, the first thing I heard in the morning was a **Barbados Bullfinch** singing on a fence, right next to my bedroom window. From the second floor stairs, there was a good view over the neighborhood.

There is a (slightly smelly) farmhouse behind a steel mesh fence, right next to the buildings, with chicken, goats and pigs, not to mention gardens with exposed soil. A place such as this, a magnet for birds, is a rare sight in a suburb packed by one-family-houses.

The Knights and Queens lot itself had plenty of open space with low vegetation, attractive to birds, which were common and tame also around the other houses along the Lodge Road.



**Fig. 3.** Kings, knights and queens; British colonial rule has left its mark on the ‘Little England’. Even today, Barbados is ruled by Queen Elizabeth II, who appoints a Governor-General for the island.

## THE BIRDS

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, I woke up at 5.00 and went out at 5.30 (sunrise was at 5.45), birding the lot and the nearby Lodge Road till 8.30. Both the people and the resident dogs were polite and friendly, letting me to focus on birds, which were often in their private yards or sat on the roofs of their houses. Overall, I recorded 15 species, and one half-a-species, the **Barbary Dove**:

**Western Cattle Egret:** 2, flying over.

**Scaly-naped Pigeon:** 20, tame and conspicuous garden birds.

**Domestic Rock Pigeon:** 5.

**Collared Dove:** About 15 birds, which did not look like hybrids with the next ‘species’.

**Barbary Dove:** At least 2 ‘pure’ ones and 1 hybrid with the previous species.

**Zenaida Dove:** 20; another tame garden bird.

**Common Ground Dove:** 3.

**White-eyed Parakeet:** 1, apparently a juvenile. An escapee?

**Antillean Crested Hummingbird:** 4 feeding on flowering vines.

**Caribbean Elaenia:** 1.

**Grey Kingbird:** 2.

**Bananaquit:** About 10; *barbadensis*.

**Black-faced Grassquit:** About 60; *omissus*. The second most common passerine.

**Barbados Bullfinch:** About 100; pleasingly common for an island endemic! The suburbs seem to be a great place to observe the species. With this *Loxigilla* species, there is no sexual dimorphism.

**Shining Cowbird:** About 35, also quite tame at this site.

**Carib Grackle:** About 50; the subspecies *fortirostris* has some potential for a (re-)split. Both the male and female are black.



**Fig. 4.** At Lodge Road, the **Scaly-naped Pigeons** were often a bit scruffy, some of them lacking almost half of their head feathers. This individual had a neater than average plumage. According to current taxonomy, the species has no subspecies, despite relatively wide island distribution.



**Fig. 5.** No such problems with the pretty **Zenaida Doves**. The birds of Barbados belong to *Zenaida aurita aurita*.

## CONCLUSION

I scored with my target species, the **Barbados Bullfinch**, with ease. Even in the case of arriving in Barbados on a morning flight from St. Lucia, on the 21<sup>st</sup>, I probably would have been able to see the species before a departure to Grenada. The bullfinches have been seen in front of the airport building. That would have been my plan B, if the American Airlines would not so kindly helped a passenger in distress. The lesson is: In the Caribbean, try to have a plan A, B and if possible, C, in case of flight delays. They will occur, sooner or later.

Out of the airports, things tend to work out, just like they did in Bridgetown. My stay was a short but enjoyable one. I was happy with ground transportation and accommodation and could focus on the observation of suburban birdlife. Well, there was also time to notice **Barbados Anoles**, not to mention several Rihanna look-a-likes among the local women, a sign of some shared African ancestry in the Barbadian population. During the colonial era, Barbados used to be the first Caribbean port for slave-traders arriving from West Africa.

By the way, it probably best to be early at the airport. The workers of Grantley Adams Airport were not happy with their working conditions. On the 20<sup>th</sup> July, there had been a work-to-rule strike, meaning that one needed at least three hours from check in to the gate. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, twenty minutes was enough for the procedure.

Good luck with your visit to Barbados!



**Fig. 6.** The endemic **Barbados Anole** can be found in every garden with adequate hiding places.