



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 6/2015

## ST. LUCIA, JULY 2015

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**Fig. 1.** To the 'great delight' of arachnophobics, *Theraphosinae* tarantulas are common in St. Lucia!

On July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, I arrived in Castries, St. Lucia, on a LIAT flight from St. Vincent, with 22 preceding flights on an OneWorld Global Explorer and some regional tickets. The idea was to score with five St. Lucia endemics – **St. Lucia Amazon**, **St. Lucia Pewee**, **St. Lucia Warbler**, **St. Lucia Black Finch** and **St. Lucia Oriole** – and one potential split, the dry habitat **St. Lucia Wren** (*T. (aedon) mesoleucus*), in one-and-half days. A *sanctaeluciaae* **White-breasted Thrasher** would be nice to see, as well. My flight timetables prohibited a longer stay, because of OneWorld regulations, which necessitated a British Airways flight to Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, in the next afternoon.

It was a daunting task with the success very much dependent on the on-time arrival of the LIAT flight and good weather during the limited afternoon and morning birding. Furthermore, the information in the Internet had been scattered and oftentimes not quite up-to-date. I therefore had to guesstimate my strategy; a reason enough to provide this report for other exploring souls with similar needs in regard to St. Lucia.

On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the start had been an auspicious one. My LIAT flight was early by 30 minutes, unlike on the previous three days, when the early morning flights between St. Vincent and St. Lucia had been delayed by several hours. From Castries, the domestic G.F.L. Charles (trade unionist and independence advocate) Airport, the plane continued to Trinidad. I, on the other hand, passed the friendly immigration and started to look for Avis St. Lucia. The weather was fine on arrival, with sun, moderate wind and only few scattered clouds on the blue sky.

Unfortunately, Avis St. Lucia had not fulfilled their part of our deal. Instead of the confirmed 4x4, there was a small sedan for me, a car possibly not able to deal with the road up to Des Cartier Trail, at Quillesse Forest Reserve. Nevertheless, things were sorted out and I eventually saw all the birds I had been looking for. The following text will give the details. I will, however, not mention all the 37 species observed in St. Lucia, but prefer to focus on the most interesting species and subspecies. The common, widespread ones, such as **Carib Grackles** (*inflexirostris*) are readily seen, just about anywhere on the island. Unfortunately, I did not have much time for photography during the brief visit. As a result, there will be hardly any bird photos in this report.

## CAR RENTAL

One needs a vehicle to go birdwatching in St. Lucia. Self-drive is a pleasure, because the roads are fine and wide, unlike in some of St. Lucia's neighbors, and driving consequently safe and easy. It is not quite as good as in the 'French Departments' of the Antilles, which tend to be more developed than the (former) British colonies, but easy enough for a person with average driving skills. In regard to off the main roads sites, I would however recommend obtaining good maps as road signs are often missing. I guess the locals know where to go on the small island and have not thought that visitors needed more guidance. Renting a car with a driver would probably result in faster driving, for those who are not easily scared by the risks involved.



**Fig. 2.** My Virginia's Rental Suzuki Grand Vitara, parked in front of the Des Cartier trailhead shelter.

As no information on the road conditions at the chosen key sites was available in the Internet, I had opted for a 4x4, to be sure to reach the Des Cartier Trail, high up on the mountains. In Castries, the female Avis representative was none the wiser and agreed that the above-mentioned sedan was not necessarily a safe choice for me. In a very professional manner, she then turned to other companies to find the 4x4 for me. Fox Rent-A-Car, at the neighboring booth, had a Mitsubishi Outlander, but they soon started to add extra charges on top of the deal I had had with Avis (avisslu@candw.lc).

We therefore aborted them and she contacted Virginia's Rental, a smaller local operator, who had a new Suzuki Grand Vitara for less than the agreed rate and delivered the car without any additional delay. It was a one-way rental to Hewanorra International Airport, at Vieux Fort, on the other side of the island. Happy with the deal and the car, I agreed to leave a quarter tank of fuel in the car, worth USD 10 (paid in XDC, East Caribbean Dollar), for their return drive to Castries. Unlike with Fox, there was no extra charge for the one-way deal. Their representative would collect the car at the departures, at an agreed time, and would also return my credit deposit form on spot.

Everything went as agreed. It is therefore my pleasure to recommend both the Avis St. Lucia and Virginia's Rental. I kind of understand why Avis sold out their 4x4s instead of keeping one for me for just a one day rental, especially because they made their best to organize a replacement on arrival and succeeded in that.

It is perhaps worth explaining that in St. Lucia, the fact that the domestic and international airports are located far away from one another, may add another twist to the transportation arrangements. It is necessary to check out the location of one's arrivals and departures (SLU = Castries, UVF = Hewanorra), as also some international flights are operated from Castries. All LIAT flights start and end there. The transit between the airports takes up to one-and-half hours by a taxi and currently costs USD 65.00. There is a ten minute helicopter shuttle, too, but it is expensive at USD 165.00/pax. I do not know what the helicopter luggage weight restrictions are.

Moreover, both the Praslin site for dry bush species and the Quillesse Forest Reserve are located along the road between the airports, just like the Fox Grove Inn, one of the better choices for accommodation because of its proximity to these sites. In my case, the one day and one way rental of a large 4x4 cost USD 90 + tax, a total of USD 109 (USD 20 less than the original Avis deal), plus around USD 30 for the gasoline (USD 134 in total). Importantly, the rental also allowed me to transit between the airports! Therefore, I saved the USD 65.00 transit fee, paying only USD 69 as an additional cost to drive around as I wished, to see the birds and to reach my accommodation.

My international driver's license (1949 version) was readily accepted by the rental companies. There was no need to obtain a local permit. When leaving Castries for Vieux Fort, my Avis map was a bit confusing beyond the Victoria roundabout (west of Castries Ferry Terminal), on the Millennium Highway. Turn left there, up the hill, and continue straight on (there is a convenient gas station soon beyond the La Toc Rd junction), all the way to a T-junction at the Cul de Sac River valley. Turn left and immediately right to Micoud Highway. Thereafter, it is straight on all the way to Praslin, Micoud and Hewanorra. (See Google Maps)

## FOX GROVE INN

For accommodation, I opted to spend the night at Fox Grove Inn ([foxgroveinn.com](http://foxgroveinn.com)), the preferred place to stay for many independent birding visitors and tour groups as well. As already mentioned, the inn is well located close to the target species sites, in a tranquil neighborhood along a side road off the Castries – Vieux Fort highway. There is space for parking and relatively comfortable (a bit hot (a fan, no AC) in my case) rooms with a nice view. The food was good even though the size of the servings was on the small side for a regular person (just right for me, after a gastric bypass). I paid USD 82.50 per night, a morning tea and a substantial takeaway breakfast included. A meal of mahi-mahi (dorado) was XCD\$56 (€18), expensive for a cheapskate like me.



**Fig. 3.** A mahi-mahi dinner plate at Fox Grove Inn; enough for me but perhaps not for you? There are salads and soups in the menu, too.

In late July, there were no other customers staying in the hotel. As a result, I guess they would certainly welcome more birding visitors there. Some good birding would be available at the Fox Grove Inn itself, time permitting, and I was happy with their (Mrs. Esther Louis-Fernand; [foxgroveinn@candw.lc](mailto:foxgroveinn@candw.lc)) prompt and informative responses to emails at the time of reservations.

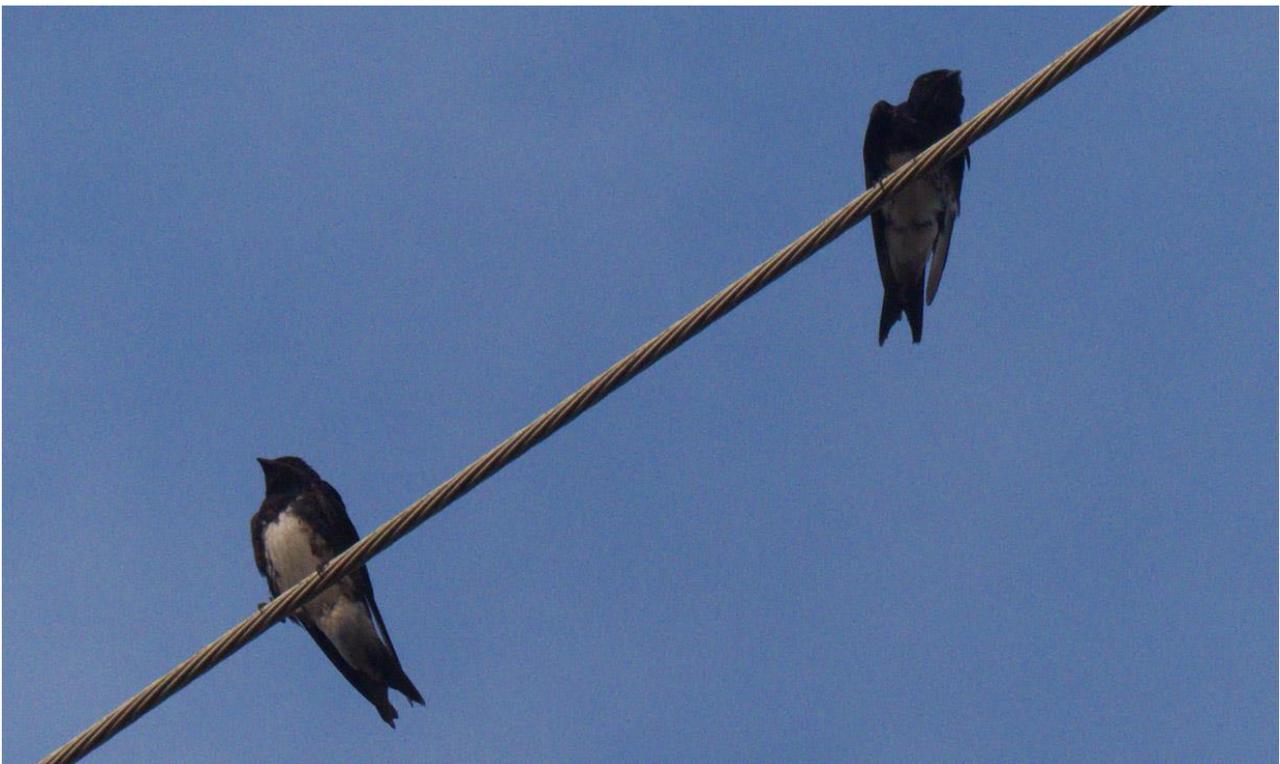
The Mamiku Road to the inn is signposted (easy to miss if speeding) on the right at Mon Repos, about 500 meters beyond Praslin. The highway climbs a hill at this section. Drive in slowly, as there is some good forest and birds there. After 250 meters, one arrives at the hotel. In there, turn left, step on it, and drive the steep driveway up, to an elevated parking area by the building.

## PRASLIN BUSH

I made two visits at this dry bush habitat, the first one in the mid-day heat at noon, and the second one early in the morning, soon after sunrise at 5.50. In some trip reports, an abandoned tourism development has been given as the point where to look for a track into a small opening in the bush, on the opposite side of the highway. Even though this is accurate, the ruins of the tourism complex are nowadays somewhat hidden behind fences and roadside bush. A line of barbed wire and 'no trespassing' signs may be easier to spot, between the highway and the ruins.

Instead, there is a quite visible electrical substation on the opposite side of the highway, on top of a hill 1.5 km beyond Praslin, driving north from the direction of Michaud and Fox Grove Inn. See Google Maps satellite images; the site is close to Fregate Islands, NW of them. Just beyond the substation, there is space to park on the right, opposite to the entrance of the bush track (well visible in satellite images). The track goes through a line of trees and thick bushes. It is a short way to the opening and it is possible to look after the car from there, at least in the beginning.

Today, the 'small opening' has become a large one because of the electrical substation. I mostly stayed on the northern end of the opening, within the first 20 to 50 meters of the track. It was not necessary to explore further to see the target birds. In fact, the first two **White-breasted Thrashers** were seen right in the highway-side bushes, just like the first **St. Lucia Black Finches**. Both species were readily seen, within few minutes, on both visits. The other interesting species/subspecies included a lone **St. Lucia Oriole**, early in the morning, a **Caribbean Elaenia**, and a singing **St. Lucia Wren**, in the dry low bush terrain higher up, also seen only in the morning. The site is also good for **Black-faced Grassquits** and **Lesser Antillean Bullfinches** (both are widespread birds).



**Fig. 4.** A family of **Caribbean Martins** observed my entertaining antics at the Praslin Bush.

## DES CARTIER NATURE TRAIL

I could also make two visits to the Des Cartier trailhead; the first, more productive one, in the afternoon between 13.30 and 18.00, and the second one in the morning, between 7.20 and 8.30. On the first visit, it was Sunday and there were no other people there. What is more, the weather was fine, albeit windy towards the evening, as a rain front approached St. Lucia from the west. In the morning, there were staff at the start of the trail, including a gang improving it, and everything was wet and muddy after ten hours of rain at night.



**Fig. 5.** A male *sclateri* Lesser Antillean Bullfinch waited for scraps at Des Cartier trailhead shelter.

The road to the Quillesse Forest Reserve is not well signposted. Neither is Google Maps helpful in this case. The key area is blurred and the roads are not shown in the map view. First, one needs to pass Michaud, on the Castries – Vieux Fort highway. Soon after the small town, the road crosses the Volet River and there is a junction to the right, the Tio Rocher Road (no signs). Keep on driving forward, ignoring the first left fork (to Dugard) 200 meters beyond the junction. At around 4.5 km, look for an obscure tarmac road back right (an inverted Y-junction), without signs. The junction is on top of a semi-open hill and there are no houses close-by. If somehow lost, ask help from the locals. They are very helpful and will point you towards the right direction.

Following the road to the right, one eventually arrives in a junction signposted to Des Cartier (turn left) and another junction to the right (also signposted). The last few hundred meters of the access road are gravel/mud, and surrounded by plantations. The track ends at the Des Cartier trailhead (2 km from the inverted Y-junction), where a shelter, a field office and information tables are located. The trailhead is on the left, beyond the shelter, and there is space to park inside the gate.



**Fig. 6.** The 'inverted Y-junction', as seen when returning to the coast. Des Cartier road ('the track to the right') behind my back, Michoud and Tio Rocher to the left.



**Fig. 7.** 'The track to the right' is narrow but fine after the 'inverted Y-junction'. No need for 4x4.

According to a big sign at the entrance, one needs a Forestry Department permit to enter the trail. I guess it is available from the resident staff, on weekdays, at least after the trail restoration has been finished. As there was nobody there on Sunday afternoon, I walked in and started a slow climb up the trail, in order to reach the Parrot Lookout. In retrospect, that was a mistake. The first 200 meters would have been enough to score with all the species. The conditions deteriorated afterwards. The trail became steep and dangerously slippery (stones, roots etc.) and views were often hindered by thick canopy. The **St. Lucia Amazons** had been present already in front of the entrance, in palms by the road, on the cleared agricultural land. A few **Orange-winged Amazons** were also seen at the plantations.



**Fig. 8.** Does one need to apply for a permit to enter, or not? That is the question...

There was restoration work going on, with new gravel on some sections of the trail and preparations to construct walking bridges to replace the rotten ones. A nice tarantula was spotted high up the trail and I also added a *sanctaeluciae* **Rufous-throated Solitaire** on my year list there. Not willing to step right next (1 cm) to the tarantula, I had to gently push it away from the path. There is some amusing discussion on these spiders in the Internet. Since one was discovered in a beach hotel room, years ago, a number of US arachnophobics have pondered, in a state of panic, whether it was safe to enter St. Lucia at all! Well, perhaps not, if the seeing one is the end of the world... Definitely yes, if one considers the actual likelihood of being bitten by a tarantula. They do not hunt people, in packs, plotting to surprise sleeping tourists, to suck their blood!

Nevertheless, realizing that I would be better off by the edge of the forest, I made a U-turn before reaching the Parrot Lookout. I have no idea if I was close to the lookout already, as the information at the entrance did not include a trail map. Neither have I seen a trail map in the Internet.

Lower down, a female **Ruddy Quail-Dove** was foraging in leaf litter by the trail. More importantly, a few **St. Lucia Warblers** were spotted soon after entering the Des Cartier Trail, together with a singing **St. Lucia Oriole** in the canopy, with glimpses of the bird itself, as it moved around. Three **St. Lucia Pewees** were singing, and I briefly saw one. The latter species proved to be the most difficult one to observe, among the short list of endemics.

Two hours were then spent at the forest edge, on the ridge road (good views) 50 to 100 meters before the entrance. From there, a total of 60 **St. Lucia Amazons** could be observed, some of them showing some amazing acrobatic skills in the increasingly windy conditions. **Purple-throated Caribs** were particularly common in the disturbed edge habitat. Among other species, few **Lesser Antilles Swifts** were also observed there, on both visits, just like **Scaly-breasted Thrashers**. It is not necessarily a good idea to sit on ground at this site. I got chiggers while doing so.



**Fig. 9.** The trail was pretty eroded, but it should be fine by now. The work had started in July.

On the second visit, I mostly stayed in the car, because of the muddy surroundings. Again, **St. Lucia Amazons** were readily seen from the entrance road, and a **St. Lucia Pewee** and **St. Lucia Warblers** were heard. A lone **Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift** was a vagrant to St. Lucia, possibly from Trinidad? On the two kilometer road back to the Tio Rocher Rd, another **St. Lucia Warbler** and a **Caribbean Elaenia** were recorded. At one spot, a family of six **St. Lucia Black Finches** were exploring some good roadside leaf litter. *Sclateri* **Lesser Antillean Bullfinches** were abundant in the area. As usual in the Antilles, some bold individuals were waiting for picnickers at the entrance shelter, too. Birds like that are tame enough to touch one's hands.



**Fig. 10.** A **St. Lucia Warbler** sang its heart out along the first 40 meters of the Des Cartier Trail.

## VIEUX FORT

Time permitting, the Pointe Sable area, at the end of the Hewanorra International Airport runway, is a good place to observe seabirds and the landbirds which fly along the coast. **Scaly-naped Pigeons** were particularly numerous (>500 passing in 45 minutes) at Pointe Sable. There was a good variety of herons and egrets, too. On the nearby Maria Islands, many **Sooty Terns** breed in season. I counted about 50 from the shoreline, with the help of a telescope. They do not come as close to the shore as **Royal Terns**, for example, do.

## CONCLUSIONS

Just like any other birding destination, St. Lucia may be visited and birded independently, in a tour group or with a local guide. It all depends on one's character. Personally, I do not consider guided or group birding very rewarding, because it prevents the personal experience of challenge and discovery, the rewards therefore becoming less satisfying than in solo bird observations. I do not employ a guide to bird at home; why should I do it abroad? Most destinations are perfectly safe and the organization of a visit relatively straightforward, including orientation.

Out of the Caribbean Islands I have so far visited (most of them), St. Lucia belongs to the easier than average destinations. It may be a bit pricey, but the infrastructure is good enough to provide comfort for a visitor, especially in terms of self-drive transportation. The island is also not crowded the way for example Grenada is. The people did not always look happy with their everyday, but were nevertheless helpful and accommodating towards a foreign visitor.

Leaving St. Lucia, I was able to witness a peculiar feature of international air traffic. Less than an hour away from Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, British Airways Boeing 777 had stopped at Hewanorra to pick us on board. Inside, I felt pity towards the passengers who had had a 10 hour night flight from London only to stop there, at least for an hour, just when they were about to reach their final destination. The plane was a complete mess, with rubbish and scraps of food all over the place, and they had not been allowed to leave. The big jetliner was, after all, standing by the runway.

We had a long, hot walk there and also had to do the stairs to get up, where a tiny cup of orange juice was organized for us. There could hardly be any financial profit from picking us few interisland passengers on board and there was no refueling either. I guess it was all about the British Commonwealth and the need to show British presence in all of its colonies, instead of neglecting places such as St. Lucia. The island is, after all, still ruled by Queen Elizabeth II, just like the colonies of Canada and Australia are, with their British Governor-Generals. For me the flight was an OneWorld connection to Trinidad, and the only available choice.