



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 5/2015

ST. VINCENT, JULY 2015

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Fig. 1. LIAT interisland flights are flown by reliable ATR planes. Delays are, however, common.

On July 24th, 2015, I arrived in Arnos Vale, St. Vincent, on a LIAT flight from Grenada, with preceding American Airlines flight from Miami to Bridgetown, Barbados, and a LIAT one from Barbados to St. Georges, Grenada. On the following day, I went out to see the island endemics, **St. Vincent Amazon** and **Whistling Warbler**, the two St. Vincent target species for a globetrotting world lister. Additionally, one may be interested to see a **St. Vincent (House) Wren**, a **Grenada Flycatcher** and a **Lesser Antilles Tanager**. A single morning, if it is not a hurricane day, is enough to score with all the main target birds. That is what I did. Happy with the result, I had another LIAT flight to Castries, St. Lucia.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a small island nation with 120.000 inhabitants, the majority of whom are of African descent. Its history involves colonization by the French and the British, with import of African slaves already since early 18th century. The British colonial rule was initially challenged by several slave revolts, by the so called Black Caribs. After the slavery was abolished, harsh living conditions and stagnant economy prevailed, during the slow fading phase of the British control, until independence in 1979. Only in 2009, full independency and democracy were gained, in a referendum which forced Queen Elizabeth II to step down as the head of the state (cf.

Australia and Canada, still under British rule!). Today, bananas and tourism are the two leading sources of wealth on the islands.

The following report will provide some basic information to update the information already available in the Internet, particularly for those who prefer to visit St. Vincent independently, as a part of a more extensive Caribbean tour. It is easier to adjust oneself to the local conditions, if some prior knowledge is acquired. At the moment, St. Vincent has services particularly suitable for a short birding visit. It is therefore an easy birding destination, one of the easiest in the Caribbean.

(Surprisingly, all my three LIAT Lesser Antilles flights were more or less on time, one 45 minutes late and one 30 minutes early. I guess I was extraordinarily lucky in that sense. The company has a dreadful reputation).

ADAMS APARTMENTS

At the E.T. Joshua (a trade unionist and independence hero) International Airport, Arnos Vale, the immigration, baggage carousel and customs were conveniently in the same room. The immigration may, however, be a bit overzealous, as it was in my case, demanding to see the ticket out of St. Vincent, even though I clearly was a visiting birder, binoculars around my neck. The same can be said about the departure security check. The staff did not act in a very professional manner (I have consulted airport security at home), even though they clearly thought that the fate of the universe depended on their ability to rough the tourists up at this regional airport. What a great way to promote tourism to St. Vincent, among departing visitors otherwise happy with the island!

Stepping out of the arrivals hall at the airport building, an ideal accommodation may be discovered only 100 meters away, uphill, at Adams Apartments (www.adamsapt.com). Cross the lane, walk the short stairs up the parking area, cross the tarmac and drag your bags steep uphill to the right and left, and you have arrived at a blue building where the reception is, on the second floor.

The outside of the building may appear a bit dirty and run down, but the third floor rooms (36 to 55 USD per night) were clean and comfortable, with two beds, air-conditioning, a ceiling fan, hot water, ample electric outlets and a good selection of channels in their flat screen televisions. The airy house is secure, with security cameras. There is a guard who controls access during the hours when the reception is closed and the entrance is properly gated.

There is also a balcony (reserved for the customers) on the third floor, where drinks may be had under a shade while viewing the Arnos Vale valley, the airport and the nearby streets. It is a good place to observe birds, too, with a view to the ocean as well. There is a bar, restaurant and a grill in the building, and the Greaves Supermarket is close by, 150 meters downhill. Overall, I have rarely, if ever, seen such a convenient place to stay for a transit, in regard to services and access to the airport.



Fig. 2. An Adams Apartments double room, occupied and therefore not tidy anymore. Yes, I carry my own (blue case) pillow, and yes, that is Red Cloud on the cover of the book... No smoking!



Fig. 3. A view from the balcony; airport on the right and the Greaves Supermarket on the left (the bright blue building). The airport arrival entrance is on the left and the departure on the right.

The proximity of the busy road was the only significant minus at the Adams Apartments, but the sounds of the traffic were tolerable. Earplugs might, however, be useful. On the other hand, one may observe some interesting street characters there, of which the Lesser Antilles has an ample

supply. On the first afternoon, an old rasta man was selling marker pens by the road. He was not interested to sell them to pedestrians, but preferred to shout to the passing cars, which were crossing a busy hill, where nobody would stop even if the pens were free! Everybody seemed to know him.

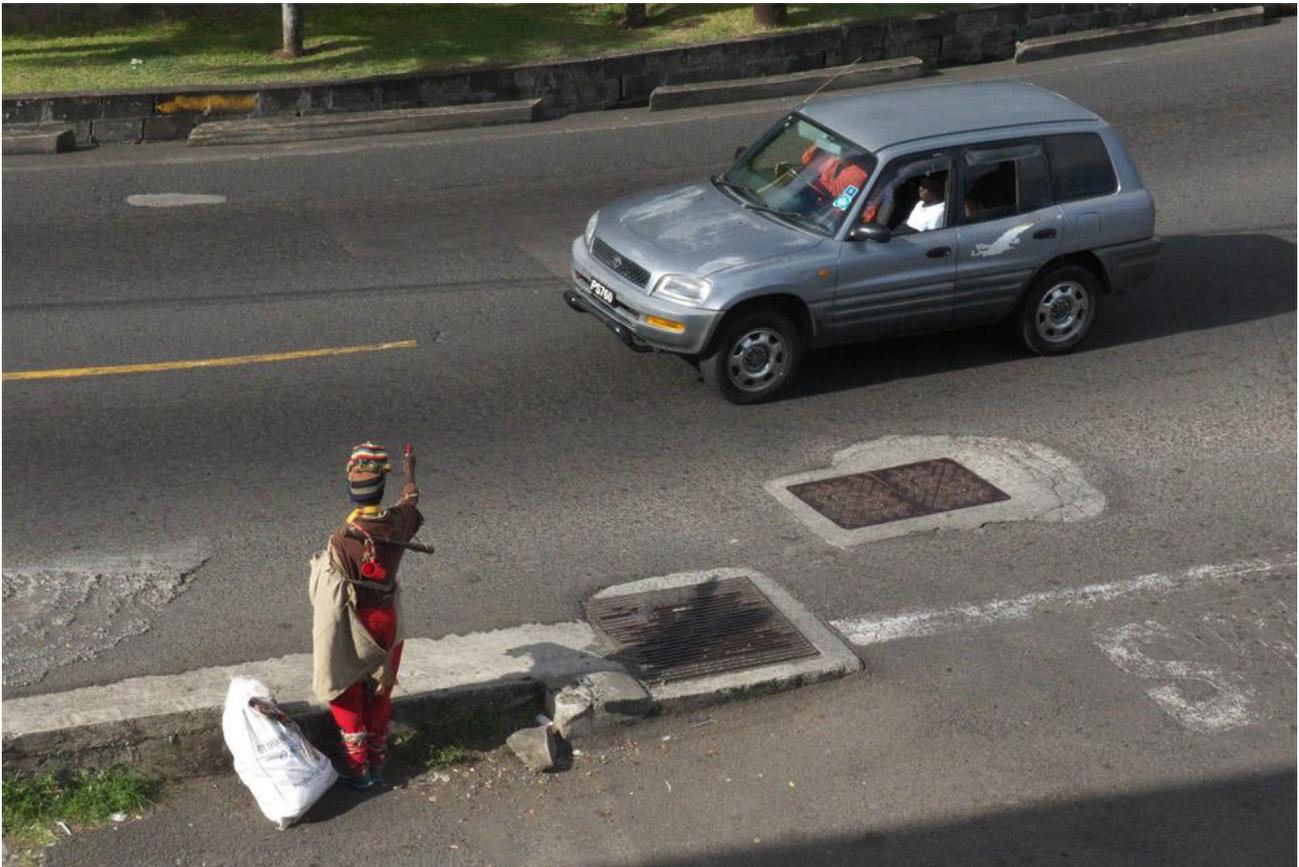


Fig. 4. Wanna buy a marker pen?! The people in the passing cars could not be less interested...

I found the manager, Mrs. Debra Adams, and her staff to be very helpful and professional. She also readily responded to my emails prior to the trip. In contrast, only two out of nine car rental companies in the neighboring Grenada bothered to respond to reservation requests, and the hotels there were equally unwilling to talk to potential customers. In some parts of the Caribbean, such as Grenada, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, there are many tourism services who still believe that face-to-face negotiations are the only acceptable way to do business. They may have an Internet home page and email address, but that does not mean that somebody actually reads the emails, responds to them, or updates the pages!

If requested, the people at Adams Apartments probably are able to organize just about anything for you. They provide accurate, detailed information, as well. What is more, one may get the service for a better than average rate (see below; taxi fees, under 'Transportation'). There are also adapters at the reception, in case one's EU or US equipment does not fit into the local sockets, in principle US standard but slightly different. Overall, Adams Apartments was a predominantly positive experience and I have no hesitation to recommend the place for others, too. It may not be a regular tourist hotel, being mainly favored by Caribbean business and other travelers, but it is a decent place to stay with an unbeatable location.

There are plans to open a new international airport at Argyle, where construction has slowly advanced. If the LIAT flights were directed there, the benefits of staying at Arnos Vale would decrease a bit. Originally, the airport was scheduled to open in 2015. Things do, however, often take time in the Caribbean. Moreover, nobody seemed to know if the government was financially able to finish and run the new airport, in a situation of global recession and decreasing tourism. There are general elections approaching, too, in late 2015, and many unfinished public projects need to be realized before the voting day, to gain support for the present government. As a result, the state coffer may be less than full in 2016. Therefore, the present information is likely to remain valid for a number of years to come.

TRANSPORTATION

In regard to transportation, there is no need to rent a car in St. Vincent, especially if one is only focusing on the main target species. For those who stay long and only visit one island in the Caribbean, a rental car may be an attractive option. If on a short visit, make a request at the Adams Apartments, and they will arrange a taxi to the Vermont Nature Trail and back, for a rate lower than the official taxi association one. I paid USD 90 (ET\$ 258) for the rides, USD 30 less than the table rate of USD 120. It is not cheap for one person, if compared with the Adams Apartments room rates, for example, but the taxi driver has to make four rides to take one up the mountains in the morning, and back down in the afternoon.



Fig. 5. Papa Iston and the Jack Sparrow taxi, at the Vermont Nature Trail entrance gate. The trail starts at the end of track, on the right, where the forest starts. Pay the entrance fee here, at the visitor centre.

Alternatively, if staying somewhere else, contact Papa Iston (Jack Sparrow Taxi) directly at **1784-495-1721**. He is my recommended driver, after being there right on time at 04.50, and at 12.10, for the return drive. Locally, he has an excellent reputation. As a casual glance in the Internet may reveal, Papa Iston is also a political activist and a musician, and has his finger well on the pulse of developments on the island. He has, for example, publicly supported a policewoman in a very high profile rape case, and suffered the consequences afterwards, not to mention gained respect in some circles. Please, give your support to the man who has rightfully stood his ground against the bigwigs, and paid a price for it.

VERMONT NATURE TRAIL

The primary site to see the endemics, the Vermont Nature Trail, is located above Kingstown, a 25 minute drive from the Adams Apartments/E.T. Joshua Airport. Early in the morning, the office at the gate will not be occupied, but the entrance is nevertheless open, and one may pay the park fee afterwards. I am not exactly sure what the rate is. The man at the gate was vague about it, talking about USD 2 but mentioning that more would be preferable. He seemed quite happy with the USD 3 I gave to him. To where the money ended, I can only guess.

Papa Iston drove me the two hundred meters from the gate to the start of a circular trail, and explained the trail to me. For the Parrot Lookout, one needs to go left after a small wooden bridge (right in the beginning), and climb steep uphill. The trail was good, like stairs, but exhaustingly steep. I was, after all, in a hurry to get to the lookout as early as possible, after a 5.20 arrival. Sunrise was at 5.35. The climb (about 500 m) took around 30 minutes, with stops. I could hear **St. Vincent Amazons** and a **Whistling Warbler** already half way up, but there were too many trees for proper views. The lookout is the place to make bird observations, even though the views are limited even there.

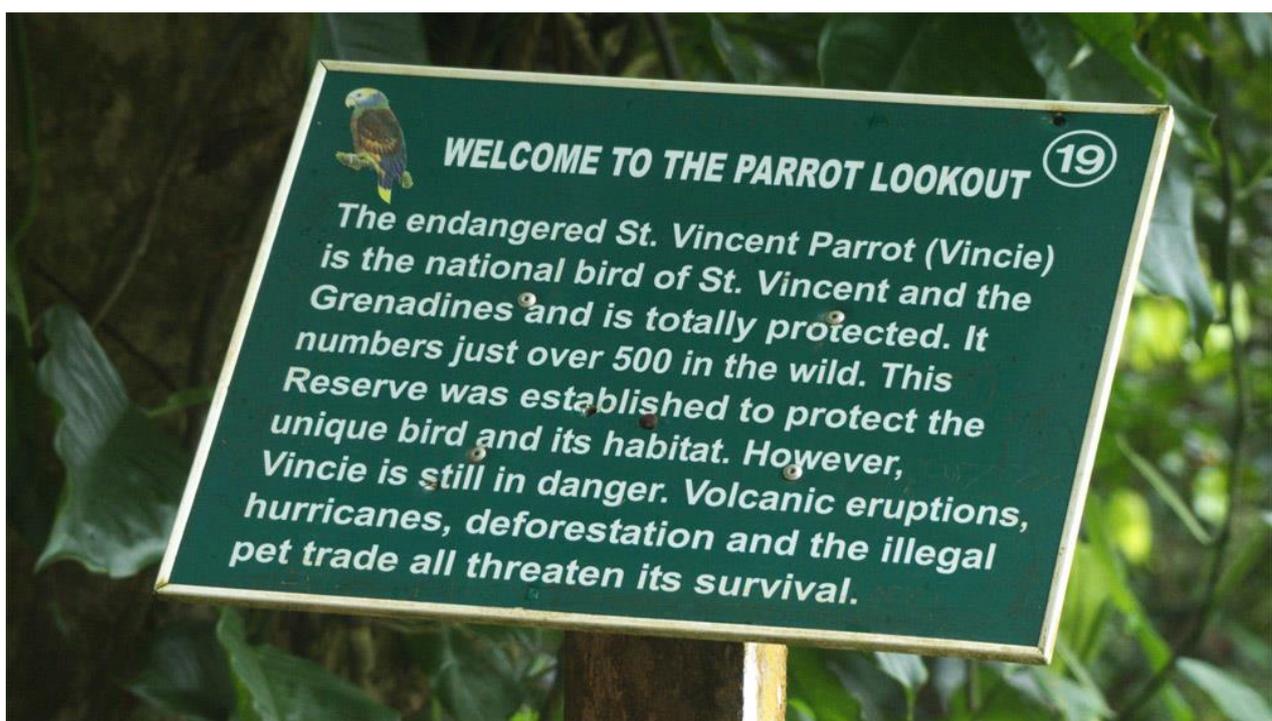


Fig. 6. Many 'Vincies' may be observed at the Parrot Lookout, Vermont Nature Trail.

The visit was difficult, because of the weather, but productive. Staying at lookout and its immediate vicinity, I enjoyed good even though cloudy conditions till 8.00. Afterwards, rain started and the forest became wet and dark. There were two periods (30 to 40 minutes) of heavy rain. During the first one, I stayed dry under a large tree, at the lower end of the observation platform. The trunk of the tree provided shelter, but one needed to check the ground before entering the depression, just in case a tarantula or a snake had already occupied it.

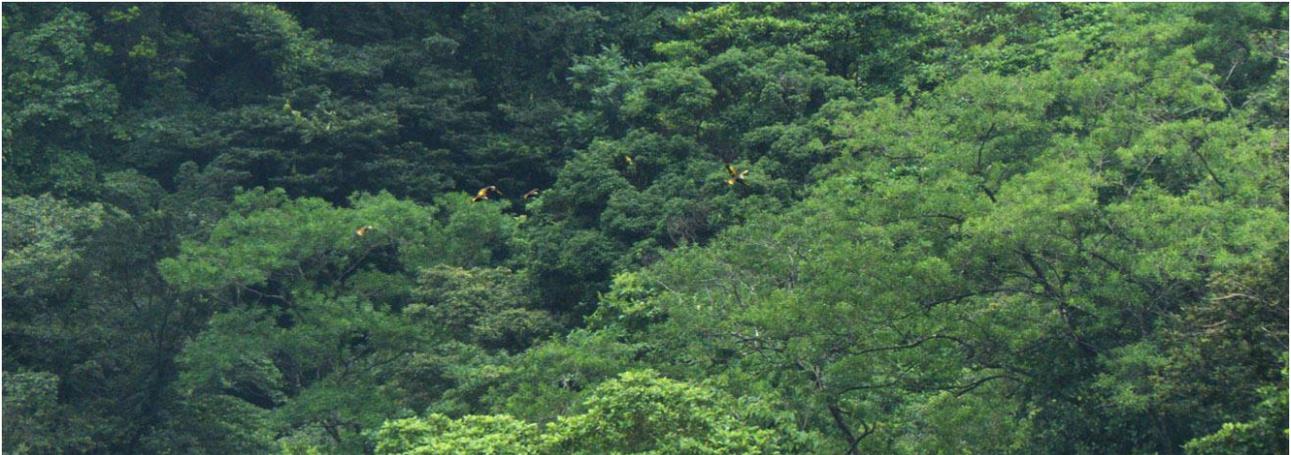


Fig. 7. The amazons may fly over the platform, but are difficult to photograph. In distance, the colors show well against the green slopes. In this shot, there are at least six **St. Vincent Amazons**.

At the time of the second period of rain, I had advanced only 150 meters down the slope, and was already in a hurry to meet my transportation on time. The trail had become a series of water puddles, and a trekking pole was definitely needed to negotiate the slippery way down. Nevertheless, I slipped on the wooden bridge and almost fell into the stream under it, hanging on the railing. Another set (see my other RTW reports) of bruises and minor cuts was received, but nothing serious, thanks to my field gear, including a pair of knee pads by Mil-Tec Sturm, Deutschland. Military gear is great for birding the globe, even though it often results in a mistaken perception that one is military, too (n most cases an advantage, even though not always). The concrete on the road to the gate was even more slippery and I had to walk on grass to get there.

The noisy and colorful **St. Vincent Amazons** were constantly present around the Parrot Lookout, and lower down, between sunrise and 11.00, with an estimated total of 26 individuals. Several were seen at close distance, flying over, but photography proved to be difficult. I heard 4 **Whistling Warblers** and saw one relatively high up in a tree next to the lookout. Other interesting birds included, among others, a soaring **Common Black Hawk**, a scarce breeder, a **Purple-throated Carib**, a **Caribbean Elaenia**, two **St. Vincent Wrens** (*T. (aedon) musicus*), and last but not least, two **Lesser Antillean Tanagers**. On my way down, a **Grenada Flycatcher** was spotted, singing, despite the rain. There were **Lesser Antillean Bullfinches** by the office building.

All in all, there were not many birds to see on the Vermont Nature Trail. The rain probably had a negative effect, too. Nevertheless, I had come to see two species, the **St. Vincent Amazon** and **Whistling Warbler**, and they both were readily located. For a world species lister, that is what really matters, at the end of the day!

In addition, I had been looking for the local **House Wrens**. Already established as **Antillean House Wren** (*Troglodytes martinicensis*) by some taxonomies, with subspecies on Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Vincent and Grenada, they appear so diverse that a treatment involving four species could follow. For somewhat similar reasons, the 'black morph' *atrata* **Bananaquits** should be paid attention, too. They were seen from the balcony of the Adams Apartments. Well, on islands, the safest thing to do is to try to see each and every resident subspecies. The developments in taxonomy may be difficult to predict.



Fig. 8. The Parrot Lookout; the view may appear limited but is actually quite fine.

KINGSTOWN BOTANICAL GARDEN

The botanical garden is known as a pleasant and a more or less guaranteed spot to see the **Grenada Flycatcher**. It is located at the northwestern outskirts of Kingstown, about half way between the airport and the Vermont Nature Trail (see Google Maps). The access is free, and the garden is open from 6.00 to 18.00, daily. There apparently are plenty of birds there, both free and captive. A '**Vincie**' captive breeding program has been established there, at Nicholas Wildlife Aviary.

Having already seen several **Grenada Flycatchers** in Grenada, and one also along the Vermont Nature Trail, I had no personal interest to visit the botanical gardens for birding. After six weeks on the road in Asia and North America, birding from sunrise to sunset, I opted for the comforts of the Adams Apartments, and spent my last afternoon resting there, to gain strength for another busy

period in St. Lucia, on the next day. In regard to birds, I preferred to focus on grilled chicken, instead of the wild birds of the Arnos Vale valley.



Fig. 9. A **Grenada Flycatcher**, in the gloom of forest. They are widespread in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, even on Mustique Island.



Fig. 10. Another sight from the Adams Apartments balcony: A cow with **Western Cattle Egrets**, prospecting lush streetside vegetation together, just above the airport parking.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, I recorded 31 bird species in St. Vincent. The species not mentioned in this report were common and widespread inhabitants of the Lesser Antilles. Unfortunately, as far as I know, birding trip reports do not list any other bird observation locations for St. Vincent, other than the Vermont Nature Trail and Kingstown Botanical Gardens. Neither did I leave the beaten track. For birdwatchers, St. Vincent therefore remains to be a one day destination, whether one arrives independently, or as a participant of an organized birdwatching tour. Just like me, people tend to go and observe the main target species at the well known stake-out, and leave it there.

In a way, it is a pity that there was no exploration in the program. Nevertheless, I enjoyed my time on the island, and also had the rest I needed. Given time, the island has potential for many discoveries. One could for example trek on the slopes of the La Soufriere Crater, keeping in mind that it is the area where the locals grow their 'herb', to check out if **Semper's Warblers** could exist there (extinct on St. Lucia). I know there are many who dream about relocating the species, somehow, somewhere. There apparently are less predating **Slender Mongoose** (the suspected cause of the extinction) on St. Vincent than on the neighboring St. Lucia.

Furthermore, there is the sea and its shores, prime habitats for interesting vagrant species, including additions to St. Vincent bird list.

Good luck with your visit in St. Vincent!



Fig. 11. Time to go on; a LIAT ATR takes off at E.T. Joshua International Airport.

