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SUMMER SUPPLEMENT

INTERNATIONAL BIRDING AT ITS BEST!

M/V Professor Multanovskiy

DIGITAL SUPPLEMENTAL NEWSLETTER OF THE DELAWARE VALLEY ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB

A Circumnavigation of the Atlantic Ocean by Colin Campbell

The Prologue

For years, I'd longed to go to Antarctica. Not particularly the Antarctic mainland *per se*, fun though that would be, but South Georgia had all the right stuff to satisfy my dreams – spectacular mountains, glaciers, the intrigue of decaying whaling stations, the legendary walk of the Shackleton trio, etc. And the birds of course, the albatrosses and penguins, the petrels and the prions. And let's not forget the sea mammals too. All of this on a totally remote, scarcely inhabited island. For some reason, I've always been an islandophile, and the more remote, the better. I guess it started earlier in life with numerous visits to many of the islands in the Scottish Hebrides; there's just something intangibly magic about being on a distant chunk of land surrounded by sea. As long as there's some means of eventually getting off, of course. I'm no Robinson Crusoe.

My previous attempts to get on an Antarctic cruise had come to naught, mainly because I tried to get a place on the cheap. So this year, not getting any younger, I cast my internet wider and discovered an amazing voyage being offered by the Tucson-based Wings group called "The Atlantic Odyssey". This was a ship being repositioned from its Antarctic summer schedule to its Arctic summer schedule and was sailing from Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego in southernmost Argentina to Rotterdam in Holland, prior to taking up its Arctic schedule in Iceland. Not only did it go to Antarctica and South Georgia, but it also visited Tristan da Cunha, St Helena and Ascension Island, three of the most remote inhabited islands in the world! I remembered these islands from my stamp collecting days and, just as then, they are part of what little remains of the British Empire. With these bonuses added, I just had to do it. Luckily, my friend and club member John Drummond was also keen to go and we agreed to share a cabin. It would be 30 days on the boat, disembarking at Ascension Island and getting a Royal Air Force plane from there to Brize



FROM THE
EDITOR

A Special Issue

We have some very special articles for you in this, our first Larus-on-Line supplement. We decided to produce this additional newsletter because we had a common theme (international birding) and so that the summer issue did not become too big to download for those of us with dial-up connections.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

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Circumnavigation....cont'd

Norton RAF station in southern England. John, a world twitcher with over 6000 species under his belt, suggested that we spent a few days in the Pampas of northeastern Argentina on our way down to Ushuaia to get a few specialities. I wanted to take the opportunity on arrival in the UK to visit family and friends for a couple of weeks before flying back to Philadelphia. As we planned out the almost two month-long trip, I realized that I was about to undertake a counterclockwise circumnavigation of the Atlantic Ocean.

Getting There

I'd arranged to meet John and our Argentinian Pampas guide, Hernan Casanas, on contract to Birding Argentina, on March 5 in Buenos Aires. The cheapest flight took me from Philadelphia to Fort Lauderdale, FL to Bogota, Colombia to Santiago, Chile, and finally to Buenos Aires. Two new countries ticked off already! At every airport I had to go through security etc. so I was a wreck by the time I got to the Argentinian capital, but totally delighted and somewhat amazed to find my baggage had arrived too. A long wait with Hernan for John to come in and then where's his luggage? Hey, they'll deliver, let's go birding.

Otamendi Natural Reserve and the Pampas

The obvious place to bird in the Buenos Aires area is the very handy Costanera Sur Reserve, but as both John and I had been there previously, we opted to drive directly on arrival to Otamendi, a 2700 hectare reserve some 70k northwest of the capital (sorry about these metric values, but I'm trying to get you in the mood). It is situated on the banks of the Parana de las Palmas River and has riverine forest and an extensive floodplain. Tiredness from the long journey vanished as, on entering the reserve, John ticked off Maguari Stork and Long-winged Harrier while I added Southern Screamer and Spectacled Tyrant to my life list. Birding from a somewhat dusty road, it was the funarids and flycatchers which captured our attention. Amongst the former, Sulphur-bearded and Stripe-crowned Spinetails, Curve-billed and Straight-billed Reedhaunters and in the latter category; Sooty Tyrannulet, Warbling Doradito and Small-billed Elaenia. In the reeds, Long-tailed Reed-Finch, Black-and-Rufous Warbling-Finch, Yellow-winged and Scarlet-headed Blackbirds and Brown-and-Yellow Marshbirds added lots of color. We returned to BA for the night, staying in the very sumptuous Claridge's Hotel (we did wonder why Birding Argentina prices were a tad steep) and dined on King George VII (huh?) steak washed down with lots of Argentinian Malbec. A dozen life species deserves no less.

*Maguari Stork*

Early the next day after a vast breakfast, we drove the short distance to Costanera Sur, a large reclaimed piece of land sticking out into the Plate River directly from Buenos Aires, passing time before late luggage arrived and we could take off to the Pampas. A great wildfowl spot with Coscoroba and Black-necked Swans, lots of grebes and ducks of which Red Shoveler and Black-headed Duck were new to me. A Picui Ground-Dove perched obligingly as did an immature Rufescent Tiger-Heron. Shorebirds included flocks of South American Stilts. Our route to San Clemente del Tuyu, our Pampas HQ 350km to the southeast, took us past a spot for one of those fabulously named birds – Firewood-gatherer – which Hernan had staked out for us; the stick nests were behind a road sign on the Interstate, conveniently by a toll gate, allowing stationary, close views. From there, we had permission to bird a large grazed grass ranch, Estancia el Palenque, where localized gems such as Hudson's Canastero and Bay-capped Wren-Spinetail were eventually seen well, along with Tufted Tit-Spinetail, Wren-like Rushbird, Campo Flickers, Chilean Swallows, Bearded Tachuri, White-crested Tyrannulet and the rather over-named Screaming Cowbird. Hotel Morales in San Clemente was at the other end of the scale from Claridge's but OK, nonetheless. We dined at the local parilla (BBQ) - a carnivore's delight.

*Firewood Gatherer*

It rained overnight but we set off early for the coast (actually the mouth of the Rio de la Plata) nearby at Punta Raza. A vast beach was scanned with scopes and the sought-after specialities, Olog's Gull and Snowy-crowned Terns soon appeared, along with Great Grebes, Chilean Flamingos, Cayenne Terns (in Argentina, considered a separate species from the Sandwich Tern) and huge numbers of Black Skimmers and Common Terns plus a single Parasitic Jaeger. Shorebirds included many Two-banded Plover, Red Knot and Hudsonian Godwit. The rain recommenced by lunchtime which we spent accompanied by Burrowing Owls, and in the afternoon we traipsed through the muddy marsh grass in NEOS boots, waterproof trousers, jackets and umbrellas searching for the almost mythical Dot-winged Crake. No luck, but great looks at Grass Wren ('their' version of Sedge Wren) and much closer looks at Bay-capped Wren-Spinetails. A fairly hard day and the ravioli, fried hake and flan for dinner

Circumnavigation....cont'd*Green-barred Woodpecker*

were really appreciated. Overnight thunderstorms and a very wet morning meant our plan to revisit the grasslands had to be abandoned as the dirt roads would be impassable even for our 4WD vehicle. Hernan suggested that we drive to BA, four hours away, and do Costanera Sur some more. After a spectacular lunch, the weather brightened and we took the opportunity to do some photography at this fabulous reserve. White-tufted Grebes 'pack-hunting', Wood Stork, White-faced Whistling Duck, Silver and Speckled Teal, Yellow-billed and Rosy-billed Pintail, Gray-necked Wood-Rail and Plumbeous Rail, three species of Coot including Red-gartered, Wattled Jacana and that's just the wetland. Glittering-bellied Emerald and Gilded Sapphire hummers, Monk and Black-hooded Parakeets, Green-barred Woodpecker and Narrow-billed Woodcreeper, Fork-tailed and Streaked Flycatcher, Yellow-billed and Red-capped Cardinal, well, you get the picture, a birdy place indeed. Dinner was succulent lamb with lashings of Mendoza wine. I keep harping on about the food but, as long as you are not a vegetarian, Argentinian food is delicious.

Ushuaia

Wednesday 9 March saw us leaving BA and heading for Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego *via* Calafate, where I'd been two years previously on a trekking expedition with my son. I was excited to see from the plane the distinct outline of that fabulous granite spike called Fitzroy where we'd camped. On to Ushuaia, labeled as the most southern city in the world, where, having seen our Antarctica boat at the dockside, along with much bigger and grander cruise ships, we checked in at the hotel (the Hostal Malvinas – we did not mention the Falklands there) and walked about town with binocs. We soon met a party of birding Brits and discovered that they were on the same boat as us – all a part of a large group from the UK birding company Wildwings. We checked out the Black-browed Albatrosses and Giant Petrels in the Beagle Channel, the Flightless and Flying Steamer Ducks in the harbour, the Upland and Kelp Geese on the shoreline along with Grey-flanked Cinclodes and abundant Dark-faced Ground-Tyrants. We arranged to hire a car for the following day and adjourned to a local parilla called La Estancia which was "tenedor libre" – literally "free fork", meaning all you can eat; meat, that is. I think everyone is on the Atkins Diet down there.

*Upland Goose*

The next day, we drove early to the National Park a few miles to the west of the city. After paying our 12 pesos fee, the first bird we saw was a perched Austral Pygmy-Owl, which allowed our close approach with cameras – with flash, it was a murky morning – without moving. We'd heard that Spectacled Ducks were on the Lago Razo and, as John needed it for a lifer, headed straight there. No luck. We heard Magellanic Woodpecker but try as we might with the technique that worked so well for David Attenborough (two taps with a stone on a hollow tree), the rotten beast would not show himself. The woods gave us close looks of the delightful Thorn-tailed Rayadito, White-throated Treerunner, Tufted Tit-Tyrant, Patagonian Tyrant, Austral Parakeet and Patagonian Sierra-Finch. On leaving, I yelled for John to stop by a river running out of the lake and there were not only six Spectacled Ducks but also Southern ('Chiloe') Wigeon. The rain had started again but it did not prevent us from getting Fire-eyed Diucon in the parking lot surrounded by busloads of tourists of many nationalities. We checked out the road to the airport and found an unusually large flock (55) of Rufous-chested Dotterel, along with a few Baird's Sandpipers. Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatchers were on the shore. One of the best birding spots in the area is at the other end of Ushuaia, at the outflow from the abattoir! Here, there are fights for the offal amongst the three species of Caracaras, with the White-throated being the 'sought-after' one; also Dolphin, Kelp and Brown-hooded Gulls, Chilean Skuas and Rock and King Cormorants. We were eating seabass in the restaurant when John recognized our tour leader, Steve Howell – for the trip we were about to take - walking by on the sidewalk. The rest of the evening was spent drinking beer, with a pause to e-mail friends from the 'Locutario'.

On the morning of our departure on the boat, we had arranged to hire a local guide, Marcelo de Cruz, to try to find us White-bellied Seed-Snipe and Yellow-bridled Finch, two specialities of the mountains in the area. We drove over Garibaldi Pass, parked the car, and hiked for one hour up a steep, wooded slope through Patagonian beech forest to the tree-line. As we spread out to try to spot or flush these birds, it started to snow, dampening our hopes of finding the targets. As we crested a ridge, Marcelo excitedly called us over and we saw two Yellow-bridled Finches, which gave one or two reasonable photos after recovering our breath. After a further couple of hours, we had to give up on the Seed-Snipe. We blamed it on the snow and the need to get back for our boat, but in truth, I was knackered.

*Circumnavigation....cont'd***The Boat**

With excitement mingled with trepidation, we boarded the M/V Professor Multanovskiy on the afternoon of Friday 11 March, clearly distinguished by its name on the pointy bit (later found to be called the bow) – Профессор МҮЛЬТановский. The port of registration on the rear (later found to be called the stern) was St. Petersburg. Russia that is, not Florida. An 'oceanographic research vessel' was the published description but in actuality, so I heard, an ice-strengthened Arctic spy ship designed for tracking US submarines during the 'cold war'. Our boat was built in 1983 in Finland, 236 feet long, 42 feet wide, a draft of 15 feet and a displacement of 2140 tons. Two 1560HP diesel engines, a cruising speed of 12.5 knots, a fuel (and food!) capacity capable of 70 days at sea and an excellent anti-roll stabilization system. Just so you know. A Russian crew of 19; 52 paying customers and another eight including the young but very decisive and excellent German tour organizer (Rolf Stange) from Oceanwide Expeditions - the Dutch charter company, 3 leaders – Tony Marr (UK) in charge of the Wildwings birders, Steve Howell (UK/US) in charge of the Wings birders, Ian Stone (UK) - the magnificent, humorous historian, an Australian doctor, Greg Coffey, 2 young and enthusiastic cooks Franco (Argentina) and Renso (Holland) and the purser – Daniela (Argentina). This was to be our home for the next 29 days, so – first - what's the accommodation like? Well, both John and I are of Scottish extraction ... but being also American we had booked not the absolute cheapest cabins, but the next one up. Our cabin was mid-ships, above the waterline and had two separate ground-level berths, a curtain wrap-around for each, an openable port-hole (until wrenched permanently closed by the crew after the first storm), a sink with made-on-board potable but not-too-tasty water, storage cupboards, a desk with electric connections (220v) and seats enabling writing, computer operation etc. and an intercom to alert us as to what's going on upstairs. Cozy; the only disadvantage being shared toilets/showers outside the cabin, but not far. Satellite telephone and e-mail services were available – at a price! Food was served in two dining rooms, a self-service breakfast, a served lunch and dinner by two delightful and efficient (sometimes overly) Russian ladies; all menus were published in advance on the notice boards. Drinks and fruit/snacks were available throughout the day, along with 'specials' from the kitchen for elevenses or afternoon tea. A comprehensive bar was served on the 'honor system' – help yourself and sign for it when the bar person was not available. Several special occasions – which appeared to be quite arbitrary - resulted in deck parties with BBQ, wraps, beer, wine and sodas which were all part of the trip. Birding was allowed (subject to weather) in all parts of the boat – bow, stern, the huge internal captain's bridge (a blessing in bad weather), the empty open deck above it, and everywhere in between. We were to enjoy this trip, no mistake. The gentle cruise down the Beagle Channel from Ushuaia that evening of the 11th March belied what was to come, but our first penguins, Magellanic, seen in the water along with Southern Fulmar, Sooty Shearwater and South American Tern heralded the fun to come over the next few days/weeks/whatever. The huge Giant Petrels accompanied us this day and for many days to come; separation of the Southern and the Northern (by color of the bill tip) became a daily task. The mandatory lifeboat drill was partaken with all, including crew, in the claustrophobic confines of the two sealed lifeboats. The question "What happens if I need to go to the toilet?" was apposite as we were all shoulder to shoulder with heads touching the roof. The answer was not forthcoming so I guess being forced to abandon ship and taking to the lifeboats was not looked forward to. So we didn't.

*Giant Petrel**Wandering Albatross***Antarctica**

To get from the south of South America to Antarctica, you need to cross the Drake Passage, arguably the most treacherous sea crossing in the world. Well, it was a doddle. But that's me. I've been on many pelagic birding trips and I can take pretty well all that King Neptune can throw at (or up over) me. The two day crossing was remarkably gentle (according to our experienced guides) but, even so, a few poor souls weren't seen for the period. For those on deck, their first Wandering Albatross circling the boat was a momentous occasion. The commonest bird in these latitudes was the Soft-plumaged Petrel, a beautiful gadfly petrel with a distinctive breast band and a high-arching flight and the most regular *Pterodroma* species we were to see on the trip. On the other hand, the immature Southern Royal Albatross was the only one seen on the trip. Several Black-browed and Grey-headed Albatrosses rounded out this great Albatross day. Our first Pintado (Cape) and Kerguelen Petrels were seen, the first the 'classic' and endearing, photogenic, blotchy plumaged petrel seen so often in documentaries on the southern oceans, the second an all-dark, distinctive, spectacular high-flier – a pelagic 'Batman' if ever there was one – one of my favorite birds of the trip. Black-bellied Storm-Petrels were as numerous as Wilson's and the first of the Prions made their appearance, with Steve and Tony attempting to point out the identification points with those individuals sufficiently close by. Always tricky, we slowly got to know this family over the ensuing two weeks. Long-finned Pilot Whales accompanied us briefly and a beaked Whale gave a brief view. In the evening, our captain, Sergey Nesterov, introduced himself, welcomed us and described the ship and crew (all in excellent English).

Circumnavigation....cont'd

So what do you do when you're not out on deck birding, stuffing your face in the dining rooms or sleeping (or throwing up)? Oceanwide Expeditions are experienced in these periods, often long, especially for the non-birders. A comprehensive range of lectures were available in the lecture room in the bowels of the ship – equipped with all modern digi-stuff. A key presenter was Ian Stone, a history professor from the University of Kent in England, who had a huge range of engaging talks on Antarctic explorers, the history and the discoverers of the islands we were to visit, and many other topics, all delivered in an intimate, very witty, manner. Indeed, it was hard not to miss one of his talks but if you attended, what were you likely to miss on the ocean??? A birder's dilemma. I was lucky, I loved those talks and the one or two lectures I missed gave me a couple of good species. Tony Marr, the ornithologist leader of the Wildwings group, was also an accomplished speaker and gave superb illustrated talks both on what we were to see, based on his previous visits, and had seen (his own digi-photos and any participant wanting to contribute were shown every three days or so – a competition was held towards the end). Other talks were on geology from the trip organizer, Rolf Stange, and on medical matters (how to avoid scurvy) from Doctor Greg. Films of relevance (Shackleton, Scott, Longitude...) were also shown. A huge collection of paperbacks was available. The bar/library had many textbooks on all aspects of natural history, atlases, scientific reprints etc for both the Antarctic and Arctic.

We crossed the Antarctic Convergence ('Polar Front') during the night of March 13. This is the latitude at about 60 degrees south where the water (and the air) temperatures take a significant drop due to the separation of the sub-Antarctic warmer surface water from the colder and fresher Antarctic surface water. The Antarctic Circumpolar Current is the movement of water around the Antarctic continent and is the most voluminous in the world.

One of Rolf's jobs was to gently awake us at 7.30am over the intercom in time for breakfast at 8. Of course, keen birders were up way before that scanning the horizons for new birds at dawn – at least, in the beginning. White-chinned Petrels were good value. The rocking and rolling increased in intensity as we scoured the horizon for land when at last the cry "iceberg" was called and over the next two to three hours we entered what we'd dreamed about – icebergs of increasing size then .. land; the first of the South Shetland Islands to the west of the Antarctic peninsula. We dropped anchor at 6pm at Aitcho Island (named after 'HO' – the Hydrographic Office of the Admiralty in London, under whose auspices the island was first surveyed). Donning life-jackets and wellies (NEOS in my case) and

*S. Shetland Islands*

paddling in the antiseptic trough (so that we took no foreign stuff onto the island – a routine at every landing) prior to descending to the zodiac inflatables for our first landing was very exciting. But not as exciting as meeting with our first Gentoo Penguins who formed a welcoming committee on the beach. It was well after breeding season and these guys were waiting to finish their molt, allowing really close photos. Up the hill a colony of Chinstrap Penguins was likewise forlornly standing and a lone young Adelie called mournfully – obviously way out of it's own colony, but great for the penguin-tickers and photographers. Snowy Sheathbills stalked around eating stuff which we don't recycle, Brown Skuas menaced and Antarctic Shags cruised by overhead. The cold was intense but the birders were generating their own warmth with this initial Antarctic experience and had to be rounded up to get back to the zodiacs and the ship. Much celebrating that night.

*Welcoming Gentoo Penguins*

The next day, we made an early landing on Gourdin Island off the northern coast of the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. A bumpy Zodiac ride to the shore and we met by the usual crowd of Antarctic Fur Seals this time accompanied by the docile Weddell Seals. We climbed to the top of a small conical hill where the visibility was superb and the wind was still allowing an unexpected warmth, in contrast to the shore where the katabatic wind (generated from ice fields and glaciers) was chilling. Our first sightings were had of the delightful Snow Petrels – pure-white magic! Our next landing was the Antarctic mainland itself, at Brown Bluff. To get there we passed some really impressive tabular icebergs with the subtle blue colors varying depending on the amount of compression in the ice (squeezing out the air pockets with time and weight results in increased blueness intensity). Brown Bluff was at 63degrees 31.2'S (and 56 degrees 53.4' W), and the first landing on the 'seventh continent' for most of us (actually only my fifth). Adult Adelies were photogenic, Gentoos and the Antarctic trash-collectors - the Sheathbills, Skuas and Giant Petrels did their stuff while, high above, the towering pale brown cliffs reaching up to 1500 feet were impressive. We returned north to Hope Bay and the Argentinian Base at Esperanza,

*Adelie Penguin*

Circumnavigation....cont'd*Argentinian Base (Esperanza)*

N or NE at a steady 12 knots, weather permitting.

Dawn on March 15 found us anchored off Paulet Island in flat seas, surrounded by icebergs and ice floes with the dawn sun washing everything rosy. One of those pictures you see in documentaries and advertisements and drool about. The island held the vestiges of large Gentoo and Adelie Penguin colonies, and while a few still lingered, Sheathbills and Skuas were doing their job as janitors. The main attraction here was a large Antarctic Shag colony in full swing. Our intrepid leader Tony kept over-inquisitive fur seals at bay with his tripod while we took photos. Our next Zodiac landing was at Devil Island, the southernmost point of our trip at 63 deg 48.14' S (and 57 deg 17.35' W), 4,400 statute miles south of the equator. South Polar Skuas were identified amongst the other *Catharacta* skuas. The view from the top of the 207m high barren hill was truly remarkable.

*Devil Island*

difficult species was secured UTB ("under the belt"). The Weddell gave the seal spotters a chance to shine as, along with an almost alarmingly high number of Antarctic Fur Seals (including an almost white one), Crabeater, Weddell, Elephant and Leopard Seals were all seen lolling on ice floes. Wilson's Storm-Petrels, Snow Petrels and Antarctic Terns were the commonest birds. Quite a day. We set sail for the South Orkney Islands.

Bird of the day on this crossing was the Antarctic Petrel, a very localized, beautiful black-white-black petrel and highly sought-after. We found a flock of about 20 of these birds sitting on a small iceberg – the Snow Petrels do the same thing, merging in so well that only their eyes and bills stand out from the snow/ice! Commonest birds were Antarctic (Southern) Fulmars and Pintado (Cape) Petrels. It was a bumper whale day with Humpbacks (27), Fin (8), Antarctic Minke (4), Southern Bottlenose (3) and Orcas (11).

The South Orkneys

We landed on Laurie Island in the South Orkneys at another Argentinian base – Orcadas – situated on a gravelly strip separating the two halves of the island. The friendly occupants gave us coffee and a guided tour of the base, including their own bit of history – the Omond House, built from tabular rock pieces by William Bruce, the leader of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition of 1901 – 1903. Bruce built a meteorological station here and, when he left, offered it to the Argentine Government who've maintained a presence ever since, making it the longest continuously occupied site in Antarctica. A small museum was very well kept and interesting. A signpost showed that the base was 7199 nautical miles to New York and 8157 to London. Southern Elephant Seals littered the beach. We left the base and entered the Washington Channel, not knowing if we could get through. A spectacular strip of water with beautiful weather (again!) and, just as we found that the northern exit was clear of ice, two Southern Right Whales were found feeding. Penguins here were mainly Chinstrap and amongst the ever-present Southern Giant Petrels was one almost pure white bird.

established in 1951. This military base has a population of 70, with 20 children attending the one of the two schools in Antarctica. While some coffee addicts enjoyed the museum and 'casino', I opted for the walk to the decomposing Trinity House, built during the British Operation Tabarin (named after a Paris night-club) in 1944, and subsequently given to Uruguay for their Antarctic operation, now closed. On returning to the dock, we noticed a signpost to the South Pole 3000km showing that we'd only just touched the edge of the continent proper. We re-boarded and cruised past a Leopard Seal on an ice floe then through the night again – the distances involved on this whole voyage were so immense that most nights from Antarctica we were heading

*Paulet Island*

Circumnavigation....cont'd

It took forty hours to cross the Scotia Sea *en route* for South Georgia. The weather held and excellent views were had of Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses, surely one of the World's most beautiful tubenoses. Almost 50 Kerguelen Petrels were logged but the commonest seabirds were Antarctic Prions and Blue Petrels, though trying to get photos was a frustrating experience. A breaching Strap-toothed Whale, two Cuvier's Beaked Whales and Hourglass Dolphins were added to the impressively growing cetacean list.



*Light-mantled
Sooty Albatross*

South Georgia

We arrived at the entrance to the Drygalski Fjord at the south-east end of South Georgia at dawn on March 19, just in time to see the sun hitting the highest peaks of the glacier-clad mountains. We cruised this awe-inspiring place as the sun rose (a bit) higher, then set off along the coastline. The Georgian Diving-Petrel, which had crash-landed on the ship during the night, was released when we were far from marauding skuas,



King Penguins

following an unfortunately premature release of an Antarctic Prion earlier! After lunch we pulled into Cumberland Bay and anchored off Grytviken, an old whaling station founded by the Norwegians a hundred years previously. While the old rusting factory was slowly being demolished, a relatively new set of buildings across the harbour housed the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) on King Edward Point. The Post Office was here also and the keen philatelists and postcard senders made full use of the facilities. Of course, South Georgia is renowned for marking the climax of Sir Ernest Shackleton's heroic rescue attempt in 1916 - and for his grave just outside of the 'village'. We indulged in the traditional ceremony of a speech and a toast at the graveside of the great man who died here in 1922, then visited the impeccable little museum, the restored church and photographed the beautiful and extraordinarily confiding King Penguins, Kelp Gulls and the South Georgian subspecies of Pintail, Antarctic Tern and Shag. Back on board, the evening was occupied by a subantarctic BBQ put on by

our chefs, to which we had invited the BAS scientists, the crew, and some of the South Georgia 'regulars', including Tim and Pauline Carr, two of the twelve or so permanent residents, who had arrived by yacht 15 years previously and just stayed! They are the authors of a spectacular book (1998) "Antarctic Oasis - under the spell of South Georgia".



Manager's house - Stromness

Overnight, we had repositioned to the Bay of Isles with the intention of landings at Salisbury Plain (for King Penguins) and Albatross Island (for something else, I've forgotten). However, this was not to be because, although the ambient weather was still great, the swell had increased due to a storm system in the north and, after a rather dangerous reconnaissance by Zodiac, the leaders took the decision not to land. We headed for Fortuna Bay which, by virtue of it being deeper and less affected by the open sea, was able to accommodate our Zodiac landings. We were not disappointed for a large King Penguin colony stretched out before us with the usual gaggle of young fur seals. In addition, the bizarre sight of a herd of reindeer feeding on the stunted grass was unexpected to some. Norwegian whalers introduced two or three herds onto the island many years ago as a fresh meat source. I guess you can have too much whale and seal. A large band of walkers decided to travel in the footsteps of Shackleton on the final part of his descent from the mountains and headed off over a ridge while others opted for the ship cruise round to the common meeting point at Stromness. Another long-abandoned whaling station, Stromness was the site of the end of Shackleton's long voyage in the tiny James Caird rowboat from Elephant Island where he'd left 22 crew, and crossing South Georgia on foot for help in 1916. The manager's house was still standing. It had a plaque outside but we couldn't read it as the whole area had been roped off due to asbestos concerns!

They tried to straighten themselves up a little bit before entering the station, but they truly were a sight to behold. Their beards were long, their hair was matted, their clothes, tattered and stained as they were, hadn't been washed in nearly a year. Down they hurried and as they approached the station, two small boys met them. Shackleton asked them where the manager's house was and they didn't answer...instead they turned and ran from them as fast as their legs would carry them. They came to the wharf where the man in charge was asked if Mr. Sorlle (the manager) was in the house.

"Yes," he said as he stared at us.

"We would like to see him," said I.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We have lost our ship and come over the island," I replied.

"You have come over the island?" he said in a tone of entire disbelief.

Circumnavigation....cont'd

The man went towards the manager's house and we followed him. I learned afterwards that he said to Mr. Sorlle: "There are three funny-looking men outside, who say they have come over the island and they know you. I have left them outside." A very necessary precaution from his point of view.

Mr. Sorlle came out to the door and said, "Well?"

"Don't you know me?" I said.

"I know your voice," he replied doubtfully. "You're the mate of the *Daisy*."

"My name is Shackleton," I said.

Immediately he put out his hand and said, "Come in. Come in."

There must have been rain or fog during the night for on the morning of March 21, 31 Antarctic Prions, a Wilson's Storm-Petrel (all successfully released) and a Common Diving-Petrel (dead) were found on board. An attempted landing at Gold Harbour had to be abandoned when the second Zodiac to try beaching flipped over. The survivors promptly named themselves as founder members of the "South Georgia Sub-Aqua Club". Plans had to be readjusted rapidly again and we headed for Cooper Island, which was thought to have a more sheltered side and less swell. A key bird to see prior to leaving South Georgia was the endemic pipit. So far, we had not been able to land at suitable places for this bird and the birding crowd was getting distinctly edgy. As we approached within half a mile of Cooper Island, I suddenly saw two passerines flying above the ship! I yelled. A frantic few minutes ensued as every birder tried to get a view of the South Georgia Pipits which, obviously recognizing our plight, had come out to greet us! The experienced leaders said they'd never encountered that before. We did get much closer looks and photos as we were able to launch the Zodiacs and the pipits fed on nearby rocks – also a colony of Macaroni Penguins was a nice addition to our Antarctic specialities. Our last venture on South Georgia was a zodiac cruise around Larsen Fjord, a magical, quiet, mirror-like strip of deep water surrounded by majestic mountains and glaciers. A nesting Light-mantled Sooty Albatross and the call of Weddell Seals were among the highlights, though one of the other four zodiacs had more pipits – an important find, as this was 'mainland' South Georgia, which was thought not to have pipits due to the rat population. We left South Georgia exhilarated. I had visited the island of my dreams. It was like nowhere else on Earth. Time to open that bottle of malt scotch, saved for such occasions. Funny how stuff like that evaporates, even in cold climates.

South Georgia to Gough Island

Our next destination was to be Gough Island, 1400 nautical miles to the northeast and well outside the Antarctic Convergence; this would take at least four days at sea. Only a few miles out of South Georgia we realized that this would be a test of our character and stomachs, as the ship started rolling and pitching in an ominous manner.

The long days were a chance for some of the aforementioned 'indoor' activities to be attended. There were even informal German classes given by Rolf, our Teutonic Tour Organizer. All were done with remarkable good humor and wit. Ian Stone regaled us with his marvelous English voice and copiously interspersed his hysterical, historical lectures with amusing anecdotes (and private asides) on subjects as diverse as "Who saw Antarctica first?", a poem entitled "The Sleeping Bag", the Nordenskiöld Expedition, "Die Deutschen im Süden", "The History of South Georgia", Shackleton, etc. Tony Marr, Wildwings Ornithologist, gave some excellent talks on bird themes laced with dry British humor and Rolf Stange, the geologist, gave a scientific insight into glaciers.



Sooty Albatross

March 22 was a stormy day with the head wind reaching Force 10 and waves breaking over the whole ship. A 'dint' had appeared in the bow overnight! Undeterred, the birders were up there on the bridge, peering through the wave-lashed windows and clocking off the first Greater Shearwaters, Sooty Albatrosses and Grey Petrels of the trip. Dinner was interesting, attempting to prevent one's food from sliding down the table or sticking one's fork in one's cheek. We'd lost quite a bit of time facing into this storm but the following day was much calmer and we were able to catch up a little. A rare petrel, the White-headed Petrel (from New Zealand waters) passed the boat very early (06.33hr) and most birders (moi, aussi) missed it. Amazingly, a second bird swept around the ship just four hours later which I got, having made the conscious decision to skip Ian's lecture, a first for me, which had just started when the 'megabird' came past! A good day for the birds with sixteen tubenoses before breakfast and a day's total of 24! New ones included Slender-billed Prion, Great-winged Petrel, White-bellied Storm-Petrel and Little Shearwater (southern race *'elegans'*). The mammal list continued with four Southern Right Whale Dolphins.

Circumnavigation....cont'd



Tristan Wandering Albatross

The following day brought us a Tristan Wandering Albatross, Atlantic Petrel and Gray-backed Storm-Petrels amongst a multitude of tubenoses, the commonest being Soft-plumaged Petrel. The final full day before reaching Gough Island we had our first Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross and the equally spectacular Spectacled Petrel, a Tristan da Cunha speciality. Over a thousand Broad-billed Prions were racked up.

Gough Island

Gough Island was sighted at 10.00 hours on March 26th. Although we knew that we could not land as the island is a World Heritage Site to protect the millions of nesting seabirds, we hoped that the sea conditions would be calm enough for us to launch the zodiacs for a cruise along its coast. A really amazing looking island, with dense green vegetation clinging to the vertical cliffs which rise from the



Spectacled Petrel

surf-laden and kelp-strewn seas, an occasional ravine with slender trees and shrubs allowing views into the interior. As someone remarked, "it wouldn't surprise me if a dinosaur emerged from one of these lost world chasms". The sea was awash with seabirds of all sizes, with a couple of White-faced Storm-Petrels being a surprise because, although known to breed in the Tristan group of islands, it had not been spotted on any of the previous four "Odysseys". The only human occupants of the island are six meteorologists who (wo)man the South African Weather Station at the southern end; they stood on their roof and waved. Later we were told that contact by radio was made and they informed us that our ship was only the second one they'd seen in six months! A lonely place, indeed. We launched the zodiacs at Quest Bay on the sheltered eastern side of the island and peered up "The Glen", a steep, grassy indentation named by the aforementioned Scot, William Bruce. The punk-crested Northern Rockhopper Penguins were our eighth and last species of penguin for the trip. Our major target birds, the endemic land birds, were soon discovered, the Gough Moorhen appearing high up one of the ravines and the Gough Bunting flitting along the boulder-strewn shoreline. Manipulating the zodiacs in and out of the dense kelp beds was tricky but eventually, all got satisfying views of these birds. Only those with 1000mm lenses and a very steady arm could manage photos, however. Gough Island, unknown by the World, rarely visited, is one of the best kept secrets on the planet.

Tristan da Cunha

It was 200 miles to Tristan da Cunha, billed as the remotest inhabited island in the world, and our voyage from Gough Island was undertaken under the cover of darkness. The conical shape of the Tristan volcano loomed over the horizon early in the morning



Inaccessible Island

but, as we approached, it became apparent that we would not be able to land – the huge swell bowling into the tiny harbour through narrow rock-lined jetties did not permit zodiac admission – so we backed off to an outlying suburb - Inaccessible Island - for the night. Someone forgot to switch off the outside lights after dark and, after a yell from a birder, we discovered the boat decks were littered with Soft-plumaged Petrels and White-bellied Storm-Petrels. The lights were doused and we spent an hour tossing the birds overboard. The next day we returned to Tristan in increasingly ameliorating conditions and eventually we managed to get the zodiacs into the harbour at the island's capital (and only) town – Edinburgh of the Seven Seas – pop. 280. Due to rats, the island was basically devoid of birdlife, but the very friendly islanders treated us to a choice of touristic options – the potato patches where the islanders grow their veggies - or the lava of the small volcano which erupted in 1961, causing the evacuation of the total Tristan population to London. Decisions, decisions. I opted for the allotments and cows viewing, and was not disappointed; I saw both. The

local café had beer but the renowned chocolate cake had already gone, some of the party had headed there first! The post office had postcards and stamps and a couple of rather bleak cooperative shops had knitted items. Few tourist boats anchor here, even fewer take the effort to land passengers to take advantage of the islanders' offerings. Amazing that this tiny community still exists. A party that night on board had the island's administrator, Mike Hently, his wife, and some of the islanders allowing some good conversations after a loosening supply of alcohol.

Somewhat bizarrely, in this totally remote part of the World, protocol rules. So we could not land on either of the Tristan outlying islands (which, being rat-free, had all the birds) without the accompaniment of Tristanians. And they weren't the early morning birds; and they had to get back before the harbour-master closed the harbour. So scheduling became a big thing. On the morning of the 29 March we headed to Inaccessible Island with the hope of seeing the almost mythical Inaccessible Island Rail, an endemic bird on this tiny island with few possibilities of visiting other than on our tour! The previous two 'Atlantic Odysseys' this bird, but this year, we failed we could not land. The trial zodiac landed with leaders and islanders but at the expense of broken ribs for our man, Tony. The proposed landing was abandoned, much to the intense chagrin of the birders. As one UK birder from

Circumnavigation....cont'd*Tristan Thrush*

Yorkshire confided to me “Ee, lad, I dorn’t think I cud go to t’Club again without gettin’ that bloody rail”. Sad but, as it turned out, the only group bird miss on the whole trip. We headed for the other outlier, Nightingale Island, where we did land, and immediately saw the endemic Tristan Thrush – a lovely confiding bird which was everywhere, and the Tristan Bunting which afforded fleeting but good views in the tall tussock grasses which covered the hill slopes down to sea level. Here we were given a difficult choice – there was probably insufficient time to do both the visit to the Rockhopper Penguin colony for up-close-and-personal views of these delightful birds *and* to climb to the top of the island to try and find the rare endemic Grosbeak Bunting (also called Wilkin’s Finch). I opted for the rarity (of course) and climbed the grassy trail flanked by 10 feet high flax and grasses which had Yellow-nosed Albatross chicks standing on their little tussock mounds which lined the steep path. It also had an unusual Yellow-nosed adult – they should be all at sea at this time - and the occasional Greater Shearwater

bursting out of the dense undergrowth to fly down the path as a runway for take-off – worth the trek without the mega-bird! At the summit, we had about half-an-hour to find the bird amongst the shrubs and dense vegetation with more albatross youngsters snapping at our pant legs! Again, the islanders’ schedules were paramount. Very odd. I took off on my own and found a Grosbeak Bunting. Should I shout and risk scaring the bird, or risk going to find others and bringing them back? I took a couple of photos (print camera) and then shouted. After all, time was of the essence. All on the top of the hill got to see the birds – another bird arrived – and all there breathed a sigh of relief. After all, after the loss of the rail, we badly needed to see this bird! All too short a visit to this magnificent island with no history of introduced rats, cats, goats etc. and therefore purely natural – other than the flax! A real eye-opener. We gave a lift back to Tristan to Sue Scott, a marine biologist studying the sub-aqua life, on condition that she gave us a talk on her work with which she duly complied to the delight of the assembled multitude on the boat. Another unforgettable day.

Tristan da Cunha to St. Helena

In front of us we had another 1330 nautical miles of steadily increasing temperatures, four days of decreasing bird numbers and species before we made landfall at St. Helena Island. Sub-Antarctic species such as Soft-plumaged Petrels and Sooty Albatrosses disappeared; Tristan’s Spectacled Petrels followed in the wake for days, allowing good photo opportunities. A Shy Albatross appeared and the first warm water birds stated to make an appearance – Bulwer’s Petrels, Sooty Shearwaters, Leach’s and Band-rumped (Madeiran) Storm-Petrels. The first flying fish were seen, later followed by flying squid. A general air of indolence settled on the ship, but the hard core birders were still alert, and the lectures from Ian and Tony were well attended, the lecture room being the coolest place on the boat! We crossed the Tropic of Capricorn on April 1 when our last Spectacled Petrel was seen; our last albatross, a Tristan Wandering, was seen the previous day.

St Helena

We were welcomed to the tropical waters of this magical island by a huge pod of Pantropical Spotted Dolphins and a collection of familiar birds – Brown and Black Noddies, Red-billed Tropicbirds, Sooty and Fairy (White) Terns, Masked Boobies and Madeiran Storm-Petrels. After formal customs and health clearance we landed on the island by swinging from a rope from zodiac to harbour wall. Interestingly, it being a Sunday (April 3), the capital, Jamestown, was virtually deserted and very quiet except for the birdsong. Birdsong?? After so long at sea with little in the way of wildlife noises, the singing of birds was music to our ears. However, the song was all from introduced species, and soon we had “added” Peaceful Dove, Common Myna, Java Sparrow, Madagascar Red Fody, Yellow Canary and Common Waxbill to our list! The key bird on the island is the only endemic, a small shorebird called the St Helena Plover, or ‘Wirebird’ as the local ‘Saints’ call it. We commandeered a few small buses and ascended the hairpin bends from the town to the island’s plateau, over a thousand feet. Here, remarkably different terrain from the rocky, cliff coastal strip, with verdant pastures, grazing cattle and little farms and habitations; all very attractive. The Wirebirds were soon found in an area called Deadwood Plain and the photographers had a field day, though trying to get pictures of the long, spindly legs (which apparently gave the bird its local name) amongst the grass was not easy.

*Fairy Tern*

The following morning was dedicated to tourism and history; Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled here by the British in 1815 following his defeat at the battle of Waterloo. He died here in 1821, the cause of his death being strongly debated ever since. Fortifications around the island’s coasts testify as to the almost paranoiac zeal the Brits put in to preventing his rescue. Firstly, we were taken by taxi to a viewpoint overlooking the Briars Pavilion (not open to the public at this time) where he spent a contented first three months of his exile with the Balcombe family while Longwood House, especially restored for him and his retinue, was being readied. Next, a visit to his original tomb in a delightfully shady nook in the Sane Valley, a location chosen by Napoleon himself; his body

Circumnavigation....cont'd

was removed for reburial in Les Invalides in Paris in 1840. Finally, a tour of Longwood itself, which had many original memorabilia and was set in a very attractive garden. Interestingly, all three of these sites are maintained by the French Government by agreement with the British. A visit to the Governor's House was particularly nostalgic for our historian, Ian, enabling him to see the Giant Tortoises (gifts to the Gov.) one of whom, Jonathan, he remembered riding when he was three years old, sixty years ago, when his father was Governor of St Helena. The estimated age of J was 170 years! After some of the best fish and chips I've ever had (the fish was wahoo) there was ample time to buy trinkets, send post cards, visit the excellent museum and e-mail friends from the Cable & Wireless office. A tourist 'must' is to climb Jacob's Ladder, a straight concrete stairway from the main Street in Jamestown to the 'plateau', 699 steps of about a foot apiece. What's it for? That's another story (hint – it's to do with manure). I waited until it was in shade before ascending. A cold beer or two on the verandah of the Consulate Hotel was most welcome after my descent.

*Giant Tortoise*

We planned a boat trip aboard the tiny "Gannet Three" for the next morning to see the coast and nesting seabird colonies, especially on Sperry Island, at the southern tip of St Helena. The sea was behaved, the weather beautiful and the sea life excellent with close encounters with Pantropical Spotted Dolphins on the way out and Rough-toothed Dolphins on the return. Brown Boobies were added to the trip list and the numbers of Noddies amazing. Some classic photos were obtained when a couple of friendly Brown Noddies landed on two ladies' heads! Sperry Island had thousands of nesting Noddies and Fairy Terns with Masked Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds claiming the highest parts of the sea stack. On the return to Jamestown, Ian Stone led a history tour which inevitably finished in the ...no, not the pub, but the Victorian tea rooms of the Wellington House Hotel. Then the pub. Then a group dinner at Donny's Place.

St Helena (15 deg 56' S; 5 deg 43 W) is one of the most delightful islands it's ever been my privilege to visit. The population was 5000, is now 3800 due to many having to find jobs in the UK, South Africa and the bases on Ascension Island, and serious concerns over the idyllic island's future exist. Unfortunately (for me, anyway) the only solution seems to be the construction of an airport to encourage tourism, business expansion and jobs, of course. Plans for this are well under way and I'm just glad that I got the chance to visit before this happened. This tiny "... mere wart in the sea " as some French bishop called it returning from the far east (prior to the Suez Canal), has just about everything for retirement! Gorgeous scenery from wave-lashed coastline to fertile rolling pastures, stark, bare jagged rock formations to peaceful, wooded valleys; an active town based on the English style, very friendly people, a great and interesting history and a marvelous climate, kept cooler than expected by the SE tradewinds. The butts? It's only 47 square miles (10.5 x 6.5 miles). It's 1200 miles to Africa and 1800 miles to South America. It is serviced by a ship (the RMS St Helena) which plies from Walvis Bay in Namibia approximately monthly. The most important but is that its bird list isn't too high! I'd have to change my vocation! A superb recent book of the (limited) birdlife is "The Birds of St Helena" by Beau W. Rowlands *et al* (BOU, 1998).

St Helena to Ascension Island

This part of the ocean is a birding desert and the two days passage between these islands was time to catch up on the unfinished novels, getting sunburnt and loll in the makeshift swimming pool aboard the Professor Multanovskiy after the excitement of St Helena. A Cory's Shearwater and a White-tailed Tropicbird on the approach to Ascension Island boosted the tour's bird list. There were two interesting events. A two part lecture on the history and future of Ascension Island, entitled "Only the British would have bothered with such a place" (a quote from a 19th century French naturalist) by our resident historian, who seemed a tad more positive about the future for this island we were about to visit than he had been for St Helena. The first active large vessel we had seen since leaving Ushuaia was a long-liner of Japanese or Korean origin, setting lines well within the territorial waters of Ascension Island. Having recently had a disheartening talk from Tony Marr on the decline of albatrosses due to inadequate precautions being taken by long-liners, we were incensed by this illegal activity and took photos of the vessel with powerful lenses on digital cameras. We reported the activity by radio to the Ascension authorities and when anchored off Georgetown, the island's capital, the usual customs and health authorities were accompanied by the police, who gathered details and recordings of the illegal fishing activity.

Ascension Island

The first view of Ascension Island was vastly different from St Helena. A stark, volcanic exterior, offset by unexpected superb, sandy beaches. Bristling high-tech aerials and alien domes dominated the skyline, signifying not just military operations of both the American and British armed forces but also the BBC World Service. Ascension has a huge airfield (Wideawake – named after the huge Sooty Tern colony on its perimeter – devoid of birds during our visit as we were not within the strange nine-month breeding cycle of these birds) with a two mile runway and a long history of involvement in military operations. Ironically, we still had to use ropes to pull ourselves from the zodiacs onto dry land. We were taken for an island tour by minibus. Our first stop was the turtle collection ponds where good views and photos of the endemic Ascension Island Frigatebird were obtained. The ponds were a

Circumnavigation....cont'd

vestige of previous plunders which allowed the British Admiralty in London to still enjoy the Green Turtle soup which they'd become accustomed to while on the remote island. We had an enforced stop due to a flat overlooking the runway where a jumbo jet was taking off. We were told that this was to be our plane on its return from the Falklands in a day's time – a surprise as we thought the RAF plane was going to be a Trident, or at least something modestly small. After an excellent lunch in the Two Boats Club, we ventured up Green Mountain, the island's highest peak at 2815ft. An interesting experience in that, in total contrast to the dry, volcanic desert of the coastal strip, the mountain had lush, wet vegetation, most of which was non-native although gallant attempts are being made to preserve the few remaining indigenous plants, mainly ferns. A fascinating old water collection system was pointed out, basically gathering dew as the island's rainfall is totally insufficient to supply the inhabitants (about 900 resident people). The windy summit gave glimpses of the entire island, and the dewpond had an associated cubby-hole where you could get an inked stamp of your achievement in reaching the top! An endemic land-crab was persuaded out of its burrow on the way back down.

In the afternoon, Ian led a historical tour to the church, the Exile's Club, the Museum and the cricket pitch (devoid of grass). We returned in the evening to witness one of nature's spectacles – the arrival of the huge female Green Turtles onto the sandy beaches, the digging of the pit, the laying of 50 – 70 eggs, their painstaking covering with sand. Sad to think that few would survive to adulthood after

hatching, but, hey, that's why there's 60+ laid at a time. The following day, our ship headed for Boat-swainbird Island, a small chunk of rock a few hundred yards from the main island, and home to not only the World's total population of Ascension Island Frigatebirds, but also to a huge population of Noddies, Boobies, Fairy Terns and Tropicbirds. Unfortunately, the swell prevented the launch of the zodiacs for a trip around the rock, but the comings and goings afforded plenty of viewing and photo ops.



Ascension Island Frigatebird

Lunch was taken on board and then the 22 of us, due to leave on the evening flight, took our leave of our fellow travelers and headed for the harbour and the airport for our flight to the UK. The 30 or so others would cruise on the Professor Multanovskiy for the next six days across the equator to the Cape Verde Islands, whence they'd catch a flight from the island of Sal to Lisbon, thence home. Both John and I wanted to get to the UK from Ascension and visit family and friends. A Boeing 747, the oldest jumbo still in active service and on RAF charter from Islandic Airways, flew us from Ascension Island that Saturday evening and we arrived at Brize Norton RAF Station in Wiltshire, England, the next morning, Sunday 10 April.

United Kingdom

I was in the UK from April 10 visiting friends and family in north England and Scotland, where accommodations vary considerably. until my flight from Glasgow to Philadelphia on April 26. But that's another story; it's put in here to complete my round trip, my circumnavigation of the Atlantic.



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Antarctic Fur Seal

Belize With Friends

by Anita Guris

The Purple-crowned Fairy was belly plunging, bathing, and cooling off by splashing in a sun-dappled, clear, rock-bottomed stream a mere 5 feet from where I sat. Its white outer tail edges flashed bright in the sunlight. Silence and stillness surrounded us as we shared this intimate moment with the purple-crowned jewel of a hummingbird. This is my fondest memory of Belize.



Purple-crowned Fairy

Belize had been a dream of ours for a very long time. My medical condition has limited my ability to travel to the tropics to go birding, so my rheumatologist suggested a few places that I could visit and be fairly certain that the medical facilities, food, and water would be safe. Some of the places he mentioned were Trinidad, Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize. We decided to take a long overdue trip to Belize.

We were very lucky that Don and Jayne Jones traveled to Belize before and agreed to put a trip together for us. We recruited some friends, including Mike Bowman from Switzerland, whom we met during our business travel adventures in 2002. The other participants, almost all DVOC'ers, were Earl Harrison, now living in Maryland, and Al & Anne Driscoll. The group was set, and our plans were to visit Belize and stay in three different lodges which would provide access to different habitats.

When we first arrived, we were eager and excited. Come to think of it, the feeling never really waned at all during the entire trip. Some of the first birds we saw were lifers – Tropical Mockingbird and Boat-billed Flycatcher, observed by all right from the van before we pulled out of the airport parking lot. I thought to myself “Man, this is going to be fun! Lifers dripping off the trees.” Gladly, I was NOT wrong.

On the trip to a small, picturesque dock in Orange Walk, where we would take a boat to Lamanai, we birded along the way and picked up Cinnamon Hummingbird, Groove-billed Ani, Vermillion Flycatcher, and Ruddy Ground Dove. On the boat ride from Orangewalk into Lamanai, we saw Black-collared Hawks, Mangrove Swallows, Proboscis Bats, and Jabiru Storks.

To begin our trip, we started off at the Lamanai Outpost Lodge, a small paradise that offered up great lodging

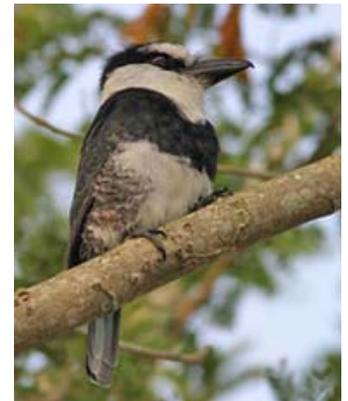
facilities, great food, and friendly, courteous service. Our bird guide was Rudy, a young man with incredible eyesight. The birding was casual. We took an organized trip each day and one each evening while there. We also took off on our own during the afternoons when we had no activities planned. Okay, really, I took a nap at every opportunity, and that's how Paul was able to get 10 more life birds than I did on the trip...not that I am counting.



Laughing Falcon

While on land at Lamanai, we enjoyed the secluded Shangri-La within the lodge and the trails immediately surrounding it. One of our first jaw-droppers was a sitting Laughing Falcon. We watched it for nearly 20 minutes. Shortly after enjoying the Laughing Falcon, we spotted a White-necked Puffbird. A little later we added a singing Barred Ant-Shrike. The birding was relatively

easy, and everyone in our group was able to see the majority of the birds. The tree with the pair of Yellow-throated Euphonias eating custard apples was just incredible. It was an easy walk, it was in a spot where I could actually see the birds without straining my neck, and the birds ate slowly so we got great looks. Now, THIS was worth the price of admission!



White-necked Puffbird

We visited the ancient Mayan ruins, and that's where I spotted my Blue-crowned Motmot. I was just thrilled! After looking at this bird in the field guide for months, I now had the surreal experience of finding it! I was nearly speechless, if you can believe that! I stammered a bit, but managed to get something out, and Paul then translated for me to the rest of the group. As anyone who has birded with me knows, it's the pretty ones that get to me. The Red-legged Honeycreeper was also spectacular, and then seeing the ruins after that just made it so much more special. I thought to myself, “I wonder if the Mayans birded, or if the Blue-crowned Motmot and Red-legged Honeycreeper were around for them to enjoy back then.” No matter, I saw it, and that was what was most important to me at that moment. From our group, three brave souls marched up the temple steps, and crawled back down. We were informed that the shallowness of

Belize....cont'd

the steps was intentional, and was part of the Mayan ritual of praying as they approached and climbed up to the temple.

Hats off to Jayne, Paul, and Mike! Anne Driscoll, not being a hard-core birder, investigated the flora of the region at every opportunity. She had lots to explore, especially orchids

which are her favorite family of flora.



Paul Guris, Al Driscoll

Some of the highlights from Lamanai (which was my favorite place), included the boat rides on the New River, where we saw Gray-necked Wood Rail,

Limpkin, Northern Jacana, and a Pygmy Kingfisher from the boat. They also took us to the savanna area by boat, where we had great looks at a Bare-throated Tiger Heron and an Apolomado Falcon through the scope. Some of us were also able to see an Agami Heron.

On the night boat ride, we moved through the water in stealth mode, with Rudy spotlighting as we floated along. He said to look for eye shine, and he would flash the spotlight in areas so fast that it seemed that it would be impossible for him to spot anything. Well, his experience paid off. He spotted a Snail Kite, Ringed Kingfisher, Common Pauraque, Fish-eating Bats, and a Northern Potoo.

One of the wonderful things that we noticed about the locals was how genuinely friendly and accommodating they were. It was a pleasure to see that the tourism industry there has managed to utilize their own people in all the positions at the resorts to improve the economy and the relations between tourists and the Belizean people. This often seems to be the goal but is rarely successful in areas of high-volume tourism.

After 3 nights at Lamanai, I wasn't ready to leave, but we had to move on to Chan Chich Lodge. We were transported in a very nice, air conditioned van, with plenty of room and cold drinks. (This seemed to be the standard mode of operation on most long treks.)

We drove the 2-3 hours to Chan Chich, and birded along the way. Chan Chich is a beautiful oasis that, together with its private reserve, totals over 500 thousand acres of forest and open land. The jungle is tamed within the lodge, and the surrounding trails are manicured and pristine.

We arrived in time for a quick refreshing dinner, and then we planned our next 5 days. The birding in the lodge area was delightful. Oscillated Turkeys were everywhere! They were displaying and calling and were not at all annoying. Other

residents that shared the grounds close to our cabanas were Red-capped Manakin, Long-tailed Hermit, Little Hermit, a pair of Bat Falcons, Red-billed Pigeon, Black-headed Trogon, Violaceous Trogon, Collared Trogon, Slaty-tailed Trogon, Collared Aracari, Crested Guan, White-collared Seedeater, Black-Headed Saltator, and several species of parrots.



Red-capped Manakin

Our first adventure was to visit a place referred to as The Escarpment, a large dry area at the top of a nearby mountain. It is much like a hawk-watch area, with a fantastic view of nearly 360° of forest covered mountains, and all from a great open space with a gentle breeze. I sat on my camp stool, watching the Bat Falcons chase every bird away from their tree located just behind us. Suddenly, Paul yelled out, "White Hawk!" giving directions using his pelagic o'clock system, so everyone could find the bird. WOW! It gave a show that any voyeur would drool over. We were fortunate enough to get long lifer looks at the bird as it soared just below and above the horizon. Then we had a Black and White Hawk-Eagle soaring in the same airspace as the White Hawk, a lifer even for Don. Laughing Falcon appeared so as not to be outdone. Although there was nowhere to hide from the sun, the van provided some shade, and the birds made me forget about the heat and the sun, but don't tell my rheumy.

Don arranged to have a buffet breakfast available for us on our remaining mornings there, so we could get out birding earlier, when the birds were most active. The weather was unusually warm for March, nearly 10 degrees higher than normal. The cabanas in all the lodges came equipped with efficient ceiling fans and massive jalousie windows to allow for airflow and privacy, and breathable, tropical-weight clothing helped. An in-ground, screened-in pool was also a great way to cool down in the afternoons when the birds were quiet.

We went for a night drive in the open safari-type vehicle. Rubin, our guide, found a Central American Woolly Opossum before we even made it out of the trees. He later pointed out bats flying all around in the spotlight. We were also fortunate to see the Mottled Owl that sat on a fence post and a Northern Potoo that eventually left its perch and flew across the road in front of us. We had a nice ride, but there wasn't much else flying around that night.

The thrill of the chase wasn't over. We took a walking tour with Gilberto, a guide for hire at Chan Chich, to look for the

Tody Motmot. We started out walking through a gentle rolling hill trail system. Gilberto informed us that he has

Belize....cont'd

been working at Chan Chich since its creation. He helped to cut the trees in the jungle and helped to build the first buildings for the lodge. Gilberto is a thin, strong, average-height man of obvious Mayan descent, with a smile so infectious that he makes you smile too. He is now, in all our eyes, a hero. As Gilberto sweeps the trails in the early morning hours to keep them free of fallen leaves and branches, he birds. When he rests, he birds. On his days off, he birds. As a result, he knows exactly where the birds are, and can usually find them easily when asked. This was true for the Tody Motmot as well. He took us off a trail, down a slippery, steep, leaf-covered hill. At first, I didn't want to negotiate the hill, but as I could see that Gilberto was sure he would locate the Tody Motmot, I decided to go for it – and I'm so happy I did. I held on to Paul, and walked sideways to ease my way down the hill. The whole group ended up squatting at the base of the hill, peeking between leaves to witness the small Rufous-crowned, black-masked, green-backed bird treasure perched on a low cross branch as it slowly rotated its tail clockwise, just as Gilberto said it would. The Tody Motmot was a prize that we had not expected to see. The bird was quite cooperative, and moved closer to look at the 9 pair of eyes staring back at him.

Gilberto moved on to show half of the group a Royal Flycatcher farther down the trail. Paul, Jayne, and I turned back and ended our morning birding by renting the available golf cart and driving down to the hot birding spot – the suspension bridge. I just loved the golf cart. It was fast, covered and quiet, so I rented it at every possible opportunity. It made traveling up and down the hill to the suspension bridge much easier to negotiate, and provided a way to allow me to reserve my energy for walking the trails.

Of interest to somebody who has never birded the tropics were the woodcreepers. We found Tawny-winged, Olivaceous, Ivory-billed, and Ruddy Woodcreepers there, and they were usually very easy to spot and watch for long periods of time. We happened upon an ant swarm and were lucky to find most of the woodcreepers, a Blue-crowned Motmot, Red-throated Ant Tanager, Grey-headed Tanager, Tawny-crowned Greenlet, and other species working the swarm.



Tawny-winged Woodcreeper

Earl Harrison took lots of digital photos and most of the spectacular ones here are credited to him. He sat in front of a fountain within the lodge area for several hours

taking photos of the birds coming in to bathe or take a sip. I only wish that Earl had been present at the stream where Al, Paul, and I had the incredible moment with that special little Purple-crowned Fairy mentioned earlier.

Don was our audiophile for the entire trip. He had prepared us well before the trip, preparing a CD of expected birds for us all to study. Don was just thrilled to hear a lifer, while most of us were still fixated on the visual payoff. We all felt bad for Don, trying busily to record some of the species over lots of group chatter. He eventually realized that he had to announce that he was about to record, and then most of us would quiet down while he was taping. It's hard to believe that Don only saw a few lifers, but even more amazing to me was that he really was totally happy about the ones he heard and even more excited about the new ones he recorded. Don was a great group leader and trip organizer. His low-key demeanor and enthusiasm for birding the tropics kept the group motivated and provided a great example for the group to follow.

We birded the trails and the areas close to the suspension bridge every day. One day, we were fortunate enough to see an Ornate Hawk-Eagle from only 150 feet on a trail just past the suspension bridge. All in all, Chan Chich was a wonderful, inspirational experience.

Our next destination was Hidden Valley Inn, but took longer to get there than planned since the British military was doing maneuvers in the area and the road was closed. We didn't have the best of vans, and Anne Driscoll was not at all happy with the ventilation. The



Common Tody Flycatcher

louver-less air conditioning was blasting a cold breeze right down on her head, so the vent quickly became a storage area for Don's bag of butterscotch to control the air flow. We ended up switching seats so that everyone was comfortable and the air conditioning was no longer a problem. We stopped for a bathroom break, a nice lunch, and a life bird – a Common Tody Flycatcher – at a wonderful place called "Cheers". We all enjoyed the food and the birding there.

On our first day at Hidden Valley, we took a day trip to the nearby waterfalls and Caracol, the ancient Mayan city thought to be the largest in the Mayan world and the largest site in Belize. Caracol as an historical Mayan site is truly incredible and the ruins boast the most hieroglyphic inscriptions of all the Mayan cities excavated along with the tallest man-made structure in ancient or

Belize....cont'd

modern Belize. Our guide, Juan, was extremely knowledgeable in Mayan history and the history of the Belizean people in general. Juan was also of Mayan and Guatemalan ancestry and spoke English better than most Americans, as did most of the Belizean people at the resorts where we stayed. I could write an entire article just on the Mayans and their culture and the richness of their contributions to society, although I won't right now since this is my bird trip report.

On the way to Caracol, we happened by what was later called the "magic tree". In less than a half hour, we racked up about 8 species of birds, including an Emerald Toucanet and a Green Honeycreeper in this one tree alone.

Nearby, we had quick but identifying looks at a Wedge-tailed Sabrewing. Red-legged Honeycreepers were flitting from hedgerow to hedgerow, while we all giggled with joy about our great luck on this trip. Shortly afterwards, we moved further down the road and came upon a Brown Pelican in the middle of the road! Yes, you did read that right. We were just as stunned as you are, but we have a photo to prove it! The Pelican was obviously injured, and, as we approached, it moved off the road onto the grass.

We pulled into the parking lot at Caracol and enjoyed a lunch, packed by our innkeepers, under the park pavilion. One of the workers approached us with his hands cupped and asked if we'd like to see a hummingbird. He explained that this amazingly tiny bird had been under his watch for several weeks, since it fell from its nest. He told us that he was taking it over to a branch and perching it there where its mother would continue to feed it. After we all got our eyeful of the Black-crested Coquette in his hand, we followed him over to the branch where the female Coquette came to feed it while we all watched. I didn't think it could get any better than this, and well, I was right, but this was just the icing on the cake at that point. We walked into the trail system and had great views of a Keel-billed Motmot, Slaty-tailed Trogon, and Sepia-capped Flycatcher.

We stopped at Thousand Foot Falls to see an Orange Breasted Falcon, which was spectacular. The bird was perched high on an exposed branch overlooking the valley. It was very clear through binoculars, but through a scope you could nearly see it breathing. We birded another section of the Falls area and also saw a Black-headed Siskins. The trek over to King Vulture Falls was a short one, but it was



Orange-breasted Falcon

quite obvious where the falls got the name. Perched high on the cliffs, where the falls began to cascade to the ground below, were two King Vultures. They were enormous and actually quite stunning. There were also a couple soaring above us, and that was a magnificent site.

While at Hidden Valley, our innkeepers Craig and Lisa were most hospitable, as were the wait staff and guides. On our second evening there, while eating our delicious dinner, Craig came over and asked us if we'd like to see a Stygian Owl. We of course said yes, and followed him to an open grassy area just 30 feet or so from the patio where we were dining. He had a telescope set up and a spotlight to illuminate the owl. There it was, sitting at the top of a distant pine tree. We watched the owl until it flew away. After the group pulled me down from the nearest cloud, and I was able to once again speak, we went back to eating our dinner.

The next day, we went on an early morning walk on the trail just behind the cabanas, where our guide helped us to locate a Rusty Sparrow, Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, Rufous-capped Warbler, Golden-hooded Tanager, and Yellow-faced Grassquit. Our guide, who could have been Don's Mayan twin, was a great birder and very helpful and friendly.

All of our group members were very impressed with the food offered at all of the lodges – even Mike Bowman, from the land where gourmet is truly gourmet. The accommodations were superb and worthy of an AAA high rating. As an interior designer, my favorite cabana was the one at Hidden Valley Inn, but the Lamanai room was most comfortable with gentle breezes off the New River, and the Chan Chich cabana was pretty but least comfortable and had the most problems with bugs (Palmetto bugs – aka huge roaches – and a tarantula that greeted me one night after dinner). In general, the bugs were not bad – and the birds were plentiful.

In conclusion, the trip was better than I could ever have hoped for. The group found a total of just over 300 species, about 140 of which were lifers for me. I would do it again in a heartbeat. I highly recommend this locale for any birder looking for a special trip to the tropics or just to get away for a historical, pleasurable, scenic jaunt.

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Links:

Lamanai Outpost Lodge www.lamanai.com
Chan Chich Lodge www.chanchich.com
Hidden Valley Inn www.hiddenvalleyinn.com

A Trip to Costa Rica

Where the Resplendent Quetzal Resides, and Where the National Bird is the Clay-colored Robin
by Jane Henderson

Our Costa Rica trip began on March 2, 2005 when my husband, Bob Cohen, and I arrived at the international airport in San Jose, Costa Rica. Several of the members of our Elderhostel group had been on the same plane out of Miami, and we began to chat about once and future birding trips as we boarded the bus that would take us on a 45 minute ride to Chalet Tirol in San Rafael where we would spend our first night.

We began the 12-day birding adventure on the hotel grounds before breakfast the next morning. Brown Jays and Blue-and-white Swallows flew around us. An enthusiastic member of our group from Toronto exclaimed: "Four life birds before breakfast!" A bit later we took a walk around the area, and my world list (which I don't really keep decent records of) began to expand. Bright-rumped Attila, Flame-colored and Passerini's Tanagers, Social Flycatcher, Channel-billed Toucan quickly made the list along with many others.

As part of an introductory lecture about the birds of Costa Rica, our leader, Jèsus Tolèdo, a native Costa Rican, explained that, although the Resplendent Quetzal is without doubt the most spectacular bird in that country, it has not been designated the National Bird. That honor has been reserved for the much more modest Clay-colored Robin. The reason for this apparently odd choice is that the robin can be seen everywhere in Costa Rica, while the quetzal can be seen only in the cloud forests – one of the many examples of Costa Rica's commitment to democracy.

Located in Central America between Nicaragua and Panama, Costa Rica is one-fourth the size of Minnesota, and hosts 877 bird species in 78 different bird families. The extraordinary variety of habitats explains the diversity of birdlife. ("Every Day an Adventure," Carroll L. Henderson, *Birder's World*, October 2004.)

The afternoon of our first day, on our way to Sarapiquí, our next destination, we crossed the Continental Divide. We made several birding stops along the way. I knew this would be a good birding trip when our bus driver backed up on major highways several times to get a look at a bird -- Crested Oropendola, Groove-billed Ani, Collared Aricari. We had our first looks at Blue-crowned Motmot as well as Black-cheeked and Cinnamon Woodpeckers. And then the flycatchers ... Tropical Kingbird, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Pewee, Common Tody-flycatcher,



Oxcart

Long-tailed Tyrant. And tanagers: Golden-hooded, Plain-colored, Blue-gray, Palm.

On this, and on subsequent road trips we noticed "living fences" along the roadsides. Limbs of the Gumbo Limbo tree are stuck in the ground and take root. Eventually the road becomes tree-lined.

We spent the night at Selva Verde Lodge, a virtual birders' paradise. On the grounds we had a Bright-rumped Attila on nest in a light fixture, as well as Buff-rumped Warbler and Orange-billed Sparrow on the grounds. The sounds of howler monkeys were with us the entire time we were there.

The following day we visited the Bio Station at Esintros S.A. -- Estudios e Inversiones Tropicales S.A. where a nother guide joined us, and we had our first trogon of the trip -- Violaceous Trogon. Also White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Yellow-crowned Euphonia, Mistletoe and Yellow Tyrannulets, and Pale-billed Woodpecker. And an assortment of woodcreepers - not easy to distinguish one from another. At the end of one trail we had a nice view of a staked-out Great Potoo, one of the goofiest birds anywhere in my opinion.

On our afternoon walk around the Bio Station we had an up close and personal look at a Semi-plumbeous Hawk, which the folks at the Bio Station have dubbed "Ernesto." He can be counted upon to appear at a certain spot along the trail -- pretty much like the creatures at Disney World, we thought. The Bio Station is an amazing birding spot.

The next day we visited a private home, Cincona, at a mid-elevation spot, about 3600 feet above sea level, where, from a balcony, we had a fine view of the San Fernando Waterfall, great looks at hummingbirds at the feeders -- Violet Sabrewing, Green-crowned Brilliant, Brown Violet-ear, Coppery-headed Emerald (a Costa Rican endemic) and an assortment of birds in the trees out front -- Golden-browed Chlorophonia, Emerald Toucanet, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis, Gray and Broad-winged Hawks. It was great.

On the way back to the lodge for lunch I had a real "Costa Rica Experience." We had stopped to take pictures of a "typical" Costa Rican sight, a guy with an oxcart. On the way back to the bus I tripped and cut my leg on something that was sticking out of the ground. By the time we got back to the lodge, I could feel blood running down my leg and into my shoe. Back at the room Bob and I tried to clean it up, but it was a nasty gash, and I thought I'd better get some professional attention. Jèsus was able to contact a private clinic, even though it was a Saturday, so we drove there -- it was not far from the lodge. The doctor spoke no English. We

Costa Rica....cont'd

didn't need to struggle with our halting Spanish, because Jèsus stayed with us and translated. It turned out that I needed three stitches, and was told that I should stay off my feet for the rest of the day. The visit cost me several thousand colones, or \$30. Incidentally, Elderhostel travel insurance, for which we'd paid no extra fee, covered the cost.



The Group

Southern Lapwing on nest. Jèsus was concerned that horses roamed around in the field very close to the nest, but it didn't seem that anyone would do anything about that anytime soon. Farther along the road we saw Yellow-throated and Yellow-crowned Euphonias, Fork-tailed Emerald, and Hoffman's Woodpecker.

After a steep drive up the mountain along the Continental Divide, and a very dusty ride up a rocky dirt road, we arrived at our hotel, El Establo, in Monteverde, home of one of the famous Costa Rican cloud forests.

The rest of the group took off on a birding expedition later on in the afternoon. I followed the doctor's orders and stayed behind. I sat by the Sarapiquí River with my leg propped up on a wall. While I struggled to make sense of the bird notes in my little notebook, a Sunbittern strolled right in front of the place where I was sitting, and I was able to get a pretty good picture of it. Amazon Kingfishers flew back and forth from the hanging bridge to the bushes. A Neotropic Cormorant perched on a rock. So although I missed a couple of birds that the

others saw, it was a pretty good afternoon for me.



Sunbittern

The following day, on our way to Volcan Arenal, an active volcano, we stopped for a rather elegant lunch at a spa, El Tucano. Everyone except me spent a

couple of hours enjoying the hot bubbling spring – I'd been told not to do it because of the risk of infection. So I took pictures of the others cavorting in the water. I thought it looked a little like a scene from the movie "Cocoon." Later on that afternoon, along the road, we saw a Fasciated Tiger-heron, a Muscovy Duck, a Thick-billed Seed-finch and a Roadside Hawk. We checked into our cottage at Arenal Paraiso, and walked around the grounds with some other birders in our group. The couple from Toronto, who had explored the grounds before we had a chance to get out, found a Black-crested Coquette, and couldn't wait to show it to us. As it happened, this bird was perched very near the place where some tourists were taking off for a frantic zip-wire ride. That afternoon we also found a Melodious Blackbird, a Cowled Oriole, and a Rufous-tailed Hummingbird on nest. We had a great view of the volcano at dusk and again at dawn.

The next morning we took an early bird walk on the hotel grounds. We saw lots of birds -- Yellow-faced Grassquit, Barred Antshrike, Red-legged Honeycreeper. Then we began our long drive around Lake Arenal. The shorter route had been closed for repairs. Not long after we set out, we got a look at a

The next morning we set out for Reserva de Bosque Nuboso in hopes of finding a Resplendent Quetzal. Jèsus warned us the evening before that, in recent years, Cerro de La Muerte and not Monteverde was the most reliable place for the quetzal. We all groaned a little, but none of us lost hope.

But before Jèsus had even paid our entrance fee, we saw a pair of quetzals high in a tree just inside the entrance gate. One member of our group said, "OK, we can go home now." But of course we set out along one of the long trails where we found Black Guan, Three-striped Warbler, Buff-throated Foliage Gleaner and several more Resplendent Quetzals, for a total of eight. Jèsus stopped us when we came upon a huge swarm of army ants, and explained to us that the army ants stir up other insects, and these insects attract the birds. We were lucky enough to find a Immaculate Antbird among other birds that were drawn to the insects.

After lunch we had some free time and a few of us did some exploring across the road from the hotel. We found "rivers" of leaf-cutter ants and followed them to an enormous anthill – at least 10 yards across. Some of the ants busily carried bits of leaves into the mound, while others carried detritus out. Although this was not the season when the Three-wattled Bellbird is expected in that area, we did hear one in the distance.



Resplendent Quetzal (T-shirt photo)

Later in the afternoon we visited a nearby hummingbird gallery, where we sat on benches and watched hummingbirds coming to the feeders: Coppery-headed Emerald, Green-crowned Brilliant, Magenta-throated Woodstar, Violet Sabrewing, Green Violet-ear.

Costa Rica....cont'd*Black & White Owl*

stunned. So were we. Things like that are not supposed to happen in Costa Rica.

That afternoon we went on the first of several “sky walks” – hanging bridges that take people through the canopy at mid-height.

*Canopy Walkway*

The following day we set out for Carara in Punta Arenas, driving over the mountains on a narrow, bumpy dirt road, stopping for birds along the way: Bat Falcon, Double-striped Thick-knee, Turquoise-browed Motmot, Long-tailed Manakin, and a Rufous-necked Wren, which, from then on, was dubbed the “Motorcycle Wren,” because that particular bird was foraging near a parked motorcycle when we first saw it. It was a very interesting ride.

After a fine lunch at Villa Lapas, our hotel at Carara, we visited a beach area where we saw 30 or more Scarlet Macaws in the trees and flying around screaming, as well as Magnificent Frigatebird, and assorted terns, including one Fairy Tern.

We spent most of the following two days at the Carara Biological Reserve, where birds were everywhere. We had great looks at Thick-billed and Spot-crowned Euphonia, Black-hooded Antshrike, Cherrie Tanager, Double-toothed Kite, Orange-collared Manakin, Mealy Parrot, Baird’s Trogon (“The Quetzal of the Lowlands.”).

That afternoon we took a boat ride on the Tarcoles River, where there was a “No Swimming” sign, and where huge crocodiles swam very near the boat. We saw Mangrove Swallows, an immature Mangrove Black Hawk, Roseate Spoonbill, Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Blue-black Grassquit.

On our last day at Carara we walked the long, private trail near Villa Lapas which includes five hanging bridges through the canopy. We saw Baird’s, Violaceous and Slaty-tailed Trogons, Lesser Greenlet, Black-hooded and Dotted-winged Ant-wren, Rufous-capped Warbler, Sulphur-bellied and Streaked Flycatchers.

March 9 was dominated by an event that had nothing to do with birds: a bank robbery in the town of Monteverde, during which several hostages were taken. The road in and out of town was closed to traffic. By the end of the day, after a SWAT team had come in by helicopter, 10 people were dead including two of the robbers, as well as a teller from the community, and two policemen. Townspeople were

That afternoon it looked like rain, and only a few of us set out with Jesus. After pulling out ponchos and umbrellas, we came across another swarm of army ants, and found the “best bird” (according to Jesus and to those of us who knew how difficult it generally is to get a look at this bird) of the entire trip: a Spectacled Antpitta. It stood up on its long legs and looked us over for quite a while. Everyone got a good look at it. We also had Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Plain Xenops, Chestnut-mandibled Toucan, Dot-winged Antwren.

Our final day, on our way back to San Jose, we made a little detour and stopped at a little park in Orotina. Jesus had happened upon a Black-and-white Owl in this park quite by chance on a previous Elderhostel trip. So, without divulging the reason for our stop, he stepped out of the bus and took a quick look around. And, sure enough, the owl was perched on a branch over the path, so we all hopped out of the bus and got a good look at it. It was a perfect end to a great trip.

During the rest of the ride to San Jose we did our final checklist, and counted 322 bird species for the trip, including two of the few Costa Rican endemics, Mangrove Hummingbird and Coppery-headed Emerald.

After a farewell dinner, we spent the night at a place called Bella Vista and enjoyed the view of the city of San Jose below. It was a great trip – a trip I’ll never forget.

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A Jamaican Getaway

by Martin Selzer

In the last issue of Larus-On-Line, you read about club members’ adventures across North America this past winter in search of visitors from the north (the owl invasion in Minnesota and Ontario), the south (all the avian Mexican vagrants in the Rio Grande Valley) and from the west (Colin’s twitch to the Pacific Northwest). This winter Lynn Jackson and I took a respite from winter’s cold with a trip to sunny, warm Jamaica. Jamaica offers a wonderful birding experience with 29 endemic species of birds and numerous other Caribbean specialties. It therefore offers some of the most exciting bird watching in the West Indies and it is also the only island where one has a very good chance of seeing every endemic in a single week. By the way, we did!

This beautiful island is blessed with a wide variety of habitats that include freshwater marshes, dry coastal scrub, lush tropical forests, and mountains that loom 7,000 feet into clear blue skies. Much of this rugged island is still relatively unscarred by human hands and holds many marvelous species of birds, numbers of which are threatened or endangered. We traveled across much of the country and were happily surprised to find large areas of good habitat just about everywhere we went. A

Jamaica....cont'd

Our trip started in Montego Bay and this overnight visit to a more "typical" Jamaican tourist experience was quite a contrast to the rest of our trip. Sure, beaches, buffets and open bars have their appeal, but there is definitely more of Jamaica to see than one could find at a beach resort and inn. Our first morning took us to the Rocklands Bird Sanctuary just outside Montego Bay. This private home and garden gave us our first looks at the "Doctorbird" or Red-billed Streamertail. Besides being a striking hummingbird, it also is the national bird of Jamaica. Also foraging in the gardens were Jamaican Mangos (yet another beautiful hummingbird with its velvety black breasted and purple wings and tail), Jamaican Oriole, Jamaican Woodpecker and Jamaican Tody.



Red-billed Streamertail

You've probably noticed a trend in the common names here. For the forgetful, it made remembering names easy. Once you figured out the family/genus, just put "Jamaican" in front of it. This worked more often than not. One other thing, if one family of birds is most exemplified in the Caribbean, it is the todies. The Jamaican Tody is the local endemic member of this group. They are too cute for words, and never failed to charm us with their colors, behavior, and approachability. We saw this bird every day, often from just a few meters away. Another spectacular Caribbean family is the Stripe-headed Spindalis. The Jamaican Spindalis is the largest member of this group; arguably the most vividly colored, this bird also brought comments of delight with just about each and every sighting.



Marshall's Pen

Marshall's Pen, a haven that teems with a diversity of birdlife, was our home for the next three nights. Caribbean Dove, Jamaican Woodpecker, Vervain Hummingbird, Sad and Rufous-tailed Flycatchers, Jamaican Becard, Jamaican Tody, Jamaican Oriole, and many others are easily found in the garden and on the trails. The stunning and spectacular Red-billed Streamertail and Jamaican Mango hummingbirds were a common sight at the feeders of the Main House and the Jamaican Owl haunted the grounds by night. A pair roosted in a tree right by the main house and we visited them each time we walked the trails.

A day trip into the Cockpit Country produced Ring-tailed Pigeon, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Black-billed and Yellow-billed

parrots, Blue Mountain Vireo, and Stolid Flycatcher along with many other island specialties. Each day we easily saw at least 20 of the Jamaican endemics and were able to become very, very familiar with most of them. Exploration of other parts of the island led us to the Black River Morass in search of West Indian Whistling-Duck (we saw over two hundred of these rare and endangered ducks along with one Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Purple and Common Moorhen, Least Bittern and Sora).



John Crow Mtns

Kingston was our home for the final three days of the trip and using it as a base, we took day trips into the Blue and John Crow Mountains. These adventures turned up Crested Quail-Dove, more Ring-tailed Pigeons, Black-billed Parrots, Blue Mountain Vireo, White-eyed Thrush, Arrow-headed Warbler, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo and Jamaican Blackbird. Just like the previous days' birding around Marshall's Pen, each day had very specific habitats and birds targeted. Again, we had at least 20 endemics each and every day of birding. Both mountain ranges, especially the John Crow Mountains were hands down the best habitat we were to visit on the entire tour. Sure, there were some small banana and coconut groves but there was little evidence of invasive plants or slash and burn.

Utterly scrumptious local foods (such as ackee, callaloo, bammy, and the famous jerk recipes), and a look at Jamaica's fascinating history and culture rounded out a very special trip. Did I mention it was warm and sunny? Well, it was! So think about getting an early start on spring next year and go to Jamaica to work on your Caribbean bird list.

The trip was organized by one of the big three US tour companies and run with the high standards and expectations that one would expect. It was a wonderful trip and I would be happy to share more details with anyone interested. As with any organized trip one should do one's homework to ensure the best result. Ask your fellow club members who have perhaps traveled more than you and please refer to the "Birder Beware!" article on our webpage for additional information. <http://www.acnatsci.org/hosted/dvoc/Misc/BirdersBeware.htm>

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