

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

LESSER ANTILLES

Aboard the Sea Cloud

February 16-24, 2014



Leaders:

**Victor Emanuel, Barry Lyon, Peter Zika,
John Harrison and David Ascanio**

Compiled by: David Ascanio

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Photo album link:

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“Six countries, seven islands and a wonderful ship to sail the Caribbean” That’s definitively the way to start a document compiling the wonderful birds we saw in the Lesser Antilles Cruise. We travelled for the birds but also enjoyed the unique cuisine, learned about plants and trees, discussed sugar trade and the making of rum, learned about back-and-forth battles and the presence of pirates during the colonial time as well as other aspects of the Caribbean people’s life.

As soon as we boarded the *Sea Clouds* in Antigua we were already pointing at two uncommon seabirds: the Lesser and the Greater black-backed gulls. Then, after leaving Antigua we enjoyed various Magnificent Frigatebird accompany our journey while egrets, pelicans and terns continued to feed in the waters of the harbor.

Our second island was the pretty, small and lush Guadeloupe. A short drive to the Guadeloupe national park placed us into the deep green forest rich in ferns and trees packed with epiphytes. Here, Bridled Quail Dove was seen by many of us while the endemic Guadeloupe Woodpecker was enjoyed by every one. Guadeloupe was also our first contact with many of the Caribbean specialties such as Purple-throated Carib, Antillean Crested Hummingbird, Scaly-breasted Thrasher, Lesser Antillean Saltator, Lesser Antillean Bullfinch and Brown Trembler.

The following island was the rugged Dominica. This is the only of the Lesser Antilles that host two endemic parrot species, one being common (Red-necked Parrot) and another being almost a ghost: the Imperial Parrot. After a couple of efforts we managed to see both parrots and also got amazing views of the endemics Blue-headed Hummingbird and the Plumbeous Warbler. Among the Caribbean specialties we enjoyed hummingbird feeders with many Purple-throated Carib, a single Green-throated Carib and Antillean Crested Hummingbird. At the forest edge, everyone enjoyed the Lesser Antillean Pewee.

The following island was Martinique. As soon as disembarked the ship we noticed a contrast: ample highways and lot of traffic! This island as well as Guadeloupe are part of the French overseas departments thus we were technically in the European Union. Here, we drove to the Peninsula Caravelle to look for two of the most difficult birds for the cruise: Martinique Oriole and the White-breasted Thrasher. The oriole came only after the first attempt (thus

being seen by about half of the group) and seemed to decide to hide for the rest of the morning. But, the thrasher was another story. To start with, Victor, Barry, Peter and myself were concerned about the real chances for having everyone to see this species. It meant to look for a secretive bird, occurring at understory of moist and dry forest and for that we had to walk along a narrow trail with a steep entrance. But bird watching is about taking the chances, isn't it? Barry and Peter took the first group and walked quite a distance. There, they found a family group of thrashers foraging on the ground. Peter rushed back and invited more people to experience this amazing discovery. Accompanied with Victor more participants reached the area and eventually got superb views of this species. As the day warmed up, we were surprised to find other family groups foraging on the ground closer to the trail entrance thus eventually everyone got to see this threatened and incredible thrasher. What a moment! We enjoyed superb views of the adults tossing leaves at the sides and the chicks inspecting it. To complement an excellent morning, Peter found a resting Bridled Quail-Dove at side of the trail and got many participants to see it. Happy and excited, we drove back to the ship for an incredible lunch including a delicious ginger soup. In the afternoon we sailed towards another Caribbean gem, St. Lucia.

St. Lucia is considered another challenge for a guide and we experienced such difficulties! At the first location, and given to drivers miscommunications among themselves the group got divided. There was no time to reunite the group as the day was warming up, thus we had to take our chances for finding all the endemic species. Victor was ahead while Peter, Barry and myself were behind. After unloading the vans we started hearing the parrots, and soon after we had amazing views of various individuals in flight. Minutes later, Victor and his group joined us and we exchanged sightings. That allowed our group to get very close views of St Lucia Oriole. Once all together, we walked along the road where we saw a tree packed with mistletoe and a nice family of Antillean Euphonia digesting it.

Yet, there were more endemic and Caribbean specialties to find. So, lead by our superb team of local guides we found ourselves along the road of Tobacco hill where we enjoyed St Lucia Pewee and Rufous-throated Solitaire. St Lucia parrots were also flying across a low pass. But, there was another tricky endemic to find, the St Lucia Black Finch. To look for it we walked along the road while pishing frequently. Much of the time we waited patiently or looked for motion inside the forest understory. And, as frequently happens, when we were running out of time and deadline time approached, a pair of St Lucia Blackfinch sang but remained well inside the understory. It took various attempts to have everyone to see it and before got dark we were happy and celebrating our success in St Lucia harbor with views of the astonishing *pitons* from the ship's desk.

The morning of February 22nd was enjoyed in a different way. The captain had set Sea Cloud's majestic sails as we moved south towards St Vincent. We had superb views of Brown and Red-footed boobies as well as several Magnificent Frigatebird. A view to Vequia's vertical cliffs allowed views of Red-billed

Tropicbird. In the afternoon we arrived to St Vincent and the birders right away loaded the vans to visit the Vermont Forest. As the lookout for the parrot involved a steep walk the group was split between those who wanted to wait for the parrots at the forest edge and those that would walk the trail. By the end of the afternoon both groups have seen the parrots well and with great satisfaction we headed back to the ship for a superb dinner. Now, there was still an endemic to find, one that according to the local guides have not been seen since the last hurricane in December 2013, the Whistling Warbler. This is an odd looking bird, with a distinctive eyering, a chest band and is only found in the island of St Vincent. It usually sings early in the morning and sometimes at dusk. Determining its phylogeny has not been a smooth process and today there is an agreement (based on 2010, Lovette et al phylogeny of the wood warblers) that the *Dendroica* warblers and the parulas are indeed its closest living relatives.

Finding a Whistling Warbler is always a challenge, especially if the local guides have not seen it in months. But, we are birders and weren't going to give up right away. To start, we had to take breakfast at 04.30AM and drive to the forest trail at 05.00AM. We also had to use our flashlights for one half of the trail thus allowing us to reach one of the known territories at the crack of dawn. Yet, we did it and once there we waited, and waited realizing there was no sign of a bird. More than a half hour later one individual sang, and came close to us, but not everyone had the chance to see it. We tried to find it but it was then quite distant. We continued the trail down to find a better location but seemed like this individual was way too deep inside a steep valley. No way we could see it there. But again, we were not going to give up easily. On the way back we realized that the deep valley was contiguous to another smaller valley crossed by the trail thus we decide to give it a last try. It took us few minutes before one individual came to us and perched at midstory to start singing. What a wonderful moment! This is one of the many reasons that makes bird watching an incomparable passion. By seeing the Whistling Warbler we were ready to return to the ship and sail to our final destination, Barbados.

At dawn of 24th February, the ship was already tied up to Barbados port and many of us were from the ship's dock looking for the last endemic of the cruise, the Barbados Bullfinch. Unlike its relatives in the Lesser and the Greater Antilles, this one is more uniform and the throat patch is barely visible. Soon after disembarkation we had wonderful views of this species thus rounding up a wonderful cruise to the Lesser Antilles.

Thank you very much for joining us aboard the Sea Cloud. I am sure you agree with us that there's no better way for birdwatching the Lesser Antilles. Should you wish to join me in other birding tours, please consider the following:

The Amazon Cruise

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/sets/72157640034966036/>

Cuba: Birds and people-to-people program.

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THE BIRDLIST

Frigatebirds / Fregatidae

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*. G,D,M,SL,SV. Daily views.

Phaethontidae

Red-billed Tropicbird. *Phaethon aethereus*. 30+ individuals were seen on Vequia island as we sailed across it.

Boobies and Gannets / Sulidae

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*. D,SV. at sea.

Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*. Several individuals were observed at sea. We learned to recognize the brown (white-tailed) and white morphs of this species. We also noticed its longer tail, compared with that of the Brown Booby.

Pelicans / Pelecanidae

Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*. G,D,M,SL.

Anhingas / Anhingidae

Anhinga. *Anhinga anhinga*. Observed in Barbados.

Hérons, Egrets and Bitterns / Ardeidae

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*. SV. One individual was observed at St Vincent dock.

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*. SL,B. Few individuals were observed near Soufriere, Saint Lucia. Also seen in Barbados.

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*. D. An adult was seen in Dominica. Also observed in St Vincent.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*. G,D,SL,SV. Cattle Egret made it into these islands apparently in the early 20's. We observed a nice roost in Saint Vincent.

Green Heron *Butorides virescens*. G,SV,B. This one was seen only three times during the trip.

Little Egret. *Egretta garzeta*. Observed in Barbados.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron *Nyctanassa violacea*. SV. Seen on the evening of the 22nd as we were walking back to the ship.

Ospreys / Pandionidae

Osprey. *Pandion haliaetus*. Observed in Barbados.

Hawks, Eagles and Kites / Accipitridae

Common Black-Hawk. *Buteogallus anthracinus*. Few individuals were observed in St Vincent.

Broad-winged Hawk. *Buteo platypterus*. G,D,M,SL,SV. A common species found in most of the Lesser Antilles. Although is a boreal migrant in South America, it is a resident species in these islands.

Rails, Gallinules and Coots / Rallidae

Common Gallinule. *Gallinula galeata*. B. Observed in Barbados.

Sandpipers and Allies / Scolopacidae

Spotted Sandpiper. *Actitis macularius*. SV,B. Seen in Saint Vincent. Also observed in Barbados.

Least Sandpiper. *Calidris minutilla*. B. Observed in Barbados.

Skuas and Jaegers / Stercorariidae

Pomarine Jaeger. *Stercorarius pomarinus*. One individual was spotted by Barry off the coast of Dominica.

Gulls, Terns and Skimmers / Laridae

Laughing Gull. *Leucophaeus atricilla*. 120+ individuals were observed in St Vincent.

Royal Tern. *Thalasseus maximus*. G,D,M. Common during the first half of the cruise.

Pigeons and Doves / Columbidae

Rock Pigeon (I). *Columba livia*. M,SV. Only reported in urban areas.

Scaly-naped Pigeon. *Patagioenas squamosa*. D,SV.

Eurasian Collared-Dove (I) *Streptopelia decaocto*. I am pretty sure we saw this species in Martinique but failed to call it at the birdlist session that evening.

Zenaida Dove. *Zenaida aurita*. G,D,M,SL,SV,B. This species is surely seen commoner in the Lesser Antilles than elsewhere. We enjoyed daily views.

Eared Dove *Zenaida auriculata*SL,SV.

Common Ground-Dove. *Columbina passerina*. G,D,B.

Bridled Quail-Dove. *Geotrygon mystacea*. G,M. When it comes to quail doves, this species wins the contest of the most beautiful of the Caribbean. We were rewarded with very good views of a single individual in Guadeloupe. Later in Martinique, Peter Zika found another while searching for the White-breasted Thrasher along the Caravelle peninsula.trail.

Cuckoos / Cuculidae

Mangrove Cuckoo. *Coccyzus minor*. G,D,SL,SV. This species was first seen in Guadeloupe, although unfortunately not by everyone. But, later in Dominica we all enjoyed scopes views of it. Also seen in other islands.

Smooth-billed Ani. *Crotophaga ani*. Seen only in Dominica.

Barn-Owls / Tytonidae

Barn Owl. *Tyto alba*. Heard only in Saint Vincent.

Swifts / Apodidae

Lesser Antillean Swift. *Chaetura martinica*. D,SL,SV. A common species found in many of the Lesser Antilles. In St Vincent it was seen drinking water on the wing over the tanks located at the park entrance.

Hummingbirds / Trochilidae

Purple-throated Carib. *Eulampis jugularis*. G,D,SL. Everyone enjoyed superb views of this territorial and common species in the Caribbean. It was particularly common in Dominica.

Green-throated Carib. *Eulampis holosericeus*. SL,SV. This is another of the Caribbean specialty, being less common than the previous species.

Blue-headed Hummingbird (E). *Cyanophaia bicolor*. D. We had superb views of this endemic to Dominica feeding on wild flowers along the road edge to Diablotin.

Antillean Crested Hummingbird. *Orthorhyncus cristatus*. G,D,SL,B. This is a diminutive but beautiful hummingbird. This small bird was enjoyed when visiting flowers at the forest edge or gardens of some of the island.

Woodpeckers / Picidae

Guadeloupe Woodpecker. *Melanerpes herminieri*. Endemic to Guadeloupe. A responsive male was observed at the Guadeloupe national park. The epithet *herminieri* was given after Felix Louis l'Herminiere, a French naturalist in Guadeloupe. We enjoyed this individual at length when he was foraging at mid forest strata.

Falcons / Falconidae

Peregrine Falcon. *Falco peregrinus*. B. Observed in Barbados.

Merlin. *Falco columbarius*. We observed this species twice in Dominica. An interesting record since it is a boreal migrant.

Parrots / Psittacidae

Red-necked Parrot (E). *Amazona arausiaca*. Endemic to Dominica. We saw various individuals (50+) along the road to Mt Diablotin. It was the commonest endemic parrot for the whole cruise.

St. Lucia Parrot (E). *Amazona versicolor*. S Endemic to Saint Lucia. Groups enjoyed views from different angles at the periphery of the Quillesse forest reserve. It was later seen on Tobacco hill as well.

St. Vincent Parrot (E). *Amazona guildingii*. Endemic to St Lucia. To find this species we split in two groups. Those that were ready to walk a steep trail to the lookout area joined me, while Barry, Victor and Peter lead the group to see the parrot from the forest edge. Everyone enjoyed good views of it!

Imperial Parrot. *Amazona imperialis*. Endemic to Dominica. Having to see an endemic parrot is always a challenge. Now, having to see a parrot on which there's only less than 300 individuals is truly a privilege. On our full day at Dominica we focused on finding this species and after various hours of "search and wait" we were rewarded with a view of a single individual in flight against the forest. What a moment! We enjoyed its long wings, unique flapping (mostly with wing tips), dark underparts and distinctive voice (*EE-an!*).

Tyrant Flycatchers / Tyrannidae

Caribbean Elaenia. *Elaenia martinica*. G,D,M,SL,SV. A common species observed in the Caribbean.

Yellow-bellied Elaenia. *Elaenia flavogaster*. SV. Only seen in Saint Vincent. Common in South America.

Lesser Antillean Pewee. *Contopus latirostris*. D,SL. As other members of the genus, this little tyrant-flycatcher loves to be close to the forest edge. It was first found in Dominica and later in St Lucia. Some consider the population of St Lucia to be distinctive to that of Dominica, calling it St. Lucia Pewee.

Grenada Flycatcher. *Myiarchus nugator*. SV. This species is mostly found in Grenada. We saw it at the Botanical Gardens of St Vincent.

Lesser Antillean Flycatcher. *Myiarchus oberi*. D. Only seen in Dominica. All *Myiarchus* flycatchers are similar in plumage thus they are better told by habitat and voice. This flycatcher was observed inside forested areas.

Gray Kingbird. *Tyrannus dominicensis*. G,D,M,SL,SV,B. Common and widespread. Notice that some Lesser Antilles populations do migrate to South America.

Vireos / Vireonidae

Black-whiskered Vireo. *Vireo altiloquus*. G,SL,SV. Vocal in Guadeloupe. Also seen in Martinique, St Lucia and St Vincent. This is a resident population.

Swallows / Hirundinidae

Caribbean Martin. *Progne dominicensis*. G,SL,SV,B. We noticed only few individuals. Although a widespread species it was not a common one.

Wrens / Troglodytidae

House Wren. *Troglodytes aedon*. D,SV. First encountered inside the forest in Dominica and later seen in St Vincent. The distinctive dark buffy plumage and different vocalization of the population in Dominica makes it a good candidate for a future split.

Thrushes and Allies / Turdidae

Rufous-throated Solitaire. *Myadestes genibarbis*. D,SL. We enjoyed views of this beautiful bird in Dominica. It was seen as well in St Lucia.

Cocoa Thrush. *Turdus fumigatus*. SV. Seen only by few participants along the trail in St Vincent.

Spectacled Thrush. *Turdus nudigenis*. SV. This one was common in the Botanical Gardens of Saint Vincet.

Red-legged Thrush. *Turdus plumbeus*. D. This species is widespread along the Antilles but is decidedly commoner in the Greater Antilles. We only saw it in Dominica.

Forest Thrush. *Turdus lherminieri*. D. Very few participants enjoyed views to this species. It is known as one of the most secretive species in the Caribbean!

Mockingbirds and Thrashers / Mimidae

White-breasted Thrasher (E). *Ramphocinclus brachyurus*. Endemic to Martinique and St Lucia. When we first walked inside the trail in the Caravelle peninsula I was doubtful about the chances to seeing this species and to show to everyone. It was a matter of time and patience when Barry realized that two or three family groups were foraging silently at different locations of the trail. Thanks to his

observation we were able to have everyone to see this magnificent and rare species. Notice its restricted distribution to Martinique and St Lucia.
Scaly-breasted Thrasher. *Allenia fusca*. G,D,M,SL,SV. A common and widespread species found in most of the Lesser Antilles.
Pearly-eyed Thrasher. *Margarops fuscatus*. G. Only seen in Guadeloupe.
Brown Trembler. *Cinclocerthia ruficauda*. G,D,SV. The tremblers are comical birds with a unique behavior to shake the wings constantly. It has been suggested that the population from Guadeloupe may represents a separate species. We enjoyed repeated views of this unique species.
Gray Trembler (E) *Cinclocerthia gutturalis*. Endemic to St Lucia. Once considered conspecific with the previous species, this trembler has paler underparts. It is also known to occur in Martinique. We saw it very well in St Lucia.
Tropical Mockingbird. *Mimus gilvus*. D,M,SV,B. We observed this species in about half of the islands visited during the cruise.

New World Warblers / Parulidae

Ovenbird. *Seiurus aurocapilla*. Heard in Martinique.
Whistling Warbler (E). *Catharopeza bishopi*. Endemic to Saint Vincent. See the paragraph at the introduction of this birdlist regarding our exciting experience with this species!
Plumbeous Warbler (E). *Setophaga plumbea*. G,D. An endemic restricted to two islands of the Lesser Antilles. It was seen in forested areas of Guadeloupe and Dominica.
Yellow Warbler. *Setophaga petechia*. D,M,B. Seen near mangrove habitats. In Martinique, we saw the Mangrove Warbler "type" with rich maroon hood.
St. Lucia Warbler (E). *Setophaga delicata*. Endemic to St Lucia. This was an easy endemic bird to find. It was common and pretty widespread. Seen by everyone!

Genus Incertae Sedis / Genus Incertae Sedis

Bananaquit. *Coereba flaveola*. G,D,M,SL,M,SV,B. The Bananaquit is a fascinating species. This is because is widespread and shows an interesting variation of plumage throughout its range of distribution. It this trip we were able to notice some of these differences. The ons of St Lucia have a prominent white throat in contrast with the ones from St Vincet which show three distinctive plumages: yellow eyebrow (juveniles?), regular plumage (with a white spot on the wing) and the black morph individuals. We managed to see all the plumages occurring in the Lesser Antilles.

Tanagers and Allies / Thraupidae

Lesser Antillean Tanager. *Tangara cucullata*. SV. This species is similar to Burnished-buff Tanager, one that occurs in South America. In fact, its similarity makes you think about its relationship with the Lesser Antilles Tanager. We found it in Saint Vincent foraging at the infrutescence of a Cecropia tree.

Genus Incertae Sedis

Lesser Antillean Saltator. *Saltator albicollis*. G,D,M,SL. Another Caribbean bird species found in various islands.

Buntings, Sparrows and Allies / Emberizidae

Black-faced Grassquit. *Tiaris bicolor*. D,M,SL,SV,B. Various individuals were seen first in Cabrits, Dominica. Later, in other islands.

Lesser Antillean Bullfinch. *Loxigilla noctis*. G,D,M,SL,SV. A common species found throughout the Lesser Antilles. Notice that the population in Barbados is now treated as a separate species, the Barbados Bullfinch.

Barbados Bullfinch. *Loxigilla barbadensis*. This species is so common that it occurs in urban areas as well as gardens in Barbados.

St. Lucia Black Finch (E). *Melanospiza richardsoni*. Endemic to St Lucia. After much search we finally got decent views of a pair inside understory of forest edge at the Tobacco hill.

Troupials and Allies / Icteridae

Carib Grackle. *Quiscalus lugubris*. G,D,B. Common and widespread. There was a clear demarcation of vocalizations along the Lesser Antilles. Those of Guadeloupe and Dominica have similar voice to the ones of Puerto Rico. And, those of Martinique, St Lucia and St Vincent have a voice similar to that of South America. Keep tuned with this species as it might be split in the future!

Shiny Cowbird. *Molothrus bonariensis*. Only reported in St Lucia and St Vincent.

St. Lucia Oriole (E). *Icterus laudabilis*. Endemic to St Lucia. The endemic orioles of the Caribbean tend to be less easy to see than other endemic birds and are generally more secretive and relatively threatened due to habitat loss. The St Lucia Oriole was seen very well at the farmland (banana plantation) contiguous to the Quillesse Forest.

Martinique Oriole (E). *Icterus bonana*. Endemic to Martinique. We were fortunate to have a view of this endemic. Although some people only saw it in flight this one is probably the most secretive and most difficult oriole to see in the Caribbean. Some of you got excellent views, maybe some others got to see the head, or the wing, and others of you got to see it in flight. The epithet *bonana* refers to the false believe by the local farmers that this species would visit the banana trees to feed at it.

Siskins, Crossbills and Allies / Fringillidae

Antillean Euphonia. *Euphonia musica*. A nice family group was observed foraging at a mistletoe scrub in St Lucia.