January 2014
Vol.1 Issue 1

Birding Travel

COLIMA WARBLER: ADDING A TICK IN BIG BEND, TEXAS

JAMAICA: CHASING ENDEMICS, LOCAL BIRD LORE, AND CONSERVATION STRUGGLES

MONOTYPIC: BORNEAN BRISTLEHEAD

AND MORE...

Blue Mountains and Streamertail, Jamaica Stephan Lorenz

Dear Reader, welcome to the first issue of **Birding Travel**! We are happy and honored that you are taking the time to read and hopefully enjoy this new, free digital magazine. Please see details below on how to receive your monthly copy. Birding Travel aims to promote responsible travel and encourage birders to seek new opportunities either across different continents or closer to home. We strongly favor sustainable ecotourism and will highlight working examples in our pages whenever possible. As birders and travellers we can play an integral role in conserving habitats and protecting birds around the globe.

Articles will include a wide range of topics, but mainly revolve around birding travel experiences from afar and North America. From basic site guides, personal travel essays, to species sketches, Birding Travel looks at birding opportunities through the eyes of conservationists, educators, dedicated listers, casual birders, and everybody in between. Content ranges from serious to casual, humorous to harrowing, with fresh perspectives on world birding. Our goal is to increase knowledge of the world's avifauna, highlight hotspots, and most of all, inspire birders to head out: birding and travelling. Or at least offer some birding stories to make it through a workday trapped behind a desk or on the couch during a winter freeze.

Please join us, as we explore the world one bird at a time and thank you again for picking up the issue. In this issue, articles range from Jamaica through Texas and Borneo.

Sincerely,

Stephan Lorenz

P.S. If you like what you read and see, please feel free to share with friends and family.

Birding salt pans, Peru Claudia Cavazos

To receive a monthly, digital copy (pdf format), please email "Subscribe to Birding Travel" at birdingtravel@gmail.com. If you would like to contribute articles/photographs or have questions on advertising opportunities, please send inquiries to the email address listed above. Comments welcome!

Colima Warbler: Adding a Tick in Big Bend, Texas

By Stephan Lorenz

Every North American birder has to complete the hike at least once. Actually, the experience is more akin to a whole trip. The long distance drive to the remote corner of West Texas, where the great river makes a big bend, followed by a predawn start and long trudge up steep switchbacks. The entire adventure has been likened to a near spiritual journey by many birders.

Walking and birding in the Chisos Mountains is a privilege every birder must experience, preferably more than once if possible. Fortunately, a relatively large, but drab warbler, that is otherwise restricted to Mexico, breeds every summer in the pine and oak woodlands of these mountains. This range-restricted species draws birders from all over North America in search of another tick. Often though, traveling birders fall in love with this rugged and wild corner of Texas and make many return visits.

The Chisos Mountains, contained entirely within Big Bend National Park, form a veritable island of lush mountain forests, grasslands, and humid canyons, surrounded by a desert sea. The small range forms the showpiece of Big Bend National Park, which exceeds 800,000 acres and protects swaths of harsh Chihuahuan Desert, more than 100 miles of scenic river, and canyons of towering limestone cliffs. The diverse habitats, ranging from barren badlands in the desert, riparian oases along the Rio Grande, to cooler mountain woodland at higher elevations, support more bird species than any other national park. Currently, more than 450 species are on the official list, a number that increases almost annually as vagrant birds stray into the park from all cardinal directions.

While birding in the park is rewarding almost anywhere, especially along the river, a trip to the mountains is necessary to see Big Bend's famed avian denizen, the Colima Warbler (*Oreothlypis crissalis*). This particular species is a relatively plain member of a colorful family, but on closer views, subtle hues are evident. The overall gray plumage is accented by brownish flanks, yellow rump and vent, and clear white eye-rings. With exceptionally good views, it is possible to see the distinct rusty crown. Superficially, Colima Warblers are similar to Virginia's Warblers (*Oreothlypis virginiae*), but the former is larger, with a heavier bill and the latter lacks the brownish tones, appearing grayer overall, with adults showing a yellowish wash to the breast. Virginia's Warblers are uncommon migrants in spring and fall and care should be taken when identifying Colima Warblers during migration.

During the summer months and height of the breeding season, there is no mistaking the trill of Colima Warblers emanating from pinyon and oak woodlands high in the Chisos Mountains. By early April, late

Casa Grande Chisos Mountains Stephan Lorenz

March in some years, birds arrive on their nesting territories from wintering sites on the Pacific slope of southwest Mexico. Upon arrival, birds sing vigorously, defending territories against conspecifics, but even though singing tapers off as the nesting season progresses, it is still possible to track down the species any day of the summer.

Males call from exposed perches between six and fifteen feet off the ground. Both males and females forage conspicuously in the top and midlevel layers of oaks and pines. During the last weeks of May, birds tend nests built on the ground, which are concealed by grass clumps, tree roots, or vines. The species rarely initiates a second brood and a breeding pair feeds fledges until July. The majority of the population has left the Chisos Mountains by the end of August, but occasional lingerers stay until mid-September.

While territorial males have been spotted in the Davis Mountains further north, the Chisos Mountains hold the only regular breeding population in the United States, with an average of fifty pairs present each year. The species is fairly common further south in Mexico's Sierra Madre Oriental, but also threatened by habitat degradation.

A hike to the famous Boot Spring between late April and early June maximizes one's chances to spot this specialty. This time of the year the temperatures are a bit more reasonable and Colima Warblers are in full swing.

I have hiked throughout the Chisos Mountains for nearly a decade now, but mainly in winter, and it was not until the fall of 2004 that I made my first serious attempt at seeing the species. While a large, grayish warbler was observed briefly during a hike along Laguna Meadow Trail, I knew I had to return the following summer. The first chance I had to come to grips with the Colima Warbler, and a slew of other birds, arrived the following May. A friend and I

Greg Lavaty (texastargetbirds.com)

completed a one week whirlwind tour, chasing birds and photographing reptiles, throughout West Texas. Thus, when we finally arrived at the start of Pinnacles Trail, we were already pretty exhausted from long drives and twelve hour days. Yet the temperatures were much more tolerable than the baking desert a few thousand feet below and we set off along the trail with high hopes.


Greg Lavaty (texastargetbirds.com)

The Pinnacles Trail, which rises steeply for three and a half miles, including a few torturous switchbacks, offers the fastest and most direct route to Boot Spring Canyon and the core habitat of Big Bend's Colima Warblers. We slowed down along the path, not so much due to fatigue, but to observe the numerous birds along the route, including Western Tanagers (*Piranga ludoviciana*) and Black-headed Grosbeaks (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*). About three-quarters of the way up, nearing the high point, I picked up a soft simple trill reminiscent of an Orange-crowned Warbler (*Oreothlypis celata*). We stopped and tracked down the caller in a low oak just a few yards off the trail, our first Colima Warbler. The bird moved past us, clearly intend on staking its claim for the nesting season, offering great views.

We could have turned around at this point, but the top was close and we planned to explore the Boot Spring area, where the lush canyon often harbors many birds, including Painted Redstarts (*Myioborus pictus*), an antithesis of color compared to the Colima Warbler. The trail widened on reaching the crest and magnificent views of the Basin and the desert beyond opened. Continuing further, through more open woodland of junipers and stunted oaks, we saw a second bird on the other side of a dry stream. It sang and foraged near the crown of a juniper. We wisely bypassed the detour that leads to the top of Emory Peak and continued along the Boot Canyon Trail. From the slopes covered in thick woodland, we heard the by now familiar trill of several Colima Warblers and glimpsed one more. The lushness of Boot Spring provided welcome relieve from the rising heat and we lingered in the shade of massive cypress and douglas-firs. Watching the antics of a family group of Acorn Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes formicivorus*), while eating a quick lunch, a vocal Painted Redstart conveniently passed through, right over our heads.

From Boot Spring, it is possible to continue towards the South Rim, which offers stunning views and likely more Colima Warblers, but we took the level Colima

Trail, as the name suggests, another good place to look for the birds. This trail connects to the longer Laguna Meadow Trail, which winds its way back through impressive mountain scenery at a less knee jerking angle than the Pinnacles Trail and can be recommended to complete this memorable loop. Of course, the hike back down was much easier with the bird in the bag. This loop covers more than ten miles overall, with an elevation gain of at least one thousand feet and requires all day to complete, especially if stopping and searching for birds. Obviously it is important to commence well prepared; water and protective clothing, in addition to the field guide and binoculars, are critical for an enjoyable hike. Schlepping our heavy legs back into the Basin parking lot, with the last rays of the sun breaking through the photogenic window, we felt exhausted, but elated. This was birding at its best, incredible landscapes and rare birds.

While a hike into the mountains is well worth the effort, it is also possible to track down Colima Warblers at lower elevations, especially during wetter years, essentially skipping the long hike. Pine Canyon offers a more accessible alternative and is only four miles round-trip, without much elevation gain, though the path can be rough in places. A high clearance vehicle is recommended to reach the trailhead at the end of Pine Canyon Road, a rough stretch of rock and gravel, which forks off Glenn Springs Road east of the Chisos Mountains. I have reached the start of the trail twice in a regular car and this four mile stretch has been improved over the past years, but it is recommended to check with park rangers about current status and conditions.

Pine Canyon Trail starts in the desert, slowly ascending towards sotol studded grasslands, before entering stands of pines, oaks, and madrones, growing along the leaf covered creek bed. The trail dead-ends at a pour-off that is usually dry, except after recent rains.

Colima Warblers should be looked and listened for along the final section of the trail, where the woodland is most extensive. The lush understory and dense trees growing between massive boulders here, hosted the first Fan-tailed Warbler (Euthlypis lachrymose) in Texas during the fall of 2009 and many other rare birds have been found here. The Big Bend region received plenty of rainfall this fall and winter and there is a good chance that Colima Warblers will be present in Pine Canyon this coming summer. Here is a great opportunity to finally spot this unique bird of the Chisos, or see it again, without having to hoof it all the way up into the mountains and always keep an eye out for what else Big Bend has to offer.

Further Reading

Beason, Robert C. and Roland H. Wauer. 2013. Colima Warbler (Oreothlypis crissalis), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.).

Sierra Madre, Mexico Stephan Lorenz

Jamaica: Chasing Endemics, Local Bird Lore, and Conservation Struggles

By Stephan Lorenz

We were in search of the "Mountain Witch"! Moving slowly and deliberately along a narrow path, we peered into the shadows, stared at the leaf littered trail ahead, and turned around frequently to check whether something was following us. The track in front was barely discernable, as it wound along hillsides and small valleys, but we forged ahead. Above, a slight breeze caught the sun dappled canopy and flecks of light bounced through the understory. We looked for movement; we listened for shuffling feet, or the crackling of dry leaves: nothing. The previous evening, we thought we had heard the "Mountain Witch", a deep sad "woo-woo", emanating from an indeterminable direction within the deep shadows of impenetrable forest.

Due to its rugged topography, the Cockpit Country in northwestern Jamaica harbors one of the largest contiguous tracts of rainforest remaining on the island. Steep karst hills and ridges, riddled with caves and sinkholes, and blanketed with lush forests, protect immense biodiversity, including many unique species. This undeveloped region is also the last stronghold of several threatened endemic birds.

The forest opened somewhat and spots of sunlight turned into patches. We crept forward, rounding a slight bend, gingerly stepping over fallen branches, avoiding clumps of dry leaves, and suddenly the "Mountain Witch" materialized. She stood momentarily in the middle of the trail, cocking her head in surprise, and then walked in an unhurried zigzag away from us. We stared in disbelief and with the sun illuminating the dove, we could see the purplish sheen to the back and upper wing. The grayish crest was subtle, but clearly visible atop its bobbing head. A gust of wind shook the trees above, shafts of sunlight chased the shadows, and in an instant, the "Mountain Witch" disappeared. Neither of us had blinked or seen the bird step off the trail. I did not truly believe that we had surprised the "Mountain Witch", but after our all day efforts and doubting its existence, starting to feel our luck had been hexed, she had briefly revealed herself.

The gorgeous Crested Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon versicolor*), locally known as "Mountain Witch", is only one of several rare Jamaican endemics that can be observed in the Cockpit Country. Other Jamaican specialties that can be seen include the Old Man Bird, Old Woman Bird, Big Tom Fool, and Doctorbirds, which translate into Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo (Coccyzus vetula), Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo (*Coccyzus pluvialis*), Rufous-tailed Flycatcher (*Myiarchus validus*), and basically all hummingbirds, just to name a few.

◊◊◊

Jamaica, famous for Marley, reggae and Rasta, beaches and patties, also offers some of the best birding in the West Indies. It is the south westernmost island among the

Greater Antilles, which also include Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico. Due to its geographical location, its unique birdlife reveals West Indian, North and Central American influences, unlike any other island in the Greater Antilles. Add to that twenty-eight endemic species, plus numerous migrants, and Jamaica becomes a hotspot for birdwatchers from around the world. Unfortunately, Jamaica faces serious environmental degradation and its wildlife could greatly benefit from visiting birders and increased ecotourism.


Jamaican Oriole Stephan Lorenz

Smaller than the state of Connecticut, Jamaica packs a great variety of habitats into its limited square mileage. Sandy beaches and remnant mangroves fringe the shores, with short stretches of rocky limestone cliffs along the eastern coast. Some dry tropical forest remains in the lowlands and grades into wet montane and cloud forest at higher elevations. Jamaica has one of the fastest deforestation rates in the world, making increased conservation efforts imperative. Fortunately, much habitat has been saved by the rugged topography of the island's interior. Nevertheless, two endemics have likely become extinct, the Jamaican Petrel (*Pterodroma caribbaea*) and Jamaican Paraque (*Siphonorhis americana*).

I was fortunate enough to spend two months working in Jamaica, assisting with research sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute, investigating the effects of forest fragmentation on resident and migrant bird species, specifically the Jamaican Tody (*Todus todus*) and American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*). I was able to study the birdlife closely and travel throughout the island. For visiting birders, a week should be sufficient to find the majority of endemics and enjoy the island's natural beauty.

I was based in Mandeville, living at Marshall's Pen Great House, a former ranch and coffee plantation dating back 200 years. The pastures and woodlots on the property are one of Jamaica's birding hotspots in their own right, but I took my first trip to one of the least settled and explored areas in Jamaica, the Hellshire Hills. The aptly named region, comprised of jagged limestone hills covered by thorn scrub and cacti, is the driest part of the country. Lying just to the east of the turbulent capital, Kingston, it remains one of the last wilderness regions in the country. Early development schemes have largely failed and the inaccessible interior protects populations of Jamaican Iguana (*Cyclura collie*), the rarest lizard in the world, and Jamaican Coney (*Geocapromys brownie*), a strange nocturnal rodent.

The arid habitat supports several bird species found nowhere else on the island. After I passed through Port Henderson and Fort Clarence Beach, I managed to find a

gravel track leading into the hills. The terrain was less than pristine, but I soon came across a singing Bahama Mockingbird (*Mimus gundlachii*), creeping like a thrasher through dense vegetation. Common in its namesake islands, it has a very limited range in Jamaica. A bit further, the track ended and I worked my way along the coast, where I came across the Stolid Flycatcher (*Myiarchus stolidus*), like a darker version of the Ash-throated Flycatcher, it is one of eight Myiarchus flycatchers endemic to the West Indies, three of which occur in Jamaica. A crescent of white sand, completely deserted, invited to linger and swim. I watched the antics of a group of Smooth-billed Anis (*Crotophaga ani*) as they struggled to perch on tall cacti, before I retraced my steps in the late afternoon.

The diverse topography of the island becomes apparent after leaving the coast and heading for the mountains, less than twenty miles inland. The Blue Mountains north of Kingston are accessible, have a pleasant climate, and hold the most productive cloud forest in Jamaica. A large variety of endemic species can be found here, including some that are difficult to see anywhere else. One of the better places to bird lies past Whitfield Hall, where the rutted dirt track turns into a trail, ascending Blue Mountain Peak, the highest point in Jamaica. Along the hike, keep an eye to the sky for Ring-tailed Pigeons (*Patagioenas caribaea*) flying between prominent perches and scan the forest floor, to look for the secretive Ruddy Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon montana*). The quail-dove is an unmistakable ground-dwelling bird that sticks to shady patches. Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, Woodpecker (*Melanerpes radiolatus*), and Tody can all be seen in the forest here. The Jamaican Tody belongs to a bird family (Todidae) confined to the West Indies. Closely related to kingfishers, these diminutive birds are common in many habitats, often calling with simple loud beeps.

Higher up the mountain, cleared areas offered distant views across slopes covered with coffee plantations, which supposedly produce the best brew in the world.

It is not necessary to scale the entire 7,400 foot mountain in order to see its most important bird, but birders must at least reach relatively intact cloud forest, where epiphytes are common. The Jamaican Blackbird (*Nesopsar nigerrimus*) only resembles other blackbirds in color and name, but behaves like a mix between an oriole and a woodpecker. This highly arboreal bird is placed in its own genus and forages almost exclusively in large bromeliads. Birds are mainly located by listening for rustling and looking for dead leaves falling from the high canopy. Its mechanical song is another clue to its presence. Due to its specific habitat requirements, it is one of the most endangered endemic birds in Jamaica. I managed to find at least two of these rare and shy birds, feeding quietly among the epiphytes, in a section of gnarled trees

laden with bromeliads.

A trip to the Cockpit Country is necessary to see the two species of endemic psittacids, simply called the Yellow-billed (*Amazona collaria*) and Black-billed Parrot (*Amazona agilis*), or Yellowbill and Blackbill in the local vernacular. While the former occurs in several places, the latter only survives in two isolated populations. Both species are threatened by habitat destruction and poaching. The Cockpit Country encompasses hundreds of steep hills and nearly inaccessible valleys in the western part of the island, protecting the largest tracts of rainforest remaining in Jamaica. The region was named after its numerous caves and sinkholes with temperatures and humidity akin to shacks where cockfights used to be held. Pristine forests cling to nearly vertical slopes and stand in narrow valleys, cut by whitewater. The Windsor Cave area in the Cockpit Country is likely the best single birding location on the island, with nearly all endemics possible.


Jamaican Tody Stephan Lorenz

The Windsor Research Center lies at the heart of the Cockpit Country and offers accommodation and access to the best birding areas. On my first morning, it didn't take long before flocks of parrots screeched above, flying from their roosts to feeding areas. It took some effort though to distinguish between the yellow and black bills. Both species are fairly common here, but difficult to see as they fly high between the tops of karst mountains. Eventually, I came across small feeding groups and was able to study the parrots closely.

A hike in the nearby forest revealed many other endemic birds, White-chinned Thrushes (*Turdus aurantius*) fed along the forest edge, a Jamaican Becard (*Pachyramphus niger*) foraged quietly in the canopy, and a pair of hyperactive Arrowhead Warblers (*Dendroica pharetra*) whizzed by. I tracked down an odd song and found the Blue Mountain Vireo (*Vireo osburni*), moving slowly right at eye level. Several nearby caves also offer the chance to watch thousands of bats emerge at dusk and during nighttime, it is well worth it to look for owls and potoos. Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) are widespread and common, but the endemic Jamaican Owl (*Pseudoscops grammicus*) is a bit trickier to see, as it prefers dense trees, but the "patoo with the big eyes" can occasionally be found on its day roost, where it is very tame. Spotlighting of fence posts or snags should reveal a Northern Potoo (*Nyctibius jamaicensis*), a potential split in the future from mainland populations.

I was fortunate enough to see the owl and potoo right in my backyard at Marshall's Pen Great House. In fact, many visiting

birders spend a night or two just to see the owl, of which a pair has taken up residence near the main building. Comfortable accommodations and easy transport from the nearby town of Mandeville make Marshall's Pen a must stop birding location. A morning walk on the property quickly revealed the interesting geographic mix of birds found in Jamaica. Northern Mockingbirds (*Mimus polyglottos*) called from exposed perches, while Zenaida Doves (*Zenaida aurita*) foraged along the margins of clearings. Noisy Loggerhead Kingbirds (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus*) monopolized the barbed wire along the pastures, from which the insect-like calls of Grasshopper Sparrows (*Ammodramus savannarum*) were barely audible.


Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo Stephan Lorenz

Flowering trees attracted groups of the endemic Orangequits (*Euneornis campestris*), Jamaican Euphonias (*Euphonia Jamaica*) and before long, a male Streamertail (*Trochilus polytmus*) cruised the abundant blooms. Found only in Jamaica, the Steamertail is one of the most magnificent hummingbirds in the world. The shiny green males sport two thick streamers, making the overall bird nearly a foot long. Common throughout the country, it is Jamaica's national bird. Birds in the western and eastern parts of the island differ in bill color and may represent two species.

The Vervain Hummingbird (*Mellisuga minima*) is the antithesis of the Streamertail, green and whitish-gray, so tiny that only the Bee Hummingbird (*Mellisuga helenae*) of Cuba leaves it as the runner-up for smallest bird in the world. What the Vervain Hummingbird lacks in size, it compensates for in attitude and voice. The second endemic hummingbird, the Jamaican Mango (*Anthracothorax mango*), is often a brash intruder, large and dark, it reveals its subtle colors of violet and magenta only in the right light.

Jamaica's has one of the highest rates of endemism in the West Indies, but the remaining forests face numerous threats from bauxite strip mining, logging, and cutting of saplings for yam sticks. It is not just endemic birds that rely on the island's natural habitats, but also dozens of species of migrants that either stopover en route south or winter in Jamaica. In addition to habitat degradation, songbirds are still hunted in some parts of the country. Several education and conservation initiatives have been launched in order to increase people's awareness of the special birdlife found in Jamaica. One of the major current issues is the protection of the Cockpit Country, which is threatened by bauxite mining.

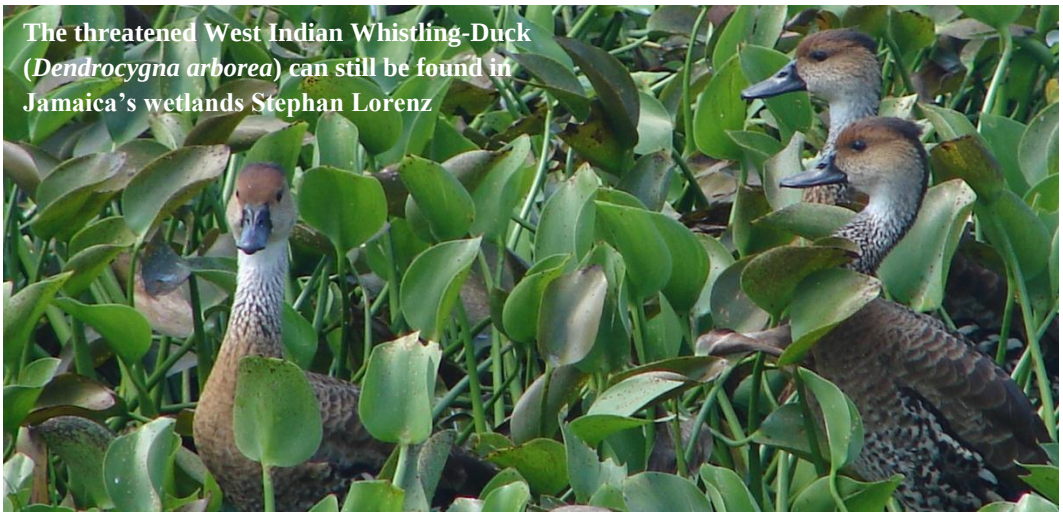
Surprisingly, while the distribution of birds in Jamaica is well-known, basic natural history of many endemic species needs additional study. Efforts are underway to explore habitat requirements, demography,

and population ecology, but the field remains wide open for numerous essential projects.

Many locals have extensive knowledge of and appreciation for birds. I sat down with a group of Rastafarians on the beach and the topic of birds arose. They spent the next hour or so filling me in on the details of nearly every endemic species and teaching me their evocative local names. The tody becomes the Robin Redbreast, the Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo the Old Man Bird, Sad Flycatcher (*Myiarchus barbirostris*) the Little Tom Fool, White-eyed Thrush (*Turdus jamaicensis*) the Glasseye, and Crested Quail-Dove the Mountain Witch. This knowledge and the bird's colloquial names should be used to educate the next generation of Jamaicans.

Meeting farmers in the fields and people cutting firewood in the forest, I tried to explain my reason for being there after their initial surprise. I surveyed the forest for birds in order to understand how species were faring in the fragmented patches. I showed them my binoculars and equipment, stressing that these forests held birds found nowhere else in the world. I explained how birds from the United Sates migrated south in the winter to seek food and shelter in Jamaica's rainforests and mangroves. Many showed genuine interest and tried to give helpful advice. I was looking for one bird in particular, flipping to the page in my field guide, I pointed at the American Redstart, or better said, the Fire Lantern.

Jamaica is one country in the West Indies, where birders could truly make a difference. Densely populated and poorly developed, Jamaica suffers from several economic problems and conservation does not receive the attention needed. While tourism is one of the main industries in the country, the majority of visitors come for the beaches and do not spend time appreciating the unique flora and fauna of the country. Birdwatchers traveling in Jamaica can explain to locals, including taxi drivers, restaurant and hotel owners, or anybody else willing to listen, why they are visiting and how important conservation actions are for birds and tourism. It is a great way to make a positive contribution, while seeing some exciting endemic birds.



The threatened West Indian Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna arborea*) can still be found in Jamaica's wetlands Stephan Lorenz

GALLERY: JAMAICAN ENDEMICS

Jamaican Woodpecker
Gina Nichol
Sunrise Birding

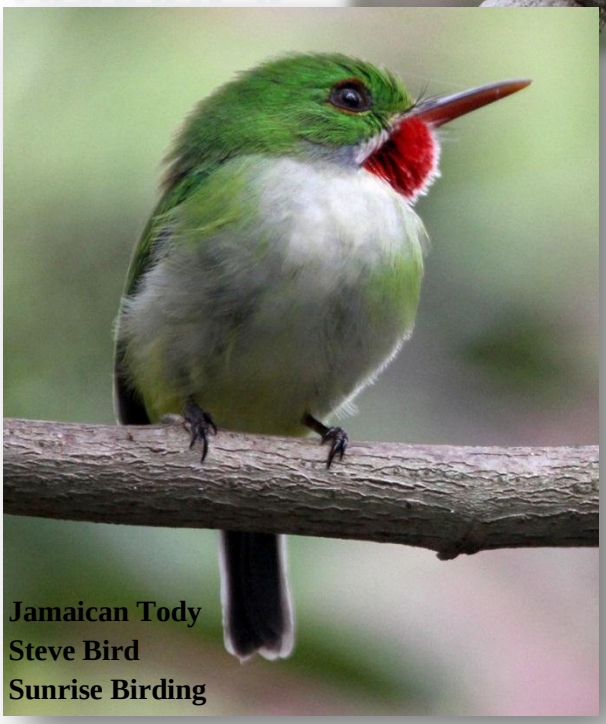
Crested Quail-Dove
Steve Bird
Sunrise Birding

BIRD JAMAICA

Orangequit
Steve Bird
Sunrise Birding

SUNRISE BIRDING

Sunrise Birding LLC
Birding & Wildlife Tours



Jamaican Tody
Steve Bird
Sunrise Birding

Jamaican Blackbird
Gina Nichol
Sunrise Birding

Monotypic: Bornean Bristlehead (*Pityriasis gymnocephala*)

By Stephan Lorenz

A monotypic bird family includes only a single species, which often does not have any close living relatives, thus deserving unique classification at family rank. Currently, the IOC list (published by the International Ornithologists' Union) recognizes 25 monotypic families, plus several groups of birds of uncertain and unresolved affinities. Taxonomy and classification are an active field of research and changes are common (lumps and splits at species level are most familiar to birders) and in the future the number of monotypic families could change as the understanding of phylogenies improves. For example, Pandionidae (ospreys) is by strict definition no longer considered a monotypic family, since the single cosmopolitan species was split into the Western Osprey (Pandion haliaetus) and Eastern Osprey (Pandion cristatus). Birding Travel will focus on some of the most unique members of the world's avifauna with articles introducing each monotypic family.

Bornean Bristlehead Stephan Lorenz

Borneo is a land of superlatives. The third largest island in the world, it contains some of the world's oldest rainforest, has one of the highest peaks in southeast Asia, Mount Kinabalu, hides one of the longest underground rivers, and harbors *Rafflesia*, a plant with the largest single flower. Add to that 633 species of birds, of which more than 50 are endemic, plus the one-of-a-kind proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*) and birders will not know where to look first.

It is easy to get lost for several weeks among the broadbills, hornbills, thornbills, pittas leafbirds, and flowerpeckers. The island is full of must-see birds, ranging from spectacular and colorful, to exceedingly rare. Yet one single species stands out for several reasons.

Borneo's most sought after endemic, is also one of the most unique birds in the world, the Bornean Bristlehead (*Pityriasis gymnocephala*). A series of alternative common names, Bristled Shrike, Bald-headed Crow or Bald-headed Wood-Shrike, hints at the difficulty of classifying this particular species. It has been included or aligned with no less than seven families of birds, including the starlings, helmetshrikes, butcherbirds and currawongs, true shrikes and corvids. Current understanding places it closest to the ioras and helmetshrikes, with the Bornean Bristlehead representing a relict species from an earlier radiation of shrike-like birds across Old World tropics.

Even just a glance at the species in the field guide, will leave birders wondering what

group of birds it belongs to. It does not really look like anything familiar. A coal black body is dramatically offset by a bright red head, neck, and throat and less conspicuous reddish thighs. A black cheek patch contrasts with the crimson face and orbital rings. Females have red spots on the underparts and both sexes have the distinct namesake crown. Short, yellow to orange skin outgrowths, give the crown a rough, bristly appearance, visible even from some distance. Feathers on throat and cheek patch also have a stiff texture. The massive black bill attests to its preference for large insects, including butterflies, grasshoppers, cockroaches, and beetles.

Little is known about the bristlehead's nesting habits and general ecology, as it is rarely encountered. The species appears to move large distances and may be seasonal in certain locales. Even in their core range, observations are sporadic, possibly because the birds forage in the canopy. The species tends to move about in small, tight groups of about half-dozen individuals, constantly calling to each other. The distinct vocalizations, so unlike anything else in Borneo's rainforests, include nasal whines and chatter notes, and the calls are one of the best clues to alert birders of the species' whereabouts.

Bornean Bristleheads occur mainly in pristine lowland rainforest and healthy stands of mangroves along the coast, but have been observed in secondary forests, edge habitats, and peat swamps. In Sabah, Malaysia, one of the most reliably sites is the vast, protected rainforest of Danum Valley. The Danum Valley Field Centre at the edge of the huge Danum Valley Conservation Area, which protects immense swaths of primary rainforest, offers access to the right habitat. Transport can be arranged from the town of Lahad Datu and accommodations, ranging from camping to guest rooms, are available at the center.

I had already spent a few days at the field center and covered many of the leech infested trails. I crossed the torrential river on the suspension bridge and systematically worked my way along the grid trails. Predawn starts along the long loop trail, winding through low hills covered in dark forest, left me exhausted by the end of the day. The temperatures and humidity never budged and the smallest exertion left me drenched in sweat for the rest of the day. I climbed the canopy tower several times, carefully working my way up the slippery steps of aluminum ladders wired to the trunk of a rainforest giant. Occasionally, my hand would cramp under my death grip and I had to quickly pull up onto an intermediate platform.

Early morning and early evening, I scanned the forest canopy, broken by many emergent trees typical of Southeast Asian rainforest. I scanned from the clearing in the midafternoon, while trying to rest and rehydrate. I was scanning from the tent, as nightfall quickly rendered the forest in silhouettes. While I had encountered many incredible birds and other wildlife, even coming face to face with an orangutan on the tower, the

Lowland rainforest in Danum Valley Stephan Lorenz

Bornean Bristlehead had eluded me.

After another round on the trails and several new birds, I spent the early afternoon cleaning up in the campsite, which was deserted except for the two of us. I had pulled off all the leeches I had collected that morning, while moving through the undergrowth in an unsuccessful search of Bornean Wren-Babbler (*Ptilocichla leucogrammica)* and Giant Pitta (*Pitta caerulea*), and had just finished a shower, somewhat trivial in the humid heat. Standing on the wooden platform in a pair of boxers, I suddenly heard some odd calls and dashed to the pack to grab my binoculars. Even with bare eyes the bright red heads of four Bornean Bristleheads stood out among the leafy green canopy. The small group came up to the edge of the clearing, but remained high in the trees. I was able to coax them out of a denser tree and they eyed the stranger, staring up in a pair of briefs, bleeding from his ankles. The birds hopped in and out of view for nearly ten minutes, showing well for a canopy dweller and then disappeared as sudden as their entrance. Sporadic and unpredictable seemed a good fit as this was the only observation, despite more days of birding in the area. But I had seen Borneo's monotypic family (Pityriaseidae) and had a grainy picture to proof it.

In Sabah, Malaysia, Danum Valley is one of the more reliably sites for this species. It is probably best to search for it along edges, including the entrance road, as it is really difficult to see anything in the canopy inside closed forest. One of the key requirements for success appears to be time and patience, plus a dosage of good luck. Sepilok Forest Reserve near Sandakan also harbors chances to spot this oddball.

References

Colenutt, S. 2002 Bornean Bristlehead: Little known Oriental bird. OBC Bulletin 35.

Lowland rainforest in Danum Valley Claudia Cavazos

From the Field: Tough Conservation Work in Arizona's Grasslands

By Erik Andersen

It's 4:45 in the morning in late July. I'm breaking down my campsite in the Huachuca Mountains in southeastern Arizona. I know I'm running late because the sky is just starting to lighten to the east, and the calls of Elf Owls and Mexican Whip-poor-wills have been replaced by a couple of early Dusky-capped Flycatchers—typically the first diurnal species to start calling at this campsite. I chug down the last of my coffee and collapse the cot. Although the monsoons started a month ago, the sky looked clear when I pulled into camp after dark, and I enjoyed the chance to skip setting up the tent. I toss everything into the truck and head down into the desert grasslands spread out from the base of the mountains.

This is the first year of a multi-year project assessing how invasive mesquite and nonnative grasses affect birds that breed in desert grasslands. Vegetation structure and composition in these grasslands have changed dramatically in response to the adverse effects of fire suppression, overgrazing, changes in land use, and introductions of nonnative plants, which have reduced cover of native perennial grasses and facilitated increases in woody shrubs. As a result, desert grasslands are among the most threatened ecological communities in the U.S. At present, only about 30% of grasslands in Arizona remain dominated by native perennial grasses with few shrubs, features that once characterized grasslands throughout the region.

During the last 30 years, bird species associated with grasslands have declined more rapidly than any other group of birds, in part due to invasions of nonnative grasses and woody shrubs. Although evidence for declines in these grassland species is strong, linkages between breeding birds and vegetation composition, structure, and floristics in grasslands are not well understood, yet this information is essential for managing and conserving grassland wildlife effectively.

Desert Grassland Eric Andersen

That's why I'm bumping down this road with dawn fast approaching, trying to make it to my first plot by sunrise. I've got 50 plots scattered along a gradient of mesquite cover between the Huachuca, Santa Rita, and Whetstone Mountains, an area known as the Sonoita Plain. Today's plot is only a short drive and hike away, and I make it to the point just in time for a sunrise start. This spot has little mesquite and is mostly dominated by tall native grasses—several gramas, threeawn, Arizona cottontop, and cane beardgrass—although there are sizable patches of Lehman's lovegrass, a nonnative introduced into the Southwest from southern Africa in the 1930s. In the right conditions, Lehman's lovegrass can outcompete native species and form nearly monotypic stands; plenty of my plots are 90%+ Lehman's by cover.

The dawn chorus is pretty impressive for this time of year. Within my 10 ha plot (a 180 m radius), I counted five territorial male Botteri's Sparrows, two Grasshopper Sparrows of the Arizona subspecies, and one each of Lilian's Eastern Meadowlark, Cassin's Sparrow, Western Kingbird, Mourning Dove, and Blue Grosbeak. Plus there's a Montezuma Quail calling outside the plot and a perched Swainson's Hawk just visible to the west. There's also a riparian corridor not far from the plot with big cottonwoods and thick mesquite (that's where mesquite occurred historically in this area—the invasion into upland areas is a recent phenomenon). There's a lot of action over there. I can pick out Bullock's Orioles, White-winged Doves, Vermillion and Brown-crested Flycatchers, Gila Woodpeckers, Cassin's Kingbirds, Lucy's and Yellow Warblers, and a noisy Gray Hawk, but there's no time to linger—I'm hoping to get in four more point counts before the three hour window ends and bird activity drops.

The point counts will give me insight into the distribution and density of birds in various vegetation conditions, but that's not the whole story. For example, many of the obligate grassland species (Botteri's, Cassin's, and Grasshopper Sparrows, and Eastern Meadowlarks) may select nesting habitat based on grass structure. Many of the nonnative grasses look a lot like native species, and may conceal nests just as well, but are birds able to fledge young at sites dominated by nonnative species just as well as at sites dominated by native grasses? Perhaps there are big differences in insect biomass, seed production, or predator numbers at nonnative sites that have serious impacts on birds. And what happens to grassland bird nesting success as grasslands turn into mesquite savannahs and shrublands? To get at these questions, I've got to monitor nests.

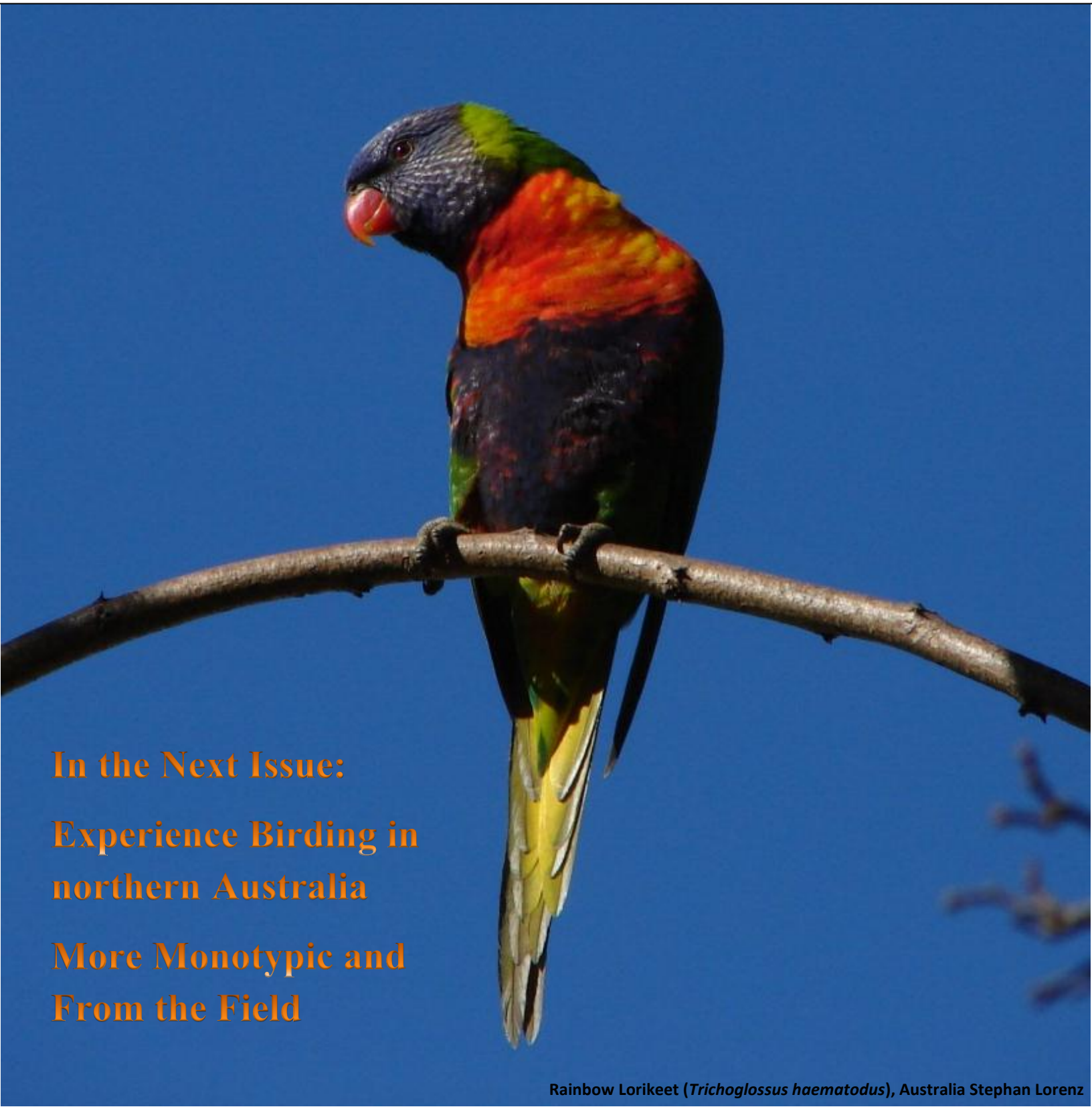
So after the point counts are finished, the rest of the day is devoted to nest searching and checking active nests. Each nest is checked every 3-4 days; short intervals are ideal when estimating nesting success, but even a four day interval is hard enough to keep up with over the big area I'm working. By noon the temperature is in the mid-90s, even here at over 4500 feet. I drive back into the cooler Huachucas to have lunch and escape the midday heat. I'm exhausted and try to get in a quick nap in the afternoon, but it's hard to not do a little birding when the trogons are calling and you never know what has drifted across the border from the mountains of Mexico. I work a short ways up and down the beautiful sycamore-studded canyon. Nothing too

exotic, but plenty of nice locals: Hepatic Tanager, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Painted Redstart, Bridled Titmouse, Arizona Woodpecker, and Mexican Jay to name a few. Then I collapse into the hammock and catch up on some sleep.

Grassland birds are very secretive, so finding nests can be notoriously difficult. Adults often drop into the tall grass far from the nest site and approach on foot. Thus, finding nests by observation can be hit or miss. One of the most productive methods is dragging a rope or chain through the grass between two people. But that requires another person so whenever someone offers to volunteer, I jump on the offer. I'm meeting one such volunteer at 2:30 so I head back down through the oaks, pick up the rope-dragger, and head back into the plots. We spend the rest of the day walking transects up and down the plots, dodging agave and catclaw. It's fairly productive; we find nests of Botteri's Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, and Mourning Dove. Plus one other *Peucaea* sparrow that looked like a Cassin's—they appear very similar to Botteri's when flushing off the nest and never stick around for a good look. A Cassin's Sparrow nest would be a good find; although common in these grasslands most summers, there are very few around this year. We call it off when the sun drops below the ridge, and I head to another campsite to eat, sleep, and repeat the process early tomorrow. It's hard work, but enjoyable. Hopefully, the research will ultimately help inform management of these threatened communities, and contribute to the conservation of some pretty cool birds.

Botteri's Sparrow nest Eric Andersen

PARTING SHOT:



Rainbow Lorikeet (*Trichoglossus haematodus*), Australia Stephan Lorenz