

Caribbean Tour 2016

Background:

This trip started innocently enough. I have wanted to travel on the [Sea Cloud](#) for some time, and our **50th anniversary** seemed like a good occasion. Our anniversary is in April, and the trip we wanted, a **VENT cruise** visiting the Lesser Antilles, was in February. Nonetheless, we selected the cruise as our joint anniversary present to each other. Then the fun began.

“As long as we’re going to the Caribbean,” Linda said, “we might as well travel around some.” That started us down a road longer than we really planned on.

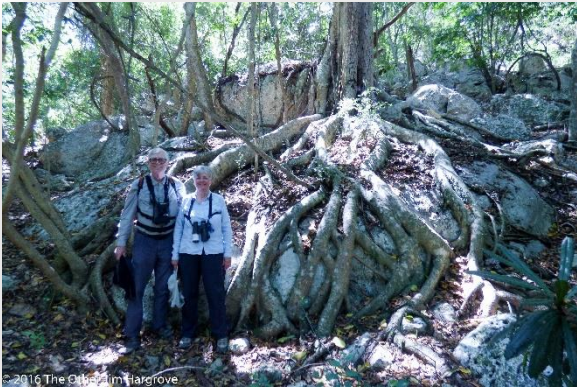
Coincidence: in June 2015, we met **Rich Hoyer** at the [Dean Hale Woodpecker Festival](#) near Bend, OR. Rich is a tour leader for **Wings Birding Tours**. We mentioned our plans, still very inchoate, and he suggested we take in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. He has done Jamaica 18 times, and was going to be on the DR tour learning where to go, etc.

I did a little investigation and found out that we could fit Puerto Rico into the mix before DR and Jamaica. That left a week long hole in the schedule, from the end of the cruise until the start of the Puerto Rico tour. I tacked on a trip to Trinidad, where we have often talked about going. Then, we had a single day and half, which I suggested we spend in Miami. The trip was done: Fly to Barbados, cruise the Lesser Antilles, hit the famous Asa Wright center in Trinidad, then on to PR, DR, and Jamaica. We would *do the Caribbean*. As we’d already been to Cuba, this trip would cover most of the bird rich areas of the Caribbean. Besides, with all the endemic birds to be found on the islands, we had a good chance to add to our world life list.

Various people, on hearing the plan, had two comments:

1. You’re crazy! (You probably already knew that.)
2. Maybe 100 lifers possible, but probably only 75 or so.

2016 is our **45th year birding together**. We started in the Everglades NP on a trip to Florida in 1971, where we



The two of Us by a Big Tree

were astounded with the many gorgeous birds to be found there. Later, when we learned that the same species, or many of them, could be found in the Houston area, we had found a hobby. That enterprise would take us around the world, to every continent, even Antarctica, in a search of all of this planet’s natural beauty we could fit into a lifetime.

Surprisingly, though, the Caribbean was an almost blank area on the map. Here is the story of that trip. First, though, here’s our signature photo: the two of us in front of a big tree. In this case, we show only the *roots* of the big tree. Use your imagination.

February 9-11, 2016: Barbados

The cruise began on February 11 in Barbados. As usual, we planned to arrive a day early, just in case something went wrong. So, late in the evening of 2/9, we set off from SFO to Barbados by way of Toronto. Everyone thinks that sounds crazy, but it actually worked fairly well. Air Canada didn’t use one of their newest and best aircraft for the flight to Barbados, but it was only about 4 hours long, and we arrived without incident, mid-afternoon on the 10th.

We set off to grab a quick bite to eat. Based on information from TripAdvisor, we walked around the corner to Cuz's Fish Shack and sampled his famous fish sandwich. It was quick and hot, and with an application of Barbados spicy sauce, it was just what we needed.

Besides, we had two lifers right away. This photo shows the Barbados Bullfinch, which we first ID'd as Lesser Antillean Bullfinch. Then we learned about the splits that would be part of our life for weeks. Virtually every place we stopped had either endemic species or endemic subspecies of birds. Many of the endemic subspecies are being *elevated* to full species status. This is based on



Barbados Bullfinch

new techniques using DNA sequencing to determine whether two specimens belong to the same species. The result is a never-ending stream of new birds for birders to find. Unfortunately, it also turns one of my goals, to see half the bird species in the world, into a moving target.

In this case, the Barbados Bullfinch deserves to be split. Both sexes look like females, which is decidedly not the case for the rest of them.

We also picked up a tame Scaly-naped Pigeon. These are confined to mountains and difficult to see on most islands, but on Barbados they came to the hotel parking lot.

Our friends and frequent traveling companions, Jenny and Terry Cloudman, joined us for the Sea Cloud. I suggested the trip last year and they jumped at the chance to see this fabulous ship. With a day to spare, we fiddled around, trying a submarine trip suggested by another birder. It was so-so. We were ready for festivities, which began with a dinner meeting that evening.



Green-throated Carib

On the 11th, we toured several spots on Barbados looking for anything interesting. The first place, Graeme Hall Nature Preserve, remains one of the last places on Barbados with a natural marsh. This turned up no new lifers, but we did have an interesting sighting: *Little Egret*. This common bird of Africa and Asia somehow reached Barbados several years ago and stayed. Now, they are breeding, and hybridizing with Snowy Egrets. In fact, we had to check carefully to find an individual that showed no sign of hybridization. We also managed to get a good picture of a Green-throated Carib, a bird we had seen previously only once, on St. Croix.

Next, we visited the Colleton Estate, a historical plantation house that you can snap up for about 7.75 million US\$, reduced from about 10 mil. Interesting house, but without any new birds. We also stopped by a small pond to look for rails, etc. Generally, we killed time until we left for the harbor, where late in the afternoon, we boarded the amazing yacht, **Sea Cloud**.

February 11-18: Aboard the Sea Cloud

When Meriweather Post, heiress to the Post cereal fortune, married E. F. Hutton, the eponymous founder of the brokerage firm, she ordered a fabulous yacht as a wedding present. She undertook the furnishing of the

staterooms herself, reaching a level of opulence seldom seen. The ship has an interesting history, detailed in [this web article](#).



Here are a couple of photos of our stateroom, one of several restored to a semblance of its former glory.

That queen size bed gives you some idea of the scale.

Although the ship can proceed under sail, usually two diesel engines provided the power. We did get to see the sails a couple of times when the wind and sea were compatible.

[Terry Cloudman has several more photos of the ship posted online.](#)

We spent the first day sailing north to the island of Dominica, where we began our survey of the Lesser Antilles in, as a fellow passenger noted, alphabetical order.

February 13: Dominica

This island is one of the least developed of the Lesser Antilles, due primarily to the mountainous terrain, that leaves few opportunities for agriculture. We ate an early breakfast on the ship, then headed out to try to see two endemic parrots, Red-winged and Imperial. The latter is much larger, appearing all dark, and is critically endangered.

We headed to the mountains, where a short hike took us to a lookout with a good view of the valley below. We saw Red-winged Parrots almost immediately, but no Imperials showed

up. The schedule called for us to return to the ship for lunch. "Forget lunch!" we cried. Most of stayed at the lookout and were ultimately rewarded with a distant scope view of the Imperial Parrot preening.

Meanwhile, the forest was full of lifers. 13 of the 23 species we saw that day were new for us. The best was the Purple-throated Carib. We tried many times to get a photo of this bird that shows all the colors. Linda finally managed on the next day, on Guadeloupe.

Late in the afternoon, fortified with some snacks, we returned to the ship in time for a fabulous dinner, where we were invited to the Captain's table. Our travel instruction indicated that we should bring a coat and tie for occasions such as this. The would take up too much packing space, so I settled on an old *guayabera* that once belonged to my father. Apparently, it was formal enough. (More on this later.)



February 14: Guadeloupe



These two photos are two of the best of the trip. Linda snapped both in a Botanical Garden on Guadeloupe where we finished a day of birding.



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Purple-throated Carib, one of the few hummingbirds with iridescent wings.

Notice the wonderful purple color of the throat for which the bird is named, together with the turquoise wings and blue on the rump. The black color turns deep green in the right light. Altogether a stunning bird.

The birding turned up three new species

for me and one more for Linda. The Bridled Quail-dove was the most beautiful bird of the day, but difficult to photograph, especially as it was raining when he ventured out of the forest.

The *half bird*, that is one seen by only one of us, was another skulker, Forest Thrush. This bird popped into view briefly, only to disappear just as quickly. Finally, another birder found it in a scope, and we lined up for a look. I was next in line, when a woman who didn't realize that we were in a queue jumped in front of me. I didn't say anything, even when she said, "Ah. There it is. Fabulous. Oh, it just flew." It wasn't seen again that day. Bummer.

One bird we saw almost every day on the trip was the Bananaquit, a small warbler-like bird that isn't a warbler. Linda got a nice photo of one working on a banana plant.

Every island has its own subspecies of Bananaquit, with some subtle variations. This one, for example, has a dark gray throat and a tiny red dot at the base of the bill. Many subspecies lack the red dot — and others have a bigger one — while the color of the throat varies from light gray to almost black.

February 15, 2016: Martinique

Like Guadeloupe, Martinique is a French island. While it has a large measure of autonomy, it is legally part of France, with its own representatives in parliament and the senate. All French islands in the Caribbean benefitted from the so-called [Banana Wars in the 1990s](#). The EU and the USA fought in the WTO over the preference given to bananas from former EU colonies, such as these two islands. Independent countries, such as St. Lucia and St. Vincent, suffered as their bananas couldn't find a good market. It took six years for the case to be resolved. The US finally pushed France to come to the table by imposing ruinous tariffs on Camembert cheese and other luxury items.



© 2016 Linda Hargrove

Bananaquit on a banana plant

Meanwhile, as part of France, the islands seem to be thriving. Infrastructure on both islands was better than on other islands. I suspect that a large amount of French money flows into the islands.

We went to a large park with some ruins where we quickly found the our only lifer of the day, White-breasted Thrasher. Like other Thrashers, this bird spent most of its time hiding in the forest and singing loudly, challenging you to find it. Fortunately, it behaved better today, and we had 4-stars views.



Anole Species on Martinique

We spent the rest of the morning in a fruitless search for the Martinique Oriole, which was spotted by a lucky few, but not by us. Instead, we focused our attention of some [Anoles](#) in the area. I hope you like lizards, because we have a ton of photos to share. This is probably the prettiest of the bunch.

I saw a sign in the forest telling about the anoles. It read, “*C’est aisé et drôle a observer les Anolis quand ils roquent sur les arbres.*” That has a couple of words not in my French vocabulary. The first, *aisé*, sounded like the English *easy*, and that made perfect sense in context. Of

course, French already has a word for easy, *facile*, so I wasn’t sure if I was missing something. I asked some locals and learned that the word does mean easy, but with a connotation of being well set, as in our expression *Easy Street*. The second word, *roquent*, proved more difficult. I asked for a translation, but no one could give me a good one. Finally, it dawned on me that the word was another English borrowing for *rocket*. So the sentence can be translated (freely) as “It’s easy and fun to watch the Anoles as they rocket thru the trees.”

Now, France has a special body, *L’Academie Francaise*, charged with keeping the language pure by forbidding Americanisms from creeping into the noble tongue. I’m confident they would not approve of these two additions, which shows that the French Caribbean *Departments* are somewhat different from the ancestral homeland. Of course, they also use a patois (a word we borrowed from French) that I found incomprehensible.

Supporters of Puerto Rican independence, as opposed to statehood, should spend some time in the Lesser Antilles.



February 16, 2016: St. Lucia

Another short sail during the night took us to the island of St. Lucia, pronounced *Loosha*, where we had another nice day chasing endemics. After Dominica, St. Lucia has the most endemic species of any of the Lesser Antilles. We set out before dawn to get to a lookout where we could search for the St. Lucia Parrot. This had the nice side benefit of giving us a good look at the Sea Cloud at night, with lights on the masts.

We wound up adding six new species to the list, but none of them provided a nice photo.

One interesting aspect of these islands is the hawk population. It is easy to identify any *Buteo* species that turns up: they are all Broad-winged Hawks. From the overlook, we had several wonderful views from above of these birds soaring over the canyon. Usually, we see the birds from below, so this was a nice treat.



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove
Caribbean Pewee

Besides the Parrot, we spotted the curious Gray Tremblor, a bird that does indeed tremble. We also saw the cute St. Lucia Warbler as well as both male and female St. Lucia Oriole, and a curious little finch, St. Lucia Blackfinch, which we were lucky to see at the start of our hike. The blah Antillean Euphonia (a female) completed the list. The only bird we managed to photograph was the St. Lucia subspecies of the Caribbean Pewee, which will probably be split in the future.

He seems to be as interested in us as we were in him.



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove
Sea Cloud at Anchor off St. Lucia

One the way back to the ship, we stopped to capture this shot showing the Sea Cloud at anchor in the harbor with a small city on the shore.

Then it was on to our final island, St. Vincent.

As we set sail in the afternoon, a member of the kitchen staff, a Filipino, approached me. “You are the man who wore that wonderful guayabera earlier.” I admitted that I was indeed that person and told the story of the shirt. My father acquired it in the 1970s. If I recall the story correctly, the Filipino ambassador to Australia gave the garment to my father, who was the US ambassador to Australia at the time. When my father died, I inherited the shirt as neither of my brothers could fit into it. I love the shirt, which is reserved for special occasions such as the dinner at the Captain’s table.

My new Filipino friend told me more about the shirt, which he described as *elegant*, and reserved in the Philippines for special occasions. He claimed that such shirts were woven from fibers taken from pineapple plants, which give it a nice sheen. He told me he felt so proud to see one of his country’s products worn on the ship and assured me that I was the best dressed person on board that night.

February 17, 2016: St. Vincent

Besides another endemic parrot, we had a target bird on St. Vincent, Whistling Warbler. We learned that to have any chance at all to see this bird, we had to get up early again and ascend to the top of a mountain. “It’s a good trail, consisting of about 200 steps.” Hard core birders, such as Linda and me, opted for the early departure and hike. Less ambitious birders, such as some friends whose name we will not mention, left on a later departure which promised a less arduous hike.

We hiked — in the rain — up quite a few more 200 steps, though no one thought to count them. We all made it to the top, where the Whistling Warbler rewarded us by showing up soon, a female and a juvenile, no male, but we were delighted. On the last trip, the group spent three hours (!) searching for it. The St. Vincent Amazon also provided us with an excellent view early, so we started down the mountain satisfied, completing a long loop. During the previous trip’s search for the warbler, the group traversed the loop three times. We were glad we didn’t have to do that, especially when the light rain turned into a brief but torrential downpour.



This is the dry season in the Caribbean. Usually, this means no rain at all. However, the El Niño event in the Pacific affects the weather here, producing out of season rain. We welcomed the rain, but would have preferred it as a slightly different time.

We stopped in a Botanical Garden, where I burned a lot of pixels trying to capture an image of an anole with an interesting blue around the eyes. I finally managed this one.

The trip on the Sea Cloud ended with another dinner, with a suggested dress of “elegant.” Fortunately, I knew just what to wear.

Tally for the Lesser Antilles:

- Total Species and Subspecies: 79
- Lifers: 29 for Jim, 30 for Linda

February 18, 2016: Barbados to Trinidad

We disembarked early and headed to the airport, arriving with plenty of time before our scheduled 10:30 am flight to Trinidad via Grenada. We were about to learn of the peril of flying on *Liat*, which seems to deserve its reputation as one of the worst airlines in the world. We learned that the flight was delayed shortly after we left the VIP lounge in time for boarding. I don't know why airlines wait until the last minute to post delays. We had paid to get into the club, but now were committed to waiting with the *hoi polloi*.

We waited for more than *three hours*.

Finally, we took off, skipping an intermediate stop on Grenada and heading directly to Trinidad. We learned that the problem was a flight attendant who had food poisoning, and a search for a replacement took some time. Then, the plane needed to be flown in from Martinique. Considering what the flight attendant did, showing us how to fasten the seat belt and put on the life preserver, I thought we could have gotten along without one. I would have been happy to give the safety demo. I felt really sorry for the few passengers who wanted to go to Grenada. One poor woman with a sick child had expected to be on Grenada about noon, but now would be lucky to get there by 9:00 pm. I will always look for alternatives to *Liat* in the future.

We did eventually get to Trinidad, where we were met by our local guide, Mahense (sp?) whose name was pronounced something like Ma-heesh. He turned out to be a terrific guide. We arrived at Asa Wright, our home for the next five days, in time for a quick freshen up before dinner.

February 19-25, 2016: Asa Wright

This was a wonderful stop, producing some of the most spectacular bird sightings of the entire marathon sweep, and the single best sighting for the entire trip. Rather than go day-by-day, I focus on the different areas we visited.

The Famous Veranda

The veranda on the back of the main building at Asa Wright overlooks a number of feeders, some for hummingbirds, and others with fruit for honeycreepers and similar birds.



Ruby-topaz Hummingbird, by Barry Zimmer

The hummingbirds were spectacular. My favorite, sometimes described as the most beautiful hummer in the world, the **Ruby-topaz Hummingbird**, showed up several times. The male gets its name from the colors reflected by the feathers, which show red and gold (that is, ruby and topaz) depending on the angle of incidence. This photo, by Barry Zimmer, one of the tour leaders, shows both colors as the male feeds of a flower in the garden below the veranda.

Red-rumped Agoutis appeared every morning as we sipped coffee before breakfast to scavenge whatever fruit had been left by the birds. I found them cute and took several photos. Here is one of them:



Red-rumped Agouti, Dasyprocta leporina

Linda's favorite hummingbird, and one that was high on everyone's list, was the cute [Tufted Coquette *Lophornis ornatus*](#), one of the candidates for the title of Second Smallest Bird. Everyone agrees that the Bee Hummingbird from Cuba is the smallest, but there is considerable controversy about the runner-up. The argument revolves around what measurement to use.

Whatever, this Coquette is a wonderful bird to watch.

Several males frequented the feeders, but moved to fast for a good photo. I downloaded one from the web. It was taken by Steve Garvie from Dunfermline, Fife, Scotland. Click the photo to see the original image.



Tufted Coquette from Wiki Commons web site

Linda managed to get this nice photo of one of the frequent visitors, [Copper-rumped Hummingbird, *Amazilia tobaci*](#).



*Copper-rumped Hummingbird, *Amazilia tobaci**



If Hummingbirds aren't enough to wow you, take a look at this Tegus Lizard, one of two that frequented the feeders daily. This creature is about 2' (60cm) long. This one is re-growing its tail.



Then, there was this bird, a Spectacled (or Bare-eyed) Thrush, a mostly nondescript brown bird, but with an amazing yellow eye ring.

We also had some interesting creatures around the lodge and actually inside one of the cabins. The first, a small snake that looks a lot like a Fer-de-lance but isn't. The common name is [False Fer-de-lance, *Xenodon rabdocephalus*](#).



This weird lizard, a [Turnip Tail Gecko, *Thecadactylus rapicauda*](#) lived in our cabin. A Google search turned up offers of these guys for sale, so I presume people keep them as pets.

This one is showing off gecko's amazing ability to cling to a vertical wall, or in this case, two walls meeting at a corner.



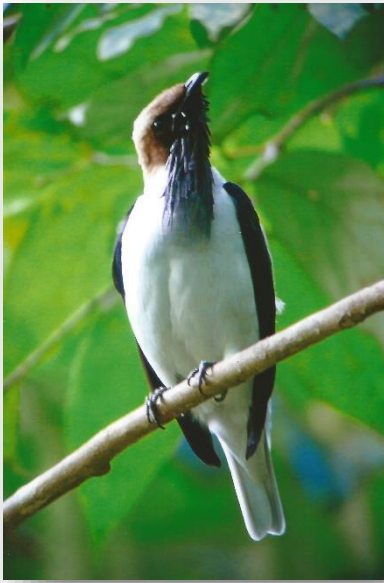
False Fer-de-lance

Turnip-tailed Gecko

The Forest: Bellbirds and Manakins

We didn't spend the entire day on the veranda, though that was tempting. We ventured into the forest to look for some special birds.

The first of these we found was the Bearded Bell-bird, a strange looking bird with weird wattles on the face of the male. These birds are much easier to hear than see. In fact, an explanatory sign along the trail claimed that they are the loudest of all birds, and that the males spend 87% of the daylight hours calling. The call does indeed echo for a long way, as we discovered when we tried to find one. We walked a lot farther than I expected, but finally had some excellent looks at a male as it "sang."



Bearded Bellbird, by Barry Zimmer

Barry Zimmer managed to get a good photo by digiscoping, aiming his iPhone thru the eyepiece of the scope to get a photo. A couple of days later, Linda and I walked down the trail by ourselves. She managed to



Male Bearded Bellbird, by Me

spot a Bell bird, which impressed me. I managed to get a decent photo to add to the collection. . Both guides, **Barry Zimmer** and **Rafael Galvez**, have amazing hearing and ability to locate birds by sound.

Nearby, were two *leks*, where White-bearded Manakins and Golden-headed Manakins were performing. The White-bearded Manakins jump back and forth on a small branch, clapping their wings together while they do it, making a sound like popcorn popping. The wing click is much too fast to see with your naked eye, but some researchers using very high speed cameras have been able to capture it. Golden-headed Manakins do a Michael Jackson moonwalk on a small branch. They weren't showing off when we were there.

Unfortunately, getting a good photo of these displays is next to impossible. At least, it was beyond my ability. On the afternoon when we walked down by ourselves, we were treated to a fabulous show by 8-10 White-bearded Manakins from a distance of about 3m (10'). We stood mesmerized while they practiced their act. Then a female, a small drab thing, showed up. The dominant male immediately flew to her side and began popping and jumping over her several times. Then he fluffed up all his feathers and rattled his wings in front of her. Apparently, it wasn't good enough. She gave the Manikin equivalent of a sniff and flew off.

At that point, I cursed myself and set up the camera for video. After some fiddling, I managed to get it focused on a male manakin, who decided that he'd done enough for one day and simply rested on the branch. We still awarded the sighting a 5+ rating. Here's a YouTube video of the display, taken by a professional:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUYbOEhe0dQ>.

And a video of the Golden-headed Manakin "dancing." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=231rIIHH3uU> This video is a bit shaky.

The Famous Oilbird Cave



Oilbirds, *Steatornis caripensis*, are very interesting creatures. Feeding exclusively at night on fruit, they are the only echo-locating birds in the Western hemisphere. We had glimpsed one years ago in Ecuador but wanted a better look. We got one thanks to a cave on the property where they roost and nest.

The cave is only available on certain days, and you have to be accompanied by one of the guides from the center to make sure you don't do anything foolish, or fall on the way down and back. We did get a good look at a bird sitting on a nest in the cave:

Day Trips from the center



Trinidad Piping-guan, *Pipile pipile*

We made several trips from the center, visiting most of the island in the process. Some of the best sightings from these excursions were insects rather than birds, but we have some bird photos to show you first. Here is a photo of the Trinidad Piping-guan, taken by Barry Zimmer. This bird is alleged to be tasty, which is one reason there are so few of them around. The size of a turkey, it doesn't fly much, though this one did make a display flight accompanied by a wing rattle while we were watching, earning it a 5-star rating.



Whimbrel

Whimbrels are not rare birds. We have seen them many times in the Bay Area

as well as Texas.

However, they are always interesting.

On a beach, we saw several, some so close that we were able to get a good photo. That is rare.

Blue-headed Parrots, *Pionus menstruus*, is a common pet shop parrot. Despite this, they seem to be doing well in the

wild. We saw a small flock, and got a photo of two of them:



Blue-headed Parrots

The stars of our expeditions from the center included the fabulous [Caroni Swamp](#), where thousands of egrets and other birds, especially **Scarlet Ibis**, come to roost at sunset. Several attempts to capture this spectacle in a photo failed to deliver anything suitable for this report. [Sigh!]

We had to be satisfied with a shot of crabs climbing a tree along the canal leading to the main swamp area. Turns out tree-climbing crabs are fairly common, but we loved watching them.



We had some interesting butterflies and a familiar dragonfly to help assuage our pain at missing a photo of the Scarlet Ibis. This Glass-wing Butterfly was my favorite. Here are two photos of the same individual taken from two different angles.



The orange edging of the wings completely disappeared when I took the second shot.

Finally, here is the dragonfly that looks *very* similar to a Roseate Skimmer dragonfly that we have in Texas.

After about a week Trinidad, it was time to head on. Due to a scheduling hiccup, we had a day to kill somewhere. I convinced Linda to stay in Florida for the day, so we could return to Everglades National Park, where we first learned to appreciate the beauty of birds and other creatures.

As it turns out, **Rafael Galvez**, the second leader for Trinidad, lives in Homestead, FL, about an hour south of Miami and right on the way to the Everglades. As Rafael prepared to leave a day earlier than we did due to a scheduling conflict, he said, "If any of you are in South Florida, give me a call." Linda replied, "Well, as a matter of fact, we are going to be there tomorrow."

So, we agreed to do some quick birding in the area and have dinner at one of the Cuban restaurants nearby.



Tally for Trinidad:

- Species and subspecies: 184
- Lifers: Jim and Linda: 9

Running Totals:

- Species and Subspecies: 246
- Lifers: Jim: 38
- Linda: 39

February 25-27, 2016: Miami, FL

We spent the 25th traveling, with all the hassles that entails. Departure and the flight to MIA were uneventful, even on time. Then we rented a car, which took forever and resulted in the now-standard upgrade because the vehicle we had reserved was unavailable. Finally, we had wheels and transferred to a generic Best Western motel near the airport. There we waited for our room to be ready. We did arrive earlier than the specified 3:00 check-in time, but usually some room has been cleaned up. Not this time.

After finally getting into our room, we did chores:

- Wash and dry a load of laundry. Luckily, the laundry room was on the 7th floor near our room.
- Call everyone, since we now had good phone connections.
- Backup photos to the cloud, with a good internet connection.

You get the idea.

Following a brief nap, we considered where to go for a meal. A tapas bar in the hotel tempted us, and we succumbed. Turned out to be a good choice, especially with a couple of *mojitos* to lubricate everything. Then we turned in, with plans to get an early start in the morning to head to the 'glades.

We wound up heading out even earlier than planned. I forgot to adjust the alarm clock for our new time zone and didn't realize my mistake until we were in the car ready to leave. Then I noticed that the clock said 4:48. Well, it was too late to change, so we headed out planning to find some place for breakfast in Homestead. Most places were closed; we finally settled on IHOP for one of their signature meals.

We noticed changes to Everglades NP as soon as we entered. Everything was newer and more modern, but not necessarily better. We stopped at Anhinga Trail, which was *Anhinga Pond* in 1971. We both remembered standing on the boardwalk and seeing many lovely birds and an alligator in the small pond. Now, there was a lot more water, but vastly fewer birds.

Well, except for the Black Vultures hanging around the parking lot. A photographer warned us to cover the car with one of the tarps provided by the Park Service. Otherwise, we could expect all the rubber to be destroyed. We followed his suggestion and thought it was worth a photo. This is all new, apparently dating from a recent hurricane that left lots of food in the area for the vultures. They got used to hanging around and looked for new things to eat.



Black Vultures eyeing rental car

We walked the length of the boardwalk, a loop less than a mile, and found some birds, but not many. Our favorite was this Purple Gallinule.



Purple Gallinule

In 1971, this was one of the “trigger birds,” something so special that it got us started birding. We were glad to find this one walking on the lily pads. Two photographers in the area were glad also, when we told them where to look.

We drove all the way to the end of the road, a marina where there used to be a motel. We had stayed at the motel when we first visited. It was damaged in a hurricane and has never reopened.

All in all, our visit was something of a disappointment. We learned that the water levels in the marsh were much higher than usual, the reason the birds were elsewhere. Later still, we learned that we had failed to check Paurotis

Pond, where we could have seen Roseate Spoonbills, a species that eluded us for the entire trip.

We stopped briefly in one of the campgrounds, where an unfamiliar call intrigued us. It turned out to be an old friend we hadn’t seen in quite a while, a [Northern] Cardinal singing differently. We miss this colorful backyard bird.

Following a suggestion by our friends the Cloudmans, we stopped at the Deering Estate on the way back to Miami hoping to see some Manatees. We spent some time on a docent-led nature walk, and then found the Manatees, three adults and a young one, just where they were supposed to be. The surface of the water was too choppy to get a decent photo.

We met Rafael Galvez at our motel in time to go see two introduced species that the ABA (American Birding Association) has decided can be counted on our ABA list. One of these was the White-winged Parakeet, a species we saw in Brazil in 1985 in what was arguably its natural habitat. Today, the bird exists mainly as an introduced species due to escaped pet birds. It is critically endangered in its native area. We drove to a busy intersection where several palm trees by a bank serve as nighttime roosts for the birds.

Then, Rafael told us that following recent splits of the [Purple Swamphen \(*Porphyrio porphyrio*\)](#) into many different species, we could add a lifer, the [Gray-headed Swamphen \(*Porphyrio poliocephalus*\)](#), a natural resident around the Caspian Sea. It turns out these birds are famous. When we mentioned the sighting to other birders, they replied, “Did you see them in the pond near Dolphin Mall?” Well, yes, we did. They look like a Purple Gallinule on steroids, with the advertised gray heads. Tick!

We finished with a nice Cuban meal at [Café Versailles](#), one of the oldest Cuban restaurants in the Little Havana area of Miami. It was a fun way to end our brief sojourn in South Florida. The next day was another travel day, to Puerto Rico.

Tally for Florida:

- Species and Subspecies: 29
- Lifers for Jim and Linda: 1 (Gray-headed Swamphen)

Running Total

- Species and Subspecies: 261
- Lifers: Jim: 39, Linda: 40

February 27-March 4, 2016: Puerto Rico

We started the *serious* part of our birding trip with a visit to Puerto Rico with Wings Birding Tours, a company we had not traveled with previously. We weren't exactly sure how it would be different from VENT. We found one difference when we arrived in Puerto Rico hoping to find someone with a sign saying "Hargrove" or "Wings" waiting for us. Nope. The tour begins "at our hotel." Unfortunately, the last minute instructions had not arrived in the mail before we left for Barbados, and I had neglected to ask for emailed versions.

We stood around near the taxi ramp while I waded thru numerous emails from Wings about the trip. Finally, I found an email from last October saying that the hotel was Hampton Inn and Suites. I called them and learned that they were expecting us, so we hopped into a waiting cab for the short ride over there. The hotel looked like a typical Hampton Inn on the mainland, and operated just like one. We checked in quickly and proceeded to the pool area where free rum drinks were being poured. We took two and sipped while lounging in the hot tub. Then, we met the rest of the group for dinner.

One member of the group was Wim Vader, whom we had met on a tour of Thailand a few years ago. His last name is pronounced like Darth Vader, which makes it easy to remember. The group consisted of two women, Diane and Janet from Tucson and Gail from San Jose, plus Wim and us, with **Gavin Bieber** as leader, a nice small size. Without nametags, though, it was two days before we had all the women's names sorted out.



Red-legged Thrush [Puerto Rico Race]

We spent our first day on the island driving from San Juan to the small town of Hateli, our base of operations for several days. Before we left, Linda took this photo of a Red-legged Thrush right outside our hotel. It may be split from the one we saw in Cuba. It does look different, but has the same red legs.

The drive produced three Puerto Rican endemics, a nice start to our search. One of these, Puerto Rican Woodpecker even provided an automatic 5-star sighting to the list.

The main reason to visit Caribbean Islands, and the Greater Antilles in particular, is to see species *endemic* to each island. The larger islands have quite a few of these, and as Linda put it, "We want to see as many endemics as possible." She added, "We want to see them well."

Some specific endemic species are the Todies. We had seen the Cuban Tody on — wait for it — Cuba. There are four more: one on Puerto Rico and Jamaica, and two on Hispaniola. We, I especially, wanted to see all of them. Cute and active, with characteristic buzzy calls, they are not usually hard to see and fun to watch. Some are easy to photograph, such as this Puerto Rican Tody.



Puerto Rican Tody

Differences between the species are minor. Here notice the color of the bill in particular and the yellow under the tail. You'll have opportunities on other Todies later.

We arrived at *Mary Lee's by the Sea* late in the afternoon after a full day birding. Our accommodations consisted of two cottages with two bedrooms each around a living and dining area and kitchen. We planned on some "self-catering," namely cooking our own breakfast. We stopped at a well-stocked market and bought

supplies for several days. My mushroom omelets which I fixed for two mornings, were a big hit with the Tucson ladies and us. The other cottage, less culinarily inclined, settled for cereal and toast.

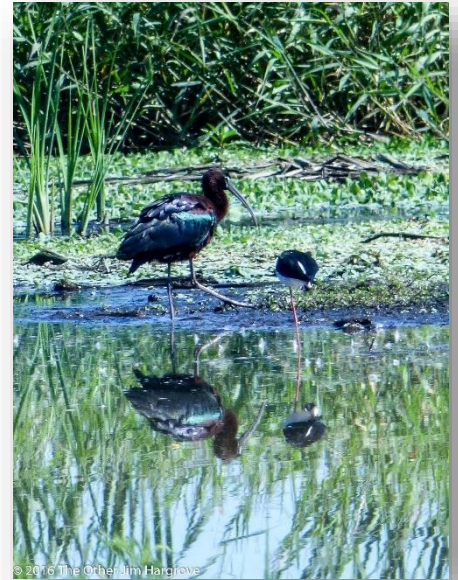
We spent several days exploring the island, which has fairly good infrastructure reflecting the boom years now sadly past. Besides birds, we saw and photographed many lizards and bugs. Rather than go day-by-day, I treat each of these separately.

Puerto Rican Birds



Pinkie

stilts and other shorebirds. This Glossy Ibis, nicely reflected in the water near a Black-necked Stilt added some contrasting color to the deep pink of the Flamingo.



Glossy Ibis with Black-necked Stilt



Troupial

This Yellow-shouldered Blackbird, a cousin of our Red-winged Blackbird, proved difficult to nail down. We finally saw a small flock near a neighborhood hardware store on our last full day of birding on the island.

Pinkie, as he is known, is the only American Flamingo on the island. He appeared here following a hurricane several years ago, and finding no others of his kind, took to hanging out in a small farm pond accompanied by

This Troupial, *Icterus icterus*, an oriole from South America introduced to the island, frequented a cactus patch right outside our cottage, providing many opportunities for a good photo. Linda snapped this one early in the morning before we set off for the day.



Yellow-shouldered Blackbird

Puerto Rican Lizards



Adult Male Green Iguana

Besides many different Anoles, we were lucky enough to get a photo of an adult male Green Iguana on our first day. The adults are not green, the name notwithstanding. This fellow was about 2' (60cm) long, counting the tail.

As for the Anoles, we have photos of a Bush Anole, a Trunk Anole, and Band-legged Anole. See if you can figure out which is which.



Puerto Rican Bugs

Let's start with spiders. We saw this lovely web — with the architect visible in the center — shimmering in the sun and couldn't resist trying to capture its beauty.



The larger spider is some species of *Argiope*, related to the common garden Orb-weaver, *Argiope aurantia*, we have in the USA. Notice the four zigzag patterns in the web. These *stabilimentums*, as they are known, are typical of the webs of this genus. Various explanations have been suggested for why the spiders include them. One I learned on this trip was an idea they might make the web easier for birds to see and avoid, saving the spider the work of reweaving the web. That's as good as any explanation. The name suggests the extra work is to provide structural support for the web, but that idea has largely been discarded.

Here are two shots of another *Argiope*, showing the web with the spider at the center, and a close-up of another orb weaver showing the lovely carapace. There is actually a second spider in the left-hand shot, a tiny Piratic Spider barely discernible at the top center of the web. This spider steals prey from the web of larger spiders.



Here's one final spider photo to prove that sometimes they can be beautiful. All of these spiders were near a trail thru the forest and easy to photograph.



Puerto Rican Butterflies and Moths

Linda snapped a photo of a moth she found in the Ladies Room with her cell phone. The other photo below



shows a “Cracker” butterfly. These always land upside down on the trunk of a tree, making them easy to identify. The males make a sound by snapping their wings together, which is where the name comes from.

We saw lovely Malachite Butterflies several times. We managed to get a photo of a beautiful specimen. Finally, another dragonfly that looks like a Roseate Skimmer.



Tally for Puerto Rico (birds only)

- Total Species and Subspecies: 123
- Lifers: 18

Running Totals

- Total Species and Subspecies: 335
- Lifers: 57 for Jim, 58 for Linda

March 5-12, 2016: Dominican Republic

For once, we had an easy travel day. We hopped on a Jet Blue flight and about an hour later we landed in Santo Domingo. It took quite a bit longer to rent vehicles and drive thru the horrendous traffic to our hotel in the historic section of the city. The hotel, Palace Boutique Hotel, snuggled into a block of old buildings, with rooms opening on several interconnected patios. While certainly picturesque, the hotel devoted too much time to remaining antique, at least for my taste. The receptionist at the desk took our passports, scanned them, printed the results, used the printout to look up a room on the computer, then thumbed thru a folder of room assignments to get the sheet for us to sign. I was feeling a bit sick and just wanted to lie down, but wound up waiting the standard hour before our room was ready. There, I took to my bed with a request for some soup for dinner. The soup was delicious.

Linda ate with the rest of the group on a lovely patio within the hotel. She reported that the prawns were delicious as well.

She is the only female birder on this leg of the trip.

The Botanical Garden

The next morning, we set off for our next destination, a lodge on the coast. First, though, we spent the morning walking along a creek that ran thru the Botanical Garden, finding many new birds in the process. Hispaniola, the largest of the three islands we visited, has the most endemics, including the ubiquitous [Palmchat](#), the only member of the family Dulidae, making it a target for birders worldwide. It proved to be very easy to see, but hard to photograph, despite their prevalence all over the island.

Several North American migrants, wood warblers that we seldom see as they don't often pass thru Texas, delighted us: Cape May, Worm-eating, and especially Prairie Warblers among them.

More cooperative were the Stolid Flycatcher and West Indian Whistling-duck, both of which posed for us.



Stolid Flycatcher



West Indian Whistling-duck

Neither of these species is a true endemic. The flycatcher can be found on other islands, as can the Whistling-duck. Both, however, were lifers for us. The Whistling-duck, in particular, made our short list of target birds for the trip. Critically endangered, it is restricted to a few Caribbean islands.



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove
Hispaniolian Lizard-cuckoo

We had been warned that the Hispaniolian Lizard-cuckoo would be difficult, so we were grateful that one decided to show up on the first day.

Other highlights included two Hispaniolan Parakeets photographed copulating for an automatic 5-star rating and a “condo” of Hispaniolan Woodpeckers. One palm tree contained at least seven occupied nest holes.

The Tody Hunt

I realize you are probably wondering if we managed to see the two Todies found on Hispaniola? Yes, we did, but managed to photograph only one of them, the Broad-billed Tody, which is more common than the Narrow-

billed Tody. In fact, we managed to get two great photos on different days. One is another candidate for best photo of the trip. I now have it on my laptop as the Desktop background photo.



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove
Broad-billed Tody



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove

LaSelle’s Thrush

A special bird in the DR is LaSelle’s Thrush. Critically endangered, comprising only a few hundred individuals, all living on one mountain range, the *Turdus* species sings only at dawn and is so secretive that locating it at other times is almost impossible. So, one morning, we arose at 2:30 and departed for the top of the mountain. Linda named the road as “the worst we have ever been on.” It is surely on the short list. The vehicles we had, allegedly all-wheel drive, labored up the steep, rocky incline, at times having to back up for a running start on a particularly bad spot. Linda and I occupied the backmost seat in the vehicle, which didn’t help, as it was hard to get into or out of.



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Old Moon and Venus at Sunrise

We were all ready for a break about halfway up when we stopped to troll for nightjars by playing recordings of their calls. This provided me an opportunity to capture this shot of the moon and Venus at sunrise. The crescent moon is an “old moon,” rather than the new one we see more often.

I took this with my cell phone.

The thrush cooperated beautifully, once we made it to the end of the road. We had superb views of two pairs singing and flying around. Gavin pronounced it, “The best look I have ever had.”

“A scarce and difficult bird seen well, a 5?” I asked Linda. “No,” she was argued. “When you come down to it, it’s just a fat robin with a fancy eye ring. 4.5.”

We ultimately settled on 4.9. We don’t have a photo.

Lizard Heaven

The DR has more endemic lizards than any other island we visited on this trip, more than 20 endemic species of Anoles plus other kinds of lizards. We don't have photos of all of them that we saw, but we have several interesting ones, which are shown below. IDs courtesy of Rich Hoyer.



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove
Hispaniolian Stout Anole, Anolis cybotes



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove
Bahoruco Stout Anole, Anolis strahmi?



© 2016 Linda Hargrove
Hispaniolian Stout Anole, Anolis cybotes



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove
Bark Anole, Anolis distichus

The final photo shows the smallest lizard in the DR on Rich Hoyer's thumb.



© 2016 The Other Jim Hargrove
Altavelo Dwarf Gecko, Sphearodactylus altavelensis

Dominican Republic Birds, besides the Todies



White Phase Reddish Egret

Reddish Egrets reside in the DR, but curiously, only the white phase. This is a good quiz bird, as you don't think of a bird this white being called "reddish."

The key field mark is the two tone bill, which shows up well in this photo.

One bird we saw well but failed to get a good photo, due to its habit of landing on a tall tree where it was backlit, is the tiny Vervain Hummingbird. This may be the second smallest bird, depending on who you consult. The claim is that this is the second smallest bird "based on average weight." Its loud voice makes it fairly easy to spot.

Here is a photo from the Wiki Commons,

[\[By Charlesjsharp - Own work, from Sharp Photography, sharpphotography CC BY-SA 4.0\]](#)

Linda managed to capture this photo of our two guides, where Gavin demonstrates one way to avoid getting "birder's neck."

Rich shows how you develop the syndrome.



Vervain Hummingbird



Dominican Republic Bugs

Here's an unidentified female dragonfly, one of the few bug photos from this portion of the trip, and finally, a *Gasteracantha* species spider photographed outside our room. It is not really flying, just suspended in mid-air.



Unidentified female dragonfly



Gasteracantha species spider

Tally for DR

This was the most tiring part of our trip by far. Lots of driving on bad roads to get to the right areas. However, it did produce a nice crop of endemics for the list.

- Species and subspecies: 122
- Lifers: 34 for both of us

Running Totals

- Species and Subspecies: 391
- Lifers: 91 (Jim), 92 (Linda)

March 12-19, 2016: Jamaica

Random Musings

Bidding farewell to DR, we headed for Jamaica, by way of Miami. We flew back in the morning, went thru immigration and customs, and then to our flight to Jamaica. The USA is one of the few places where you cannot transfer from one international flight to another without going thru this hassle.

We arrived at our hotel to find yet another mess, with our rooms not ready. This time, there was a good excuse. The longtime owner of the place died recently, and the entire staff had attended a memorial service that morning.



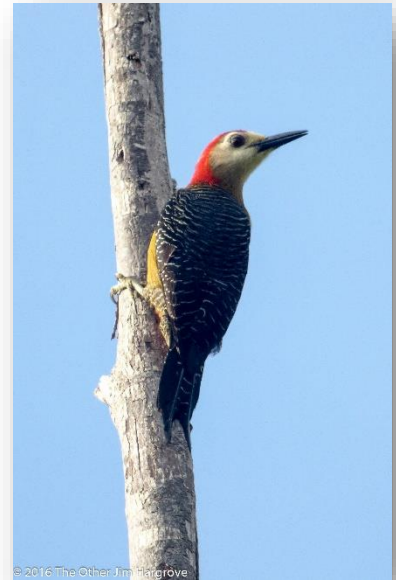
Our marathon quest began in earnest on the next day with the last of the Todies, Jamaican Tody. Yeah, I know, it looks like all the others. But cute, and easy to see, a nice combination for a lifer.

We walked around the area near our hotel in Montego Bay, getting a good shot of the Black-billed Streamertail, an amazing hummingbird that comes in two flavors, Black-billed and Red-billed, differing only in the color of the bill. Some authorities considered these the same species, but most think differently.



Place names form one of the delightful aspects of Jamaica. After staying one night at Toby's Resort in Montego Bay, we visited Green Hills Estates on the way to Goblin Hill, where we stayed several nights. Then we went to Starlight Chalet and Health Spa in the Blue Mountains before winding up at historic Marshall's Pen.

We had many nice views of Jamaican Woodpecker, another of the many *Melanerpes* species in the world. This may look familiar, reminding you of woodpeckers in the USA.



Ever wonder what an inchworm turns into? Here is an Avocado Beauty Geometer that Linda photographed.



Here's a mystery. The cute little bird below is called a Sad Flycatcher, but we don't know why. Its song is not particularly maudlin, and it acts like a normal flycatcher. Maybe all the good names were already taken.



Rich Hoyer, who is very interested in and knowledgeable about *lepidoptera*, pointed out this small Jamaican Crescent, *Antillea proclea*, with the distinguishing mark, the two tiny white dots on the forewings. We saw many more butterflies than we were able to photograph.

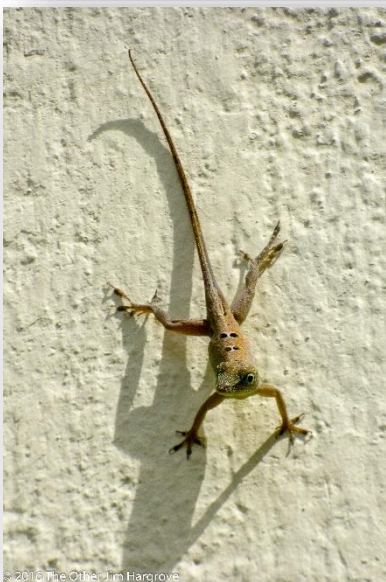
More Anoles

Jamaica has its own share of interesting lizards, and most are a lot easier to photograph than birds, or even spiders. One of the most interesting of these was a Jamaican Giant Anole. When we first saw this big guy, he looked like the photo on the left, mostly brown with darker stripes. Then, he got excited, either because of another Anole on the same tree, or perhaps because we were there. In minutes, he turned bright green. Then, he calmed down and returned to his brown state.



This immature Jamaican Turquoise Anole was common. We have several pictures of one. Notice that this one, like most we saw, lacked any turquoise on the tail.

Here is a picture of an adult, with a blue tail:



And another juvenile, just to prove how many of these we saw.



On the last full day of the tour, we were birding in the garden at Marshall's Pen when a small anole fell (jumped?) out of a tree into the leaf litter. Rich Hoyer managed to catch it and held it for all to see and photograph. It was a Twig Anole, one that lives on twigs about the size of your finger. Notice the purple color of the dewlap, which reminds me of a steak just a bit too rare.



We kept putting the little fellow back on the tree, only to have it jump or fall off again. Finally, it found a twig it liked and stayed there.

The second photo shows why this anole is seldom seen.



Last Minute Birds

We were near the end of the trip, and just a bit tired. Without a steady stream of lifers to spice things up, we looked for something interesting. We found it at Rocklands Bird Sanctuary, a private reserve on the way back to Montego Bay. The hummingbirds here, and there were lots of them, have been trained to land on your finger and drink from a small bottle. Linda was incensed that I failed to get a photo of her during all this. She nominated the experience as one of the highlights of the trip.



I did get one of another tour participant, Diana Hews.

Although it is hard to see in this photo, that's a Red-billed Streamertail on her finger.

A short walk from the main building took us to the day roost of a Northern Potoo, a very well camouflaged, nocturnal bird that likes to pretend to be part of a tree or post when not active.



Airport Birding

Turns out there is a pond on the airport where we spent a final few hours before flying out. This photo of a White-crowned Pigeon was the best of the trip, though we saw the bird several times on different islands.

And to prove that we don't ignore common birds, we snapped this picture of Smooth-billed Anis huddling for warmth in a gorgeous Bougainvillea Tree.



Tally for Jamaica:

- Species and Subspecies: 126
- Lifers: 31 for both of us

Complete Trip Totals:

- Species and Subspecies: 439
- Lifers: Jim 122, Linda 123

This exceeded by far even the most optimistic predictions for the trip. We give most of the credit to all of the outstanding guides we had on every stage of this marathon journey. Birders are almost always nice people, making these trips enjoyable. This Odyssey was no exception.

We have now *done* the Caribbean despite missing about 3-4 endemics. We move on to other areas, beginning with a planned trip to Japan in May-June.

Lagniappe



We managed to photograph this tiny (less than 10mm for the body) spider in our living room after we got home. Our granddaughter, Kiera, a budding entomologist, found it as we prepared to sit down for a family dinner.

Another beauty to share with you.