

These accounts of bird watching in Barbuda were written and posted online by visitors.

Birding in Barbuda

We had called ahead, about a week earlier, to reserve our flight to Barbuda and the low-altitude flight takes only 15 or 20 minutes, providing us with a look at a BROWN BOOBY. Quickly we found ourselves on Barbuda and fifty years back in time, according to most folks, but for us it was wonderful to spend a day on such an unspoiled paradise. Our guide asked what we would like to do, and of course I right away wanted to see the BARBUDA WARBLER, our target bird. George said he would take us there but what he wanted to do was to take us first to look at the caves on the northeast Atlantic coast, and then to the lagoon dock for a tour of the MAGNIFICENT FRIGATE BIRD colony. Already the slower Caribbean pace was taking hold, and it was easiest to just relax into the day and go with the flow.

We took a ride through the (only) town of Codrington, which was clean and quiet. There are only 1200 or so residents on Barbuda, we stopped at the restaurant to put in our lunch order for later, then it was off to the north coast. Codrington sits on the eastern/landward side of Codrington Lagoon, the largest lagoon in the Caribbean, I believe. The lagoon empties into the sea from its northern, and most secluded end. A couple of hurricanes in the mid-90's also opened up temporary channels through the barrier beach that separates the western edge of the lagoon from the Caribbean Sea, but these were now closed again. The hurricanes were apparently quite destructive, especially for the mangroves that are home to the frigate birds, and are still vivid in the minds of the people we spoke with. The island of Barbuda is flat, with the highest point being only 175 feet or so above sea level and also a long way from the town.

But all was perfect during our day on Barbuda, an idyllic day that I will always remember. We drove along a dirt road north to the cave area, seeing HELMETED GUINEAFOWL along the way. We climbed through a small Cave and emerged high above the water on a cliff overlooking the Atlantic. No signs of civilization in any direction. Beautiful RED-BILLED TROPICBIRDS soared overhead and came in for graceful, heart-stopping landings on the cliffs right below our feet. There were nice butterflies to see on the flowers at the top. And best of all, Humpback Whales were moving just offshore, and a pair actually breached, leaping completely clear of the water!

After a pleasant half hour or so here, we climbed back down through the cave to the van, and rode back down to town. George then took us to the dock and dropped us off for the Frigatebird tour. Visiting the colony turned out to be pleasant and interesting. We had George's cooler with us, so soft drinks or beers were available for the short boat ride. When we arrived at the colony, our guide and boatman jumped out and walked the boat to a little pole and tied us up for a short stay. The birds were in the midst of their breeding season, so there were some well-

grown chicks, and also a number of displaying males with their distended bright red gular pouches.

According to our guide, this is the largest known nesting colony of this species.

We hung around here for 20 minutes or so, then took a ride across the lagoon to the west side and grounded the boat for a pants-rolled-up landing.

The thin strip of sand that separates the lagoon from the Caribbean was a delicate shade of pink, and as soft as silk. This was the finest sand I have ever seen on any beach, anywhere. Looking north, it extended like a pink ribbon into the horizon, with no sign of civilization at all. The lagoon was on the right, a vivid green, and the Caribbean was on the left, the most amazing aqua blue. Overhead was the deep blue sky, filled with puffy white cumulus clouds. I have a photograph of this scene which is now the desktop photo on my laptop, the most perfect tropical island postcard. We skipped shells across the Caribbean and got our feet wet. At one point we watched a Kestrel zooming along above the water just offshore. It saw something and swerved, and suddenly its target, the tiniest little ANTILLEAN CRESTED HUMMINGBIRD, went screaming upward into the sky, quickly losing the kestrel. If ever I saw a hummingbird say, "Holy #@%!", that was it!

Soon we were back on the little boat and motoring our way east across the lagoon, where we docked and tipped our boatman and went on our way with George. We headed south out of town, and along the roadside south of the airport and south of town George pulled over and Joe and I got out. George gave us a small cooler with some water and instructed us to hide it under a nearby bush, which we did, and then he pointed out the features surrounding us and said that the Warblers could be found on either side of the road. Our side of the road was a fairly open field with a few clumps of trees, surrounded by dry scrub, with an embankment to the east a few hundred yards. Across the road was a fenced pasture, but we never ended up going across there. George said he would be back for us in about an hour to an hour and a half.

It was about 11:30 am and fairly hot. Still, there was more bird activity than I might have expected. Of course, our eyes and ears were peeled for our target bird! We walked to the embankment and up the slope to the top, which revealed a pond, probably used for the cattle we heard nearby. We headed toward the right atop the embankment, and hadn't gone more than a few feet before I heard what was unmistakably a warbler chip note, back down to our right in the scrub. A little pishing and squeaking and we were soon enjoying wonderful looks at our first BARBUDA WARBLER. It is a very attractive warbler, grey-green above and bright yellow on the face and below, with bright white wing bars. It feeds quite low in the scrub, it seems, and we got many superb looks at the bird down near ground level. Very satisfying.

We spent some more time wandering around this area, hoping for a look at the Berlepschii race of the Lesser Antillean Flycatcher. But, we could not locate one. We were confused at times by various call notes with which we were

unfamiliar and which took time to track down, especially those of the CARIBBEAN ELAENIA. We walked down around the south end of the pond and then back; the north end was a little marshy. We wandered back out to the road, but no sign of George yet, so we went back into the scrub, this time checking the margins and trails leading into the scrub on our left as we stood with our back to the road. We were rewarded with stunning looks at our life GREEN-THROATED CARIB, perched breathtakingly in the sunshine in a little clearing. The green and blue on the bird's breast was as clear and shimmering as the Caribbean Sea itself. Hummingbird #99 for me, and one of the most beautiful I have ever seen.

George arrived shortly, and we headed back to town for a great lunch. The day was really very good value, considering that we were chauffeured all over the island, fed, shown birds, and provided with snacks and drinks whenever we wanted from George's seemingly bottomless cooler. After lunch we headed for the beach. But first we drove past a site that George knew for shorebirds, the little spot was small but productive. Looking out the van windows at the edge beside us revealed RUDDY TURNSTONE, SANDERLING, SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER, and one WESTERN SANDPIPER with its larger, slightly drooped bill. On to the beach, where we spent the rest of the lazy afternoon, wandering up and down the edge. Nothing new here, but there were flowers, including aloes, blooming along the gardened edges of the building there, which gave me the chance to spend more time watching several ANTILLEAN CRESTED HUMMINGBIRDS. Our only worries were avoiding the spiny grass seeds on some of the beach grass. About 4pm we packed up and left the beach. George dropped us off at the airport, we waited a bit, the plane arrived, we boarded, and soon enough we were back on Antigua.

Barbuda Bird List:

Red-billed Tropicbird (6)
Brown Pelican (8)
Brown Booby (1)
Magnificent Frigatebird (300+)
Great Egret (2)
Cattle Egret (30+)
American Kestrel (3)
Helmeted Guineafowl (20+)
Ruddy Turnstone (25+)
Sanderling (14)
Semipalmated Sandpiper (10)
Western Sandpiper (1)
Sandwich Tern (6)
Royal Tern (5)
White-crowned Pigeon (4)
Zenaida Dove (12)
Common Ground-Dove (20+)
GREEN-THROATED CARIB (1)
Antillean Crested Hummingbird (12+)

Caribbean Elaenia (9)
Gray Kingbird (8)
Barn Swallow (15)
Yellow Warbler (2)
BARBUDA WARBLER (6)
Bananaquit (25+)
Black-faced Grassquit (5)
Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (1)
Carib Grackle (6)

Following the Warbler

Carib Aviation's 7:45 a.m. flight to Barbuda boarded at 7:20 and we were airborne by 7:35. Will wonders never cease in the Caribbean? Of all the flying I've done in the islands, this was only the second time ever that a flight left early. We met our guide John by the tiny Coddington airport terminal who took us two miles south of the airport to an area where **Barbuda Warbler** has been found in the past. He dropped us off at 8:00 and by 8:17 we had found the first of several warblers. With it safely in the book, I'm back to having only three island-specific endemics left to find in the Caribbean (Cuban Gnatcatcher, Oriente Warbler, Zapata Rail). Mark busied himself trying to get recordings of the Warbler's voice while I roamed around in the 12-20 foot high coppice. Someone who had seen the Warbler here earlier said the bird was in "white bark" forest. That white bark is on Jamaican Dogwood, the dominant tree in the coppice.

John picked us up at 9:00 and drove us to a boat on Codrington Lagoon. To use George's service's costs \$120 US per day (in 2004) This includes transportation to the Warbler area, a boat trip on the lagoon to the Magnificent Frigatebird colony, lunch, drinks, and any other driving around you want done. The Lagoon must be the largest lagoon I've seen in the Caribbean outside of Cuba. We sped across its waters for 15 minutes to the mangroves on the north side where we snaked our way up a channel to the edge of the Frigatebird colony. Parking the boat at the edge of a line of rope put up by the Barbudan government to keep boats back from the nests, we sat in the brilliant sun watching young Frigatebirds being fed by their mothers. About 7,000 pairs of Frigatebirds nest in the colony. This is the first and only Frigatebird nesting colony I've ever seen.

Back at the boat ramp, John took us to a flowering Agave plant just northeast of the settlement where Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, Bananaquit and Green-throated Carib were sucking nectar like crazy. While Mark did audio recordings, I stumbled around in the coppice, hearing two singing Barbuda Warbler, and a Mangrove Cuckoo.

We ate lunch at a restaurant that didn't have a sign saying it was a restaurant, then drove south along the main road to the two swank hotels at the south end of the island.. One of the hotels, the K Club, is where Princess Di used to hang out when she

came to the Caribbean. Rooms/ villa's here start at \$500 a night and go up to \$2,800 per night. My guess is that Di stayed in the more expensive villa. Nearby is the Coco Point Hotel with similar prices. I'm not sure what you get for the extra money paid for a room, but you certainly get privacy at those prices. We birded the abandoned salt pans next to the K Club finding Least Tern and Snowy Plover among others then walked to the entrance gate at the Coco Point Hotel. Here the guard let us walk out on the beach which has to be the most beautiful, most extensive, beach I've seen in the islands. Anywhere in the islands.

John drove us back to the Warbler spot and dropped us off about 1:45 with plans to pick us up at 4:30 for a return to the airport. Mark disappeared into the forest with his recording equipment and I walked around looking for other birds. A spot for the Warblers is easily found. Just about two miles south of the airport you will see an excavated wetland on the right (White-cheeked Pintail here). Directly across from that wetland there is a length of a huge pipe. Maybe 60 feet behind the pipe is another excavated wetland. Walk into the forest by the pipe. We had at least two singing Barbuda Warbler in the Acacia trees over the pipe. Walk and listen along any of the cattle paths into the forest. Barbuda Warbler's voice sounds like a combination of Yellow Warbler and Chestnut-sided Warbler. They sing loud and conspicuously and shouldn't be difficult to find.

Walking along one of the trails I flushed two Helmeted Guineafowl, which surprised me because I didn't think they could fly! Along the edge of the wetland I saw and heard one Lesser Antillean Flycatcher of the race *Berlepschii*. This race occurs only on St. Kitts, Nevis, and Barbuda. I walked south along the main road for a couple hundred yards then walked east (left) along a bulldozed trail that skirts the edge of the coppice and an adjacent pasture. I walked east for 20 minutes picking up at least 13 singing male Barbuda Warbler, one late Prairie Warbler, and flushed another Helmeted Guineafowl. Hearing that many singing warblers in the heat of mid afternoon suggests that there is a large number of Barbuda Warbler in proper habitats on the island.

John picked us up at 4:20 and took us back to the airport. The plane came in on time and we boarded for the 15 minute flight back to Antigua. Departing to the east we climbed quickly over the island then turned south toward Antigua. It was refreshing to see that once past the light development around Codrington, there is nothing but forest on this 68 square mile island. Just north of the K Club there are two large wetlands hidden in the forest. I'd bet they are the place to look for West Indian Whistling Duck. Unless something dreadful happens to Barbuda in the way of tourism development, the future of Barbuda Warbler habitat should be secure for a few more years. There are a couple of guest houses in Codrington also, but it's apparent that with the ease Barbuda Warbler can be found, all you need to do is fly over for a day trip from Antigua. The cost for John's services is money well spent. If nothing else, it's ecotourism money that helps support one family on the island. I told him how much I liked the island and hoped that it would never be developed like so many other West Indian islands have been. He said "we plan to keep Barbuda wild." I hope they succeed.