

Aruba, March 2003

Published by Surfbirds Admin (surfbirds AT surfbirds.com)

ARUBA: 23rd to 30th March 2003

by [Steve Mlodinow](#)

My wife and I spent 5 lovely days birding in Aruba at the end of March 2003. Below are some observations, comments, and suggestions.

For navigating about Aruba, I highly recommend the Berndston and Berndston map (www.mapmyway.com). The Birds of the Netherlands Antilles (Voous 1983) provides interesting status-and-distribution information, but the plates are somewhat antiquated. Also, this book is out-of-print and difficult to obtain. Hilty's (2003) Birds of Venezuela is an excellent resource regarding possible vagrants from South America.

Dollars are accepted everywhere, and seemingly every soul speaks English. We stayed at the lovely Bucuti Beach Resort at Eagle Beach (www.bucuti.com). The employees there seemed to live to make our lives cozy and pleasant. Also, being a small property, coming and going was easy. As an added attraction, it had a lovely beach, and the grounds served as a roost for **Carib Grackles** and **Shiny Cowbirds**. Iguanas prowled the grounds incessantly, engaging in entertaining head-bobbing and wattle-shaking battles. Just down the street was Dushi's Bagels, which opened at 6am (Mon-Sat) or 7am (Sun), providing delightful bagel-and-lox breakfasts early enough to get to most birding spots near sunrise. The sun was up from about 6:45 to 6:45, and no birding location was more than 30 minutes drive away. Aruba's moniker is "One Friendly Island" and that seemed utterly true. We usually felt most welcome and always felt safe. The lack of endemics or a substantial list may make Aruba seem like an unlikely birding destination, but if you want to take the family to a great vacation spot and get in some fun and interesting birding, I highly recommend this island. I owe many thanks to Eddie Massiah for encouraging me to give Aruba a try.

Birding Locations

Bubali: The Bubali Bird Sanctuary lies only ~5km north of Oranjestad on the west coast of Aruba. Highway 1 runs along the sanctuary's east side, a windmill (actually shipped from Holland) is on the north side, and the massive Wyndham Aruba is across the street from the northwest corner. There are several spots to check at Bubali. Going N from Oranjestad, you'll encounter a roundabout, with the right hand (eastward) road marked 'to Paradera'. Continue straight (north) to the first light. Turn left here, and a small sewage pond (Yes!) will be quickly visible on your right. This is a good spot for shorebirds (had two **Solitary Sandpipers** here among many **Lesser Yellowlegs** and **Black-necked Stilts**) and **White-cheeked Pintail**. We also had an **Ovenbird** in the brush nearby. There is much activity (and therefore, few birds) Mon-Sat, except for first thing in the morning. So come early or on Sunday.

From the sewage pond, continue westward. Just before the road ends in a "T", a gravel road leads off to the right into some trees. You can park here and walk almost the entire westside of Bubali. No water is visible, but passerines abound. We found two major rarities along this stretch - **Swallow-tailed Kite** and **Cape May Warbler**. We also had our only non-Spanish Lagoon **Ruby-topaz Hummingbird** here as well as **American Redstart**, **Hooded Warbler**, and **Northern Parula**.

Finally, from the north side, near the Dutch Windmill, one can access a viewing tower. Most of Bubali is now cattail marsh, with some patches of open water. There is little edge habitat. I sense this is a great change from the early heyday of this spot when lots of first records were recorded here. We did have a few herons, plus **Caribbean Coots**, moorhens, and up to 9 **Least Grebes**. **Neotropic Cormorants** roosted in some trees, topping out at 125 birds. Throughout Bubali, **Bare-eyed Pigeons** and **Eared Doves** are abundant, and this was the only spot we had **Groove-billed Ani**. **Blue-tailed Emeralds**, **Caribbean Parakeets**, **Tropical Mockingbirds**, **Northern Waterthrush**, **Golden Warbler**, and **Bananaquit** were common here. The only unusual waterfowl was a female **Lesser Scaup**. Interestingly, **Brown Pelicans** were foraged here in a manner resembling that normally associated with **American**

White Pelicans. We saw the ST Kite from this platform as well, and had at least 2 **Peregrine** and 1 **Merlin** here.

Salt pans: Palm Beach to Malmok: N of Bubali, on the eastside of hwy 1, between the high rise hotels and Malmok (a distance of ~2km), there are a series of salt pans. Previous visitors had found a number of shorebirds and terns here, but our visit was well into the dry season. Thus, these salt pans were almost entirely dry, though we did have a few shorebirds here.

Seabirds: Malmok to California Lighthouse: From just S of Malmok to the island's N tip lie several wrecks and rocky outcroppings. These consistently harbored a number of 'seabirds', including 100+ **Laughing Gulls**, up to 10 **Brown Boobies**, **Magnificent Frigatebirds**, **Cayenne Terns** (plus the occasional **Sandwich** and **integrated**), **Royal Terns**, and a couple early **Common Terns**. We had an **American Oystercatcher** near the N tip.

Tierra del Sol Golf Course (TDSGC): On the S edge of Malmok, hwy 2 runs east from hwy 1 (the hwy numbers are not marked, but there is a sign to 'Tierra del Sol Golf Course'). Go east for about .5 to 1 km, and the golf course entrance to the N will be evident. Ask at the pro-shop for permission to access the pond. Part of the pond can also be seen from a gravel road along the east coast. This road was accessed from near the base of the lighthouse. We then followed a series of gravel roads through some barren flats until we could see the pond on our right. This area was easily traversed by a small sedan.

This golf course was a vagrant magnet the likes of which I've never encountered. Consider the following list: **Little Egret** (1st record), **Northern Pintail** (2nd record), 5 **Green-winged Teal** (1st record), 2 **Southern Lapwing** (2nd record), and **Red-breasted Blackbird** (1st record). Some waterbird numbers of note here included 325 **Neotropic Cormorant**, 40 **Great Egret**, 30 adult and 19 young **Snowy Egret**, 20 **Green Heron**, 40 **White-cheeked Pintail**, ~100 **Greater Yellowlegs**, ~50 **Lesser Yellowlegs**, 20 **Stilt Sandpiper**, 60 **Semi-palmated Plover**, and 125 **Black-necked Stilt**. Some uncommon to rare species, not listed above, included **Least Grebe** (2), **Reddish Egret** (imm), **Northern Shoveler** (2 males), and **Collared Plover**. Per Floyd Hayes, it was an excellent winter for 'northern' ducks in the West Indies, perhaps partly explaining our success with this group.

Spanish Lagoon: A lush mangrove cut about 1 km long. To reach Spanish Lagoon, take route 4 into Santa Cruz. In town, you'll see a sign signaling a left turn to Arikok National Park. 2km past this sign there is a turnoff marked 'Frenchmen's Pass' to the left. Go left here and follow the road until you see the lagoon to your right. A short dirt track leads to a small parking lot on the lagoon's northwest side. Park here and follow the trail along the lagoon's edge. This trail will take you almost to the shore. The mangroves here are very birdy. In addition to the abundant **Golden Warblers** and **Northern Waterthrush, Blue-tailed Emeralds, Bare-eyed Pigeon, Caribbean Parakeets, Blue-tailed Emeralds,** and **Bananaquits** are thick. Our major rarity here was Aruba's first **Tennessee Warbler**. Other neotropical migrants included **Hooded Warbler, Northern Parula,** and **American Redstart**. Spanish Lagoon was our only location for **Belted Kingfisher, Gray Kingbird,** and **Black-whiskered Vireo**. We had at least 2 **Peregrine** here plus a **Merlin** (doves make good eating I'd guess). There were a few **N Scrub Flycatchers,** and we had several **Yellow Oriole** and **Ruby Topaz Hummingbirds** here.

A mesquite draw or two lead north from the Frenchmen's Pass road. This area had **Yellow Oriole, Troupial, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Northern Scrub Flycatchers,** and one **Rufous-collared Sparrow**.

Here (and elsewhere in Aruba) pishing worked really well. The **Golden Warblers** came in almost immediately, followed shortly by **Bananaquits,** with the waterthrushes "thwacking" loudly from cover. Hummingbirds, mockingbirds, and N Scrub Flycatchers also responded quite well. I think our success with neotropical migrants was directly due to our persistent pishing efforts. Interestingly, the birds learned quickly. Return visits, a day or two later, garnered only about 20% of the first-visit response to pishing (as measured by the number of birds coming into view; those that did come in a second time, however, also tended to come not as close and stayed not as long). A three to four day gap between visits brought the second-visit response rate up to about 50% of the first visit's response.

Arikok National Park: Arid desert. From Santa Cruz, follow signs to entrance, where a map can be obtained. The first gravel road to the left leads to a trailhead for the Cunucu Arikok trail. This is apparently the best birding in the park and was recommended by several previous

visitors. It did seem to have the best habitat in the park, but the birding here was fairly slow. We had scads of **Troupial**, a **Yellow Oriole** or two, several N Scrub Flys, and our only good view of a **Burrowing Owl**. The landscape is attractive.

On the road to Boca Prins (the main park road), about 1/2 way to the shore, we saw a draw to our left with a small grove or two of trees. There we had our only **Crested Bobwhite** and a **Rufous-collared Sparrow**. At Boca Prins, there is a dense grove of trees that looks really tasty but was birdless. Might be good during migration.

Species Notes

Pied-billed Grebe: one or two each at Bubali and Tierra del Sol Golf Course (TDSGC), including a young bird at Bubali.

Least Grebe: Up to 9 at Bubali (25 Mar) and 2 at TDSGC (28-30 Mar).

Neotropic Cormorant: max of 325 at TDSGC and 125 at Bubali on 28 Mar. None elsewhere.

Brown Booby: Always at least a couple at Malmok, with a max of 10 there 23 Mar. Had singles fishing off Eagle Beach on a couple evenings (nice hotel bird).

Green Heron: all Greens. Could not find a Striated, though we looked hard.

Reddish Egret: Immature at TDSGC on 23-25 Mar. Apparently uncommon in Aruba.

Snowy Egret: Breeding colony at TDSGC had 19 young (counted on 30 Mar).

Little Egret: 25-30 Mar at TDSGC. Breeding plumage bird. Videotaped. Description available. First Aruba record.

Northern Shoveler: 2 males at TDSGC on 23 Mar. Videotaped.

White-cheeked Pintail: Max counts of 30-40 at TDSGC and 40-50 at Bubali.

Northern Pintail: Male at TDSGC 23-30 March. Videotaped. 3rd Aruba record.

Green-winged Teal: Male first noted at TDSGC on 25 Mar; male and 3 females seen on 28 March. 2 males and 3 females on 30 March. Videotape. First Aruba record.

Lesser Scaup: female at Bubali 24-30 March.

Swallow-tailed Kite: videotaped hunting over trees at Bubali 25-30 March. First Aruba record.

Merlin: one at Bubali on 24 Mar and one at Spanish Lagoon 25 Mar.

Peregrine: At least 2 around Bubali/Eagle Beach; probably 3-4 there. At least 2 around Spanish Lagoon.

Crested Caracara: just a couple around Arikok and TDSGC.

Crested Bobwhite: one at Arikok

Caribbean Coot and **Common Moorhen:** plenty at Bubali and TDSGC. None elsewhere.

Southern Lapwing: Per A. Jaramillo, range rapidly expanding in S.A. with recent complete colonization of Trinidad and Tobago. Two where marsh met fairway at TDSGC. Second Aruba record.

Collared Plover: One at TDSGC on 28 March. Apparently predominantly a summer resident and rare this early.

Semipalmated Plover: A flock of 60 flew over TDSGC on 23 March.

American Oystercatcher: Apparently uncommon. 3 near Saveneta on 23 Mar and 2 at California Lighthouse 25 March.

Solitary Sandpiper: Apparently rare in Aruba, but common in Venezuela. 2 at Bubali 23-28 March.

Cayenne/Sandwich Tern: Always a few between Malmok and California Lighthouse. Mostly Cayenne, though one 'pure' Sandwich and several integrades noted.

Common Tern: Per Voous, quite rare as early as March. One at Malmok 25-30 Mar and another at California Lighthouse 28 March.

Bare-eyed Pigeon: Common at places with trees, such as Bubali and Spanish Lagoon. Less common, but still present at places such as Arikok and TDSGC.

Eared Dove: Everywhere. At outdoor restaurants, in the trees, flying overhead. Omnipresent. Seen on nest. One fresh juv.

White-tipped Dove: Least evident dove/pigeon. Seen at Arikok, Spanish Lagoon, TDSGC. Heard more often than seen.

Caribbean (Brown-throated) Parakeet: endemic race. common everywhere.

Groove-billed Ani: A few every time we visited Bubali. None elsewhere.

Burrowing Owl: Good view at one at Arikok. Endemic race.

Ruby-topaz Hummingbird: A real stunner. A few at Spanish Lagoon and one at Bubali. Some (imm males?) had a dark stripe down a pale front reminiscent of a GB Mango. This plumage is not shown in any guide I have.

Blue-tailed Emerald: Common, widespread, and confiding.

Belted Kingfisher: only one at Spanish Lagoon.

Northern Scrub-Flycatcher: Likes areas of cactus/mesquite. Most common at Arikok or the draws heading n from Frenchmen's Pass. Seen building nests.

Brown-crested Flycatcher: One at Cunucu Arikok and a few in the draws heading N from Frenchman's Pass. One along Spanish Lagoon itself.

Gray Kingbird: several at Spanish Lagoon.

Black-whiskered Vireo: several at Spanish Lagoon.

Tropical Mockingbird: common everywhere. sometimes even feeding in outside restaurants. Seen building nests.

Tennessee Warbler: one at Spanish Lagoon on 25 March; an Aruba first. Common winterer in northern Venezuela.

Northern Parula: Considered rare by Voous. Hilty (2003) lists only three records for Venezuela. On 23 March, we had 2 at Bubali, 4 at Spanish Lagoon, and 2 at the mangroves at Pos Chiquito. We had a third bird at Bubali on 25 March plus we refound one of the Spanish Lagoon birds on that date. Refound one at Bubali and 2 at Spanish Lagoon on 30 March. Total of at least 9 for the trip. Only one previous Aruba record.

'Golden' Yellow Warbler: Exceptionally numerous in mangroves and trees bordering Bubali. Also in small number around hotels and in xeric mesquite. When responding to pishing, often appeared in groups of three: an ad male, an ad female, and an imm. These little family groups would often squabble with each other. The males all had full chestnut caps and very bright yellow underparts with heavy chestnut streaking. The well-defined cap and intense yellow underparts were almost reminiscent of a Wilson's Warbler. The immatures were in varying states of molt and often had gray cheeks or gray on the underparts, the gray being a clear gray color that I've never seen in Northern Yellow Warblers. The females, plumage-wise, seemed indistinguishable from Northern Yellow Warblers. These birds did have shorter primaries than our Northern Yellows, but some of the longer-winged Golden Yellows seemed to overlap with some of the shorter-winged Northern Yellows I've seen in the US. All the Yellow Warblers that I took a close look at seemed to be Goldens.

Cape May Warbler: A vagrant in Aruba (Voous 1983) and considered rare in Venezuela (Hilty 2003). One on 24 March at Bubali. Videotaped. Only two accepted Aruba records.

American Redstart: Uncommon. Up to 2 different birds at Bubali and Spanish Lagoon.

Ovenbird: Vagrant in Aruba according to Voous (1983) and rare in Venezuela per Hilty (2003). One at Bubali 23 March. Only three previous Aruba records.

Northern Waterthrush: Quite common wherever water and trees occur together. Couldn't pull out a Louisiana.

Hooded Warbler: Vagrant according to Voous (1983) and only 5 records from Venezuela (Hilty 2003). Female at Spanish Lagoon on 23 March. Male at Bubali on 24-30 March. Only two previous Aruba records.

Bananaquit: Everywhere. Even in restaurants. Multiple birds building nests.

Rufous-collared Sparrow: A bird of xeric scrub. One at Arikok and one in mesquite near Frenchmen's Pass.

Black-faced Grassquit: Fairly common. A couple here, a couple there in a wide variety of habitats, including a cute pair taking handouts at a restaurant.

Red-breasted Blackbird: One videotaped at TDSGC on 28 March. Perched in dead branches above marsh next to two Barn Swallows. Range expanding in S.A. per Alvaro Jaramillo with increasing numbers in Trinidad and Tobago (F. Hayes). First Aruba record.

Carib Grackle: Common around hotels and in better vegetated neighborhoods. Otherwise scarce.

Shiny Cowbird: Seen hither and yon in small groups (up to 4 or 5), except roost at our hotel in Eagle Beach maxed out at 70 on 29 March.

Troupial: Gorgeous. Vocal. Fairly Common. Liked more xeric habitats, such as Arikok, though more widespread.

Yellow Oriole: A few at Spanish Lagoon, but more easily observed at Cunucu Arikok.