

## Jamaica trip report, January 2009

VLADIMIR DINETS

(written in February 2016)

In 2009 I spent 16 days in Jamaica. The main purpose of the trip was crocodile research along the coast, but I also had some time to explore inland habitats, and surprisingly saw 20-21 of 22 extant land mammals.

Despite having some of the world's highest deforestation and murder rates, Jamaica is a beautiful and reasonably safe country. Just stay away from poor neighborhoods of Kingston (Montego Bay is a more convenient base anyway) and be very careful driving on mountain roads. Most tourists never leave the seclusion of fenced-off beach hotels except by tour buses, so people in the interior seldom see foreigners and get really surprised and excited when you show up. Make sure somebody knows where you are if you go into wild caves.

Like the rest of the West Indies, the island has lost almost all of its non-flying terrestrial mammals. The only remaining one is the small **Jamaican hutia** (locally called *coney*), a shy nocturnal rodent now mostly confined to tower karst areas and high elevations. I was lucky to see one in Blue Mountains National Park on a forest trail that branches off Hwy B1 at 18°05'03"N 76°43'08"W. According to IUCN map, nowadays you have to hike a few km NE from there to get within range. Cockpit Country is said to be a much better area to look for coneys, particularly in places where dense forest grows on limestone with lots of holes, but I never saw them there.

For a mammalwatcher, the main reason to visit Jamaica is its spectacular bat diversity, with at least 21 extant species. Most of these are found in caves at least occasionally; contact Jamaican Caves Organization ([www.jamaicancaves.org](http://www.jamaicancaves.org)) for information and help with arranging visits to more remote caves. Identification keys, distribution records and lots of other information can be found in the excellent book *Bats of Jamaica* ([www.nsrl.ttu.edu/publications/specpubs/sps/SP48.pdf](http://www.nsrl.ttu.edu/publications/specpubs/sps/SP48.pdf)). The highest diversity is found in so-called "hot caves" with large mormoopid colonies; exploring them is always a fun adventure. You can see all or most of the island's cave-roosting bats by visiting just three cave systems: Windsor, St. Claire and Green Grotto. Plan on spending at least a full day exploring each of them, for some species aren't easy to find.

Windsor Cave has the largest colonies and twelve bat species (sharing the world record with Cueva de La Barca in Cuba). I found ten: **Antillean ghost-faced bat**, **Parnell's, sooty** and **Macleay's mustached bats**, **greater fishing bat**, **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bat**, **Pallas's long-tongued bat**, **Jamaican fig-eating bat** (rare), **Jamaican fruit-eating bat** and **Cuban funnel-eared bat**. See [www.jamaicancaves.org/windsor.htm](http://www.jamaicancaves.org/windsor.htm) for roosts description, and [cockpitcountry.com/windsorcave.html](http://cockpitcountry.com/windsorcave.html) for access details. I highly recommend staying overnight at the research station, particularly if you are also interested in birds, herps and other fauna.

St. Claire Cave is a difficult cave to explore, but, fortunately, the bats are mostly not too far from the entrance. The cave is said to have eleven species. I found nine: **Antillean ghost-faced bat**, **Parnell's, sooty** and **Macleay's mustached bats**, **buffy flower bat**, **Jamaican flower bat** (a rare species not found in more recent visits to that cave), **Jamaican fruit-eating bat**, **Jamaican funnel-eared bat** and **Wagner's bonneted bat**. See [http://www.jamaicancaves.org/st\\_clair\\_060321.htm](http://www.jamaicancaves.org/st_clair_060321.htm) for access information.

Green Grotto Caves on the N coast (right on Hwy A1; <http://greengrottocavesja.com>) are very touristy, but still had nine species of bats when I visited: **Antillean ghost-faced bat**, **Macleay's mustached bat**, **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bat**, **Greater Antillean long-tongued bat**, **Jamaican fruit-eating bat**, **big brown bat** (local ssp. *lynni* is common only in these caves; don't miss it for it's likely to be split), and **Mexican freetail**. You have to arrange access to the parts outside the main tourist area to see them all.

I checked out a few other caves along the N coast, but found only **Jamaican fruit-eating bats** there.

Negril is a town near the W tip of the island where **Mexican freetails** roost in coastal cliffs. **Pallas's mastiff bats** roost in hollow palms in nearby Royal Palm Reserve.

Black River Great Morass is a large wetland near the S coast. I spent a week there and once was lucky to see a **Jamaican red bat** night-roosting on a tree trunk bent over a stream. **Pallas's mastiff bats** roosted in abandoned houses there. In the same area, Font Hill Wildlife Sanctuary near St. Elizabeth is a good place to see **greater fishing bats** feeding at dusk.

**Caribbean manatees** are very rare in Jamaica, but it is usually possible to see them at Alligator Hole (see [www.visitjamaica.com/canoe-valley](http://www.visitjamaica.com/canoe-valley)). This location is also known to be used for drinking by **Shaw's mastiff bats**, rare in Jamaica; I saw a few freetails of the right size there but can't be sure about the species.

There are some interesting cetaceans in Jamaican waters, but I never had a chance to look for them.