

Field Guides Tour Report

Thanksgiving in Jamaica 2019

Nov 24, 2019 to Nov 30, 2019 Cory Gregory & Dwane Swaby

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Jamaica has such a long list of amazingly beautiful and colorful birds that it's hard to pick a favorite. Close to the top of the list however surely was this Jamaican Spindalis, a species only found in Jamaica. Photo by guide Cory Gregory.

Sitting between South America and Cuba, the Caribbean nation of Jamaica was a fantastic place for us to enjoy the warm weather, the plethora of unique and fascinating birds, the relaxed lifestyle, and escaping the holiday hustle and bustle. With the birdy and historical Green Castle Estate as our home base, we made a variety of daytrips and had the luxury of returning back to the same place every night!

Our day trips took us to a variety of birding hotspots and between them all, we saw a vast majority of the avifauna that this island nation has to offer. Even in driving from Montego Bay to Green Castle on our first day, we were surrounded with attention-grabbing species like Magnificent Frigatebirds gliding overhead, Zenaida Doves sitting on the wires, and even a small gathering of the rare West Indian Whistling-Ducks in Discovery Bay!

Our first day at Green Castle was our first foray into the forests and we quickly connected with a fun collection of endemic species like the showy Streamertail, Jamaican Woodpecker, Sad Flycatcher, White-chinned Thrush, Jamaican Spindalis, Orangequit, and many others. And who can forget the amazing day-roosting Northern Potoo!

The second full day we ventured east to the John Crow Mountains where we explored Ecclesdown Road. Even as we ate our picnic breakfast, birds of eye-popping color started coming out of the woodwork; highlights included both Black-billed and Yellow-billed parrots, Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Ringtailed Pigeon, and many other specialties.

Shuttled up the hill via the pickup, the Vinery area was our next destination. Between the showers we connected with more Jamaican specialties like the showy Jamaican Lizard-Cuckoo, the tiny but colorful Jamaican Tody, Rufous-throated Solitaires, and the Greater Antillean Bullfinch. That night, we even connected with the rare Jamaican Owl deep in the forests at Green Castle!

The Blue Mountains were our final daytrip destination. As we wound up the road, the habitat changed and we found ourselves in a beautiful (and cool!) montane tropical rainforest. It was there that we got great looks at the endemic Blue Mountain Vireo, Jamaican Blackbird, and eventually the tricky White-eyed Thrush! We even enjoyed some local coffee while overlooking the valley.

But before long, it was time to leave Green Castle and make our way back to Montego Bay. We stopped at Stewart Town en route for some more birding and enjoyed quite a few of the crazy-sounding Jamaican Crows, a fly-by Ruddy Quail-Dove, and even got to hear the rare Greater Antillean Elaenia. The Rocklands Bird Sanctuary was another fun stop where we found ourselves face-to-face with many of the specialties like Streamertail, Orangequit, Caribbean Dove, and a variety of grassquits. It was a great conclusion to a fun trip!

The following morning, after our birding from the balcony, it was farewell and safe travels! On behalf of Field Guides, I want to thank you all for making it a fun and productive trip! Major thanks to Dwayne for his local expertise, Raymond for his excellent driving (and bird-finding skills!), and to Sharon in the home office for all her logistical work.

Until next time, and thanks for sharing this Caribbean adventure with me, good birding to everyone!

-- Cory

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

WEST INDIAN WHISTLING-DUCK (Dendrocygna arborea) – This is a rare species that we don't chance into every time. Lucky for us, Raymond had a secret spot staked out and we added this interesting duck within a couple of hours of the start of the tour!

BLUE-WINGED TEAL (Spatula discors) – This wintering dabbler was seen at the reservoir at Green Castle Estate and the sewage lagoons in Montego Bay.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (Spatula clypeata) – The only spot with this familiar dabbler was the Montego Bay Sewage Lagoon where several hundred were gathered.

RING-NECKED DUCK (Aythya collaris) – Only a singleton was seen on tour, a lone bird at the Green Castle Estate Reservoir.

RUDDY DUCK (Oxyura jamaicensis) – Note the species name, jamaicensis! And Jamaica was a fine spot to see this white-cheeked diving duck. We saw them both at the GCE reservoir and the Montego Bay Sewage Lagoon.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LEAST GREBE (Tachybaptus dominicus) – A tiny, dark grebe with a glowing golden eye, this tropical species was spotted on our first day near the whistling-ducks.

PIED-BILLED GREBE (Podilymbus podiceps) – The Spanish River Bridge netted us this familiar grebe species.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (Columba livia) – Seen most days in urban areas. [I]

WHITE-CROWNED PIGEON (Patagioenas leucocephala) – Jamaica is a great place to see a lot of this large, dark pigeon. We tallied these every day and they were especially common in the lowlands including right by our hotel in Montego Bay.

RING-TAILED PIGEON (Patagioenas caribaea) – This is a Jamaican endemic pigeon that we saw very well! Especially numerous at the higher elevations, we encountered quite a few at places like Ecclesdown Road, Vinery, and in the Blue Mountains. [E]

COMMON GROUND DOVE (Columbina passerina jamaicensis) – This tiny species of dove was seen at a number of spots including at our hotel in Montego Bay and especially at the Rocklands Bird Sanctuary where they were attracted to the seed.

RUDDY QUAIL-DOVE (Geotrygon montana) – We were walking up the track in Stewart Town when one of these chunky doves bombed in and nearly hit Cory in the head! It perched briefly in view but quickly corrected course and flew deeper into the forest. What a strange encounter!

CARIBBEAN DOVE (Leptotila jamaicensis jamaicensis) – It wasn't until Rocklands that we had great, extended looks at this rather colorful regional endemic.

WHITE-WINGED DOVE (Zenaida asiatica) - Seen near Montego Bay, especially near the Mynt where we stayed our final night.

ZENAIDA DOVE (Zenaida aurita) – Tallied every day, this species is rather similar to the Mourning Dove which we know so well. We noted the white trailing edge of the wings (which shows up as a white check on the folded wing).

MOURNING DOVE (Zenaida macroura) - Seen at the brushy field next to the Montego Bay Sewage Lagoon on our final full day of birding.

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

SMOOTH-BILLED ANI (Crotophaga ani) – Rather common in the grassy fields but often as we drove by!

CHESTNUT-BELLIED CUCKOO (Coccyzus pluvialis) – It was stupendous that we encountered not one or two but THREE of these tricky endemic cuckoos on Ecclesdown Road. They're quite large, aren't they! [E]

JAMAICAN LIZARD-CUCKOO (Coccyzus vetula) – This prized specialty is the other endemic cuckoo found in Jamaica. We encountered them a couple times including on the Green Castle grounds and again up at Vinery. [E]

Nyctibiidae (Potoos)

NORTHERN POTOO (CARIBBEAN) (Nyctibius jamaicensis jamaicensis) – This subspecies, the nominate jamaicensis, is endemic to Jamaica. We had an incredible look at one on a dayroost right up the road from our cabins! We went on to see them after dark a couple times as well.

Apodidae (Swifts)

WHITE-COLLARED SWIFT (Streptoprocne zonaris pallidifrons) – About 22 of these large swifts cruised low overhead when we were birding at the Spanish River Bridge. Quite an unexpected surprise!

ANTILLEAN PALM-SWIFT (Tachornis phoenicobia phoenicobia) – Tiny, fast, and distinctive, these regional specialty swifts were fairly common in the lowlands such as at the Mynt. This species is typically found only on 3 islands in the world: Cuba, Hispaniola, and Jamaica.

<u>Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)</u>

JAMAICAN MANGO (Anthracothorax mango) – We had fun watching these flashy endemic hummingbirds duking it out at the feeder at Green Castle. [E]

VERVAIN HUMMINGBIRD (Mellisuga minima minima) – This tiny species, the 2nd-smallest bird species on earth, is found on only two islands in the world, Hispaniola and Jamaica. There was a very brief appearance in Vinery but overall, there weren't many around for us. They are often very

fond of Bottlebrush but none of it was in bloom during our visit and the species was largely absent.

STREAMERTAIL (RED-BILLED) (Trochilus polytmus) – Wow, what a truly fantastic species to enjoy in Jamaica! This long-tailed hummingbird is found no where else on earth. Lucky for us, they were common throughout the trip and I think we all ended up with amazing looks. At Rocklands Bird Sanctuary, they even landed on our fingers while they fed! [E]

STREAMERTAIL (BLACK-BILLED) (Trochilus polytmus scitulus) – Clements and eBird treats this as a subspecies of the former species whereas the IOC treats this as a distinct species. Either way, we got to enjoy this dark-billed version along Ecclesdown Road in the John Crow Mountains. [E]

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

COMMON GALLINULE (Gallinula galeata) – This species, which is in the rail family, was seen several times such as at Green Castle Estate, Spanish River Bridge, and Montego Bay Sewage Lagoon.

AMERICAN COOT (Fulica americana) – This familiar species was fairly common in wet areas.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-NECKED STILT (Himantopus mexicanus) – These lanky shorebirds were also fairly common in wetlands such as at the Green Castle Estate, the Spanish River Bridge, and Montego Bay Sewage Lagoon.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

KILLDEER (Charadrius vociferus) – A plover that most of us were already familiar with! We added these at the reservoir at Green Castle Estate.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RUDDY TURNSTONE (Arenaria interpres) – Tallied on our first day, these coastal shorebirds were seen foraging at the base of some mangroves as we drove east.

LEAST SANDPIPER (Calidris minutilla) – Not uncommon in the right habitat, these tiny shorebirds were tallied in Discovery Bay, Green Castle Estate, and Montego Bay Sewage Lagoons.

WILSON'S SNIPE (Gallinago delicata) - A pretty rare find! One of these fed quietly along the back edge of the Green Castle Estate Reservoir.

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (Actitis macularius) - Another familiar shorebird, these tail-bobbing sandpipers were seen at a variety of wet spots.

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (Tringa melanoleuca) – No fewer than six of these sturdy Tringas were seen feeding in the rocky stream at the Spanish River Bridge.

LESSER YELLOWLEGS (Tringa flavipes) - Only one was seen at the Montego Bay Sewage Lagoon on our final full day.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

LAUGHING GULL (Leucophaeus atricilla) - Quite common anywhere along the coast.

ROYAL TERN (Thalasseus maximus) – This tern is by far the most common tern along the coast and we ended up tallying them most days.

SANDWICH TERN (Thalasseus sandvicensis) – A rather uncommon species, one or two were seen along the coast near the Spanish River Bridge.

Fregatidae (Frigatebirds)

MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD (Fregata magnificens) – A quintessential species along the tropical coastlines, these "Man-o-war birds" were seen gliding effortlessly high overhead. It wasn't just another friggin' bird! :-)

Pelecanidae (Pelicans)

BROWN PELICAN (SOUTHERN) (Pelecanus occidentalis occidentalis) – Seen a few times along the coastlines. This nominate subspecies is a different one from the subspecies we see in the States.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREAT BLUE HERON (Ardea herodias) – Not as common as one might expect. Our only sighting was from the Spanish River Bridge.

GREAT EGRET (Ardea alba) – This familiar egret was common throughout in wet areas.

SNOWY EGRET (Egretta thula) – A delicate white egret, these were seen a few times in marshes and wetlands.

LITTLE BLUE HERON (Egretta caerulea) - Quite common for us throughout our time in Jamaica.

TRICOLORED HERON (Egretta tricolor) – After Dwayne explained "white boxers", it made much more sense. We spied one of these on our final day near the town of Salt Marsh.

CATTLE EGRET (Bubulcus ibis) - Common in grassy fields often alongside cattle or horses.

GREEN HERON (Butorides virescens) – The reservoir at Green Castle Estate hosted this quiet heron.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (Nycticorax nycticorax) - We had nice looks at this uncommon heron at the Spanish River Bridge.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (Plegadis falcinellus) – One fed quietly in the Spanish River as we looked down on it from the bridge.

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

TURKEY VULTURE (Cathartes aura) - These familiar birds, known locally as the John Crow, were common and tallied every day.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

RED-TAILED HAWK (JAMAICENSIS) (Buteo jamaicensis jamaicensis) – It was fun getting to spend time with the nominate subspecies of this very widespread raptor.

Strigidae (Owls)

JAMAICAN OWL (Pseudoscops grammicus) – What a tough bird! Dwayne worked his magic and we ended up with great looks at this Jamaican endemic deep in the forest of Green Castle Estate. [E]

Todidae (Todies)

JAMAICAN TODY (Todus todus) – There are only five species of todies on earth and they're all found on Caribbean islands. Jamaica has its own and this endemic was high on our list of favorites from the trip. Tiny but full of character! [E]

<u>Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)</u>

BELTED KINGFISHER (Megaceryle alcyon) – We were milling around at a rest stop when one of these fish-eaters flew by.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

JAMAICAN WOODPECKER (Melanerpes radiolatus) – The only woodpecker species we saw but it was a good one! This Jamaican endemic was fairly common and we had looks on most days of our trip. Frank picked this as one of his Top 3 birds. [E]

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

AMERICAN KESTREL (Falco sparverius) - This small falcon was common throughout our time and we ended up tallying it every day.

MERLIN (Falco columbarius) – I don't know how we managed but we found this falcon a couple of times in the same day; first along Ecclesdown Road and then a duo at the Spanish River Bridge later that day.

Psittacidae (New World and African Parrots)

BLACK-BILLED PARROT (Amazona agilis) – This uncommon endemic parrot can be downright tricky to find sometimes but we had amazing luck as soon as we arrived at Ecclesdown Road. Flocks and flocks of these swirled overhead and we ended up with great scope views. [E]

YELLOW-BILLED PARROT (Amazona collaria) – Only found in Jamaica, this endemic parrot was another specialty we tracked down on Ecclesdown Road. We had some more encounters at Stewart Town on our final day as well. [E]

GREEN-RUMPED PARROTLET (Forpus passerinus) – Introduced from South America, this tiny parrotlet is now firmly established in Jamaica. We had a few fly over during breakfast on our final day in Montego Bay. [I]

OLIVE-THROATED PARAKEET (JAMAICAN) (Eupsittula nana nana) – Note the subspecies. We saw this nominate (and endemic) subspecies several times including at Green Castle itself.

<u>Tityridae (Tityras and Allies)</u>

JAMAICAN BECARD (Pachyramphus niger) – It's really cool that Jamaica has a becard; it's the only one found in all of the Caribbean. This endemic was seen a couple of times including at Green Castle Estate where Dwayne coaxed it to cross over the trail. [E]

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

JAMAICAN ELAENIA (Myiopagis cotta) – This flycatcher is found no where else on the planet. We enjoyed decent looks at one overhead at Green Castle Estate and then even better looks at Stewart Town on our last full day. [E]

GREATER ANTILLEAN ELAENIA (JAMAICAN) (Elaenia fallax fallax) – A notoriously difficult species to find in the non-breeding season, this regional specialty was heard at Ecclesdown Road and Stewart Town but they never came any closer. This species is only found in Jamaica and Hispaniola. [*]

JAMAICAN PEWEE (Contopus pallidus) – The only pewee present in Jamaica, this endemic was seen several times higher up in the Blue Mountains and at Vinery. [E]

SAD FLYCATCHER (Myiarchus barbirostris) – One of three Myiarchus flycatchers present in Jamaica, this endemic turned out to be quite common throughout our stay. These are quite small and dark, rather reminiscent of Dusky-capped Flycatchers. [E]

RUFOUS-TAILED FLYCATCHER (Myiarchus validus) – This is a big Myiarchus with a noticeable pale base to the bill and lots of rufous in the wings and tail. We saw this Jamaican endemic a few times including at Green Castle, Ecclesdown Road, Vinery, and in the Blue Mountains. [E]

STOLID FLYCATCHER (Myiarchus stolidus) – Although not endemic to Jamaica, it's a regional endemic found only on Hispaniola and Jamaica. A fairly local species, the only one we found was on the hike down to the reservoir at Green Castle.

LOGGERHEAD KINGBIRD (LOGGERHEAD) (Tyrannus caudifasciatus jamaicensis) – A common species in Jamaica, these big-billed kingbirds were tallied every day. Note the subspecies, these could theoretically be split someday.

<u>Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)</u>

BLUE MOUNTAIN VIREO (Vireo osburni) – We saw the Blue Mountain Vireo in the Blue Mountains. Big surprise! We tallied a couple more of these Jamaican endemics, complete with the big bill and lack of wingbars, up the track at Stewart Town as well. [E]

JAMAICAN VIREO (Vireo modestus) – With a pale eye and noticeable wingbars, there wasn't much confusion between this and the previous species. This endemic, although common throughout our time, tended to be tricky to see. [E]

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

JAMAICAN CROW (Corvus jamaicensis) – A tricky Jamaican endemic, these ended up being pretty common (and vocal!) in Stewart Town on our final day. Roz enjoyed being +1 for a few minutes with this bird! [E]

<u>Hirundinidae (Swallows)</u>

CAVE SWALLOW (CARIBBEAN) (Petrochelidon fulva poeciloma) – A few of these were flying high overhead in Stewart Town but it was tough to make out much on them at that distance.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (Sturnus vulgaris) – A couple of these introduced birds flew over the Mynt on our final morning together. [I]

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (Mimus polyglottos) - Common throughout our time in Jamaica.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

RUFOUS-THROATED SOLITAIRE (RUFOUS-THROATED) (Myadestes genibarbis solitarius) – A tricky thrush to see! We connected with a couple quick glimpses high up in the Blue Mountains. Globally, this is a pretty range-restricted species, found only in Jamaica, on Hispaniola, and some of the Lesser Antilles.

WHITE-EYED THRUSH (Turdus jamaicensis) – Goodness, this endemic sure made us work! We ended up with outstanding views in the Blue Mountains at one of our final stops of the day. [E]

WHITE-CHINNED THRUSH (Turdus aurantius) – This is another endemic thrush found only in Jamaica. The "Hopping Dick", as it's known locally, was fairly common though and at times was seen on the road edges. [E]

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

JAMAICAN EUPHONIA (Euphonia jamaica) – It's interesting that Jamaica has a euphonia and that no other Caribbean islands do! It's an interestingly-colored bird too. We encountered these a few times at Ecclesdown Road, the Vinery, and the Mynt. [E]

<u>Spindalidae (Spindalises)</u>

JAMAICAN SPINDALIS (Spindalis nigricephala) – Another one of the stunning Jamaican endemics, this beautiful species was once part of the Stripeheaded Tanager complex before it was split up and renamed. These were fairly common and tallied on a majority of the days. [E]

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

- **JAMAICAN ORIOLE** (Icterus leucopteryx leucopteryx) The only oriole we saw on tour, these were actually quite common and we tallied them most days. Although Jamaica is in the name, it's not actually endemic to Jamaica, it's also found on a Colombian island.
- JAMAICAN BLACKBIRD (Nesopsar nigerrimus) One of the rarer Jamaican endemics, this specialty was a main target for us in the Blue Mountains. Thankfully, it didn't take long before we saw these odd, tree-top-loving Icterids. [E]
- **GREATER ANTILLEAN GRACKLE** (Quiscalus niger crassirostris) This short-tailed grackle is only found on a handful of islands including Jamaica where there is an endemic subspecies. They were fairly common for us and we tallied them on each of our days.

<u>Parulidae (New World Warblers)</u>

- **OVENBIRD** (Seiurus aurocapilla) This wintering warbler was seen walking on the trail in front of us a couple of times. This isn't an abundant species here in winter and so these sightings were noteworthy.
- **WORM-EATING WARBLER** (Helmitheros vermivorum) Jamaica is right in the middle of the wintering grounds for this interesting warbler and we caught up to one on our first full day at Green Castle.
- **BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER** (Mniotilta varia) This limb-creeping species was one of the more common wintering warblers for us on our tour.
- **COMMON YELLOWTHROAT** (Geothlypis trichas) We encountered a couple of these wintering warblers right on the grounds of Green Castle Estate.
- **ARROWHEAD WARBLER** (Setophaga pharetra) A fantastic species! This Jamaican endemic is a non-migratory warbler that prefers the higher forests on the island. We encountered them a couple of times including at Ecclesdown Road and in the Blue Mountains. [E]
- AMERICAN REDSTART (Setophaga ruticilla) Common, tallied nearly every day.
- CAPE MAY WARBLER (Setophaga tigrina) It wasn't until our final morning at The Mynt that we caught up with this local wintering species.
- NORTHERN PARULA (Setophaga americana) This was another of the common wintering warblers that we tallied about every day.
- MAGNOLIA WARBLER (Setophaga magnolia) A few folks got eyes on this uncommon wintering warbler on Ecclesdown Road. Sadly it didn't stick around for everyone.
- **BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER** (Setophaga caerulescens) It was a real treat having this stunning warbler in fine plumage! Jamaica is in the core of the wintering range and this species ended up being quite common for us.
- PALM WARBLER (WESTERN) (Setophaga palmarum palmarum) Seen at our last birding stop, near the Montego Bay Sewage Lagoons, this tail-bobbing warbler was hopping around out on the rock piles.
- YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER (Setophaga dominica) An uncommon find for this tour, this attractive warbler was seen at Green Castle Estate on the 2nd day of the tour. Well spotted!
- **PRAIRIE WARBLER** (Setophaga discolor) A fairly-common wintering species at Green Castle, a few of these surfaced along the various trails Dwayne took us down.

Thraupidae (Tanagers and Allies)

- **BANANAQUIT (GREATER ANTILLEAN)** (Coereba flaveola flaveola) Seldom found far from flowers, this tiny nectar-loving species was common for us throughout the trip.
- YELLOW-FACED GRASSQUIT (Tiaris olivaceus olivaceus) We didn't see many of these until Rocklands Bird Sanctuary but once there, these handsome little grassquits were abundant!
- **ORANGEQUIT** (Euneornis campestris) This fascinating species, an endemic of Jamaica, is the sole member of the genus Euneornis. We encountered these most days but we couldn't have gotten better views than we did at Rocklands on our final full day. What an outstanding experience! [E]
- **GREATER ANTILLEAN BULLFINCH** (Melopyrrha violacea ruficollis) This regional specialty was rather tough to come by but we eventually found some at Green Castle and Vinery.
- YELLOW-SHOULDERED GRASSQUIT (Loxipasser anoxanthus) This attractive Jamaican endemic played hard to get at first but we eventually found them nicely at Ecclesdown Road and Vinery. [E]
- **BLACK-FACED GRASSQUIT** (Melanospiza bicolor marchii) Quite common along the roadside edges in the Blue Mountains and then especially common at Rocklands where they may have landed on your knees!

MAMMALS

SMALL INDIAN MONGOOSE (Herpestes auropunctatus) – This species of mammal was introduced to try to control the rat population that was affecting the sugar-growing plantations. However, the mongoose eats about everything and it's now widely considered to be very harmful to the native wildlife. [I]

<u>Herps</u>

JAMAICAN GIANT ANOLE (Anolis garmani) – These big anoles are native to Jamaica and we spotted one on our first full day at Green Castle Estate.

CANE TOAD (Rhinella marina) – These huge guys were seen on the lawn many of the nights. [I]

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 103 bird taxa and 1 mammal taxa