

# Mammalwatching in the Virgin Islands

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The Virgin Islands are considered part of the Lesser Antilles, although all of them except St. Croix (which has most endemic reptiles etc.) are on Puerto Rican Bank and their flora and fauna are mostly impoverished versions of Puerto Rican ones. They are touristy and expensive, with no primary forest left, but the climate is great, except for occasional hurricanes in July-November. VI are divided between the US and the UK; the US part is better for wildlife and there is a good guidebook for it, *Puerto Rico & Virgin Islands Wildlife Viewing Guide* by D.W. Nellis (Falcon, 1999).

The only surviving native land mammals are bats; there are also a few introduced species and many species of marine mammals. Recently extinct are shrew-like *Nesophontes edithae*, jutia *Isolobodon portoricensis* (likely domesticated and introduced from Hispaniola by Amerindians), Caribbean monk seal, and West Indian manatee.

I visited VI (St. John, St. Thomas, St. Croix and Norman) in July 2000 for a few days.

## 1. Bats

There are six bat species in VI, including one endemic subspecies. All six are known only from St. John.

**Jamaican fruit bat** (*Artibeus jamaicensis jamaicensis*). Common, although populations crash after hurricanes; roosts in caves and sometimes concrete structures and trees. Known from all larger islands and some small ones; the only bat known from Anegada (despite the abundance of small caves there). Large, dark.

**Antillean fruit-eating bat** (*Brachyphylla cavernarum*). Common; large colonies in caves and occasionally buildings. Subspecies *intermedia* is known from St. John, St. Thomas, Norman and Jost Van Dyke (elsewhere only in Puerto Rico); smaller subspecies *cavernarum* occurs on St. Croix and throughout the Lesser Antilles. Large, pale.

**Red fruit bat** (*Stenoderma rufum rufum*). Extremely rare; described from subfossils and considered extinct for over a century. Collected on St. Thomas in 1943, on St. John in 1957, and on St. Croix in 2004 (see below). Roosts in the canopy among leaves, rarely in the undergrowth. Medium-sized; wings look red in flight. Endemic subspecies.

**Greater fishing bat** (*Noctilio leporinus mastivus*). Rare; roosts in caves, cliffs and buildings; forages over protected bays and mangrove lagoons. Known from St. Croix, St. John, St. Thomas, Norman and Guana. Large, long-legged.

**Pallas's mastiff bat** (*Molossus molossus*). Common; colonies in buildings and cliffs, sometimes in hollow trees, palm fronds, and caves. Known from St. Croix, St. John, St. Thomas, Tortola, and some small islands. Medium-sized, black.

**Brazilian freetail** (*Tadarida brasiliensis antillularum*). Extremely rare; captured on St. John in 1960 and on Guana in 2004. Roosts in buildings, concrete structures and caves. Small, dark; has long wings and swallow-like flight.

Below are a few locations to look for bats. I've been to all of them except the last one.

Barren Spot Bat Tower (access from 17.7362N 64.7638W), an old mine tower on St. Croix with a roost of a few hundred **Antillean fruit-eating bats**. It is now reportedly gated but you can see the bats emerge or return.

Caledonia Valley (park at 17.7632N 64.8795E and walk to the trailhead at 17.7616N 64.8768W) on St. Croix usually has many flying bats at dusk. The largest ones are **Jamaican fruit bats**, smaller and lighter ones are **Antillean fruit-eating bats**, and yet smaller dark ones are **Pallas's mastiff bats**. Watch also for **red fruit bats**. A nearby place with the same species is Creque Dam Valley, where **red fruit bat** was once netted (at 17.7460N 64.8765W).

Treasure Point Sea Caves (18.3156N 64.6239W) on Norman are accessible by boat tours from St. John and Tortola. **Jamaican fruit, Antillean fruit-eating, and greater fishing bats** often roost at the far end of the largest cave.

Bat Cave (18.4489N 64.6517W) on Tortola (within Shark Bay National Park) is a nice hiking destination, but seldom has bats (not sure which species; could be **Jamaican fruit, greater fishing** and/or **Pallas's mastiff bats**).

## 2. Marine mammals

VI are great for ferry rides, as there are ferries between all major islands and to some small ones. The best ferries are the ones to St. Croix: they cover over 50 km and go over deep water. Ferries to Anegada are also worth trying. More than 20 species of cetaceans are theoretically possible during these crossings, but most are very rarely seen. I saw a mixed herd of **pantropical spotted** and **spinner dolphins** from the (now defunct) ferry from Fajardo (Puerto Rico) to St. Thomas, and a **sperm whale** from St. John-St. Croix ferry. More commonly seen from ferries and sometimes from shore and during diving tours are **bottlenose, Atlantic spotted, and common dolphins, short-finned pilot whales**, and, in winter, **humpback whales**. The best places to look for them from shore are said to be Cocky Point on St. Thomas, Cane Bay on St. Croix, Buck Island, Deep Bay on Anegada, and Pajaros Point on Virgin Gorda. Whalewatching tours run from Red Hook on St. Thomas in January-March. Deepwater species most often strand on the western shore of St. Croix.

## 3. Introduced species

Introduced mammals include **black rats** (abundant), **brown rats** (rare outside cities), house **mice** (uncommon), **feral dogs, cats, donkeys** (on St. John), **goats** (mostly on St. John), and **pigs** (mostly on St. John), as well as **white-tailed deer** (on St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John) and **small Indian mongooses**; the latter are known to prey on deer fawns. Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge (entrance at 17.6871N 64.8794W) on St. Croix is said to be the best place for **mongooses**.