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Important Bird Areas AMERICAS

# ST KITTS & NEVIS

Natalia Collier & Adam Brown



South-east Peninsula with Nevis on the horizon.  
Photo: Kate Orchard



## Country facts at a glance

Area:	261 km <sup>2</sup>
Population:	42,700
Capital:	Basseterre
Altitude:	0–1156 m
<b>Number of IBAs:</b>	<b>2<sup>1</sup></b>
<b>Total IBA area:</b>	<b>6,260 ha</b>
<b>IBA coverage of land area:</b>	<b>22%</b>
Total number of birds:	196
Globally threatened birds:	0
Globally threatened birds in IBAs:	0
Country endemics:	0

## General introduction

The Federation of St Kitts and Nevis comprises two islands in the Leeward Islands at the northern end of the Lesser Antilles. The islands lie c.13 km south-east of St Eustatius, 67 km west of Antigua and 25 km north-west of Redonda (to Antigua and Barbuda). St Kitts is the larger island (168 km<sup>2</sup>) supporting c.75% of the population, and is separated from Nevis (93 km<sup>2</sup>) by a shallow 3-km channel called “the Narrows”. Nevis is south-east of St Kitts. The islands constitute the smallest nation in the Americas in terms of both area and population, and were also among the first islands in the Caribbean to be settled by Europeans.

Both islands are volcanic in origin. The northern end of St Kitts is dominated by the dormant volcano Mount Liamunga (1156 m) which is cloaked in tropical moist forest at higher elevations while the lower slopes have been cleared for agriculture (sugarcane production ended in 2007). Streams flow down the numerous ghauts on the sides of the volcano. The northern coastline of St Kitts is primarily cliffs of up to 15 m high. The south-east of the island comprises low hills supporting dry thorn-forest along a tapering peninsula used for grazing livestock and for tourism development. The southern coastline is characterized by sandy or rocky shores with saline coastal ponds. Nevis is a conical-shaped island formed by an extinct volcano that rises to 985 m at Nevis Peak, and is similarly vegetated to northern St Kitts. The island is fringed on three sides by long sandy beaches, and protected by (intermittent) fringing coral reefs. St Kitts and Nevis have a tropical maritime climate. Average annual rainfall is 1300 mm although low-lying areas can receive as little as 200 mm and it can reach over 3800 mm on the volcanoes (up to 6000 mm has been recorded). Most of the precipitation arrives during hurricane season in late summer and fall. Modern land use (on St Kitts) includes agricultural plantations in the lowlands, local market agriculture, tourism development (especially from Basseterre to Frigate Bay and the South-east Peninsula), fishing, and light manufacturing.

## Conservation and protected area system

On St Kitts the Central Forest Reserve was created as a result of the Forestry Ordinance (1904) which legislates for the protection of areas above 300 m. This ordinance was enacted to prevent further deforestation (at the hands of the sugarcane industry) and thereby also protect soil and water sources. The Wild Birds Protection Ordinance (1913) prohibits the hunting of 18 species of bird, and established a regulated hunting season for another nine species, reflecting the number of bird species known on the island at this time. The National Conservation and Environment Protection Act (1987) legislates for further protection of c.90 species. However, the extent to which these laws are enforced is unknown. There are no known officially protected areas in Nevis, but there is also no hunting of any species on the island. The Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park (on the west slope of Mount Liamuiga, but outside the Central Forest Reserve) is a World Heritage Site.

“There are no known officially protected areas in Nevis, but there is also no hunting of any species on the island.”

There is little systematic bird research or bird-specific conservation action currently being undertaken on the islands. Environmental Protection in the Caribbean conducted a survey of the South-east Peninsula Ponds and Booby Island in May 2004, and Steadman *et al.* (1997) provides data from their research on St Kitts in the 1970s and 1980s. Birds have been documented informally for many years on Nevis (e.g. through the maintenance and provision of birding lists for visitors). The NGO Nevis Historical and Conservation Society is active on the island, especially with education and awareness efforts and community conservation action.

<sup>1</sup>This directory only includes global IBAs, for regional IBAs using “B” or Caribbean criteria, see BirdLife International (2008).

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Much of St Kitts was converted (by the British) to agricultural land dominated by sugarcane. St Kitts became Britain's most productive Caribbean supplier of sugar. Even though lands were abandoned as the sugar market fluctuated in the 1830s, much of the island remained cleared for sugarcane cultivation through the nineteenth century. Pesticides (such as DDT) were used on the sugarcane fields during the 1960s and impacted the bird populations of St Kitts. Nevis had abandoned the mass monoculture by this time. In spite of the clearances for agriculture, upper elevation forests have been spared and are largely protected. However, throughout all areas (including these montane forests) alien invasive predators are a problem. Of particular concern are the African green monkey (*Cercopithecus aethiops*; brought by the French as a pet and established as a wild population since the 1700s) and the small Indian mongoose (*Herpestes auropunctatus*), brought by the British from Jamaica in 1884 to reduce rat damage to sugarcane. These two species have undoubtedly reduced populations of native amphibians, reptiles and birds. Other invasives such as cows, goats and white-tailed deer are widespread, but their presence along pond shorelines (e.g. in the South-east Peninsula) means that they impact nesting shorebirds

and terns through trampling. The government has recently undertaken a campaign to remove unfenced and feral livestock from the peninsula in preparation for tourism development of the South-east Peninsula. Such development for the tourism industry (which takes little account of global biodiversity priorities) poses a huge threat to the future ecological integrity of the South-east Peninsula, and presumably other areas.

Bridled Quail-dove (*Geotrygon mystacea*), one of 10 restricted-range birds present on St Kitts and Nevis.  
Photo: Jim Johnson



### Ornithological importance

Over 190 species of birds have been documented (as certainly or hypothetically) occurring on St Kitts and Nevis, 37 are breeding residents (23 of which are landbirds). The majority are Neotropical migrants (or vagrants). Ten (of the 38) Lesser Antilles Endemic Bird Area (EBA 030) restricted-range birds occur on both of the islands, none of which is endemic to the country. A number of these species, especially Bridled Quail-dove (*Geotrygon mystacea*) and Antillean Euphonia (*Euphonia musica*), are restricted to the moist forested slopes and ghauts of the volcanoes. St Kitts did support an endemic subspecies of the Puerto Rican Bullfinch (*Loxigilla portoricensis*; one of the Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands EBA (029) restricted-range birds). The "St Kitts" Bullfinch (*L. p. grandis*) was last recorded in 1929. Its apparent extinction was probably due to a combination of habitat loss (especially for sugarcane) exacerbated by forest-damaging hurricanes, and predation by non-native mammals, including monkeys, mongoose, cats, and rats. However, further searches for this taxon are probably warranted.

No globally threatened birds are present in significant numbers on the islands. The Vulnerable West Indian Whistling-duck (*Dendrocygna arborea*) may have nested on St Kitts in the past and was seen "occasionally" up until the 1980s. The Near Threatened Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) was recorded on St Kitts for the first time in 1988, and the species does occur on Nevis, albeit in very small numbers. Waterbirds, seabird and shorebirds in the Federation are concentrated in the salt ponds of the South-

east Peninsula (KN002), on Booby Island (KN003), and in Nevis' coastal lagoons and ponds. However, there seem to be considerable fluctuations and declines in the numbers of birds breeding. For example, 21 pairs of Kentish (Snowy) Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*) were counted at Little and Great Salt Pond in 1985, but none were seen in 2004, then small numbers have been recorded since. Similarly, Roseate Tern (*Sterna dougallii*) breeds on the Southeast Peninsula with 100–200 pairs estimated in the mid-1990s, but just 12 individuals were found there in 1998 and 2004. Magnificent Frigatebirds (*Fregata magnificens*) and Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*) are reported to nest in the Hurricane Hill–Newcastle area, but in unknown numbers. Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) are reported to breed at the north end of White Bay, but again, numbers are unknown. A survey of nesting seabirds on Nevis is long overdue.

Figure 1. Location of Important Bird Areas in St Kitts and Nevis



### IBA overview

Of St Kitts and Nevis' two IBAs, only St Kitts Central Forest Reserve (KN001) is protected. Booby Island (KN003) does not receive any form of protection or conservation management at the current time.

The two IBAs have been identified on the basis of 11 key bird species. Ten restricted-range landbirds are represented only in the Central Forest Reserve IBA and almost nothing is known about their status or abundance within the reserve. For example, the Bridled Quail-dove (*Geotrygon mystacea*) was legally hunted on St Kitts, but little is known of what impact this had, or whether hunting still occurs. Many of the restricted-range species occur also on Nevis. With further details of their distribution and status it might be appropriate to define a terrestrial IBA for the island (and a second internationally-recognized area for these species within the Federation). Booby Island IBA has been identified for its globally important breeding population of Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*).

"Further details on the distribution and status of restricted-range species on Nevis might lead to the definition of a terrestrial IBA on the island."

Table 1. Important Bird Areas in St Kitts and Nevis

IBA code	IBA name	Adm unit	Area (ha)	A1				A2				A3				A4				
				CR	EN	VU	NT													
KN001	St. Kitts Central Forest Reserve	St Kitts	5,960								X									
KN003	Booby Island		300																X	



For information on trigger species at each IBA, see individual site accounts at BirdLife's Data Zone: [www.birdlife.org/datazone/sites/](http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sites/)



Great Salt Pond, South-east Peninsula.  
Photo: Kate Orchard

## Opportunities

In order to maintain the Federation's biodiversity, there is an urgent need to instigate protective measures for the Southeast Peninsula Ponds IBA and for Booby Island IBA. The annual take by hunters of Bridled Quail-dove (*Geotrygon mystacea*) on St Kitts and its current status need to be determined. Ponds throughout the islands need to be fenced to prevent trampling from livestock (including feral populations).

**"There is a need for baseline assessments of congregatory bird populations on Nevis and St Kitts."**

There is also a need for some baseline assessments of congregatory bird populations on Nevis, and for the regular monitoring of these same species groups on St Kitts. Regular censuses should aim to obtain data on species populations, breeding sites, and local movements. Such monitoring should be used to inform the assessment of state, pressure and response variables at each of the Federation's IBAs in order to provide objective status assessments and highlight management interventions that might be required to maintain these internationally important biodiversity sites.

## Further information

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Contribute to information on St Kitts & Nevis' birds!  
[www.worldbirds.org/v3/caribbean.php?c=19](http://www.worldbirds.org/v3/caribbean.php?c=19)

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