The Jamaican Naturalist William Thomas March (1804-1872): a preliminary review of his zoological and botanical collections

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ABSTRACT

William Thomas March (1804-1872) was responsible for extensive zoological and botanical collections, including one of the syntype specimens of *Mimus gundlachii hillii* March 1874. The specimen is held at World Museum, National Museums Liverpool. March was a Jamaican naturalist and collector. He was of black and white ancestry and worked with well-known collectors of his time. He was highly regarded amongst his peers. Many institutions worldwide house March's botanical and zoological specimens but some have been misattributed as his name has been documented inconsistently. There is little doubt that more of his collections have yet to be found, located and documented. One of the main findings of this paper is that Spencer Fullerton Baird (1823-1882), first curator of the National Museum at the Smithsonian, honoured March's work by naming the Black Faced Grassquit *Melanospiza bicolor marchii* after him as he said March had "done so much towards extending our knowledge of the natural history of his island." The objective of this paper is to highlight the breadth of distribution of March's Jamaican specimens around the world and to summarise his achievements and background for museums and institutions that house his specimens. This is especially important at this time when museums are looking to diversify their audience and improve their collection interpretations.

Keywords: Black collector, Spanish Town, Hooker, P.H. Gosse, Spencer Fullerton Baird, Natural History, Caribbean, W.W. Marsh.

INTRODUCTION

The Jamaican collector and naturalist William Thomas March (1804-1872) has been an under-recognised and uncelebrated figure within our institutions - yet his contribution to museums worldwide is remarkable. March worked and corresponded with some major figures of his time including: Sir William Jackson Hooker (1785-1865) first director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; Charles Darwin (1809-1882) the English naturalist, biologist and geologist well-known for his theory of evolution which changed the way we see all organisms (Desmond, Moore & Browne 2004); Phillip Henry Gosse (1810-1888) an English naturalist, pioneer of marine biology and populariser of natural science; Richard Hill (1795-1872) a Jamaican naturalist, lawyer and leader of the free people of colour during the campaign for equal rights (Campbell 1976); and Spencer Fullerton Baird (1823-1882) first curator of the National Museum at the Smithsonian. March's knowledge of local and regional flora and fauna was instrumental in helping these 'big names' to catalogue Jamaica's biodiversity. William Thomas March should be acknowledged for his achievements and contributions to progressing our understanding of Jamaican botany and zoology given that he sourced specimens for these notable collectors. I am researching the collector and Jamaican naturalist William Thomas March (1804-1872) for my Associateship of the Museum Association (AMA). My research is founded in the histories of the Vertebrate Zoology collections at World Museum which includes collections from March. Initially my project involved creating a new dataset titled 'Bird skins from Jamaica in the collections of World Museums Liverpool.' This dataset is now published and available on the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) and contains specimens from William Thomas March. My research takes March out of the shadows, profiles his contribution and in doing so provides a better understanding of Jamaica's biodiversity. This article aims to begin the documentation of the worldwide reach of specimens collected by March and sent abroad to notable collectors and institutions.

METHOD

Using the World Museum database I began screening the original data we had for bird specimens from Jamaica in order to publish on GBIF. At this time, I also ran a background search on the collectors of these specimens. I had attended various conferences online where topics for discussion included decolonising museum collections and repatriating specimens. With this in mind, using the World Museum database I researched the collector's names to see if any of them were people of colour. March's name gave no indication of his colour but my research showed he was born in Jamaica. I found that Catherine Levy, former president of BirdLife Jamaica, had written two papers about March's life (Levy 2008, 2013). On this basis, I decided to carry out further research into March's background and his Jamaican bird specimens which are housed in the Vertebrate Zoology collection at World Museum Liverpool (Fig. 1).

I searched the online catalogues of museums which I

suspected held his specimens, including the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. The Jamaican specimens at World Museum Liverpool had originated from there. Further searches using GBIF revealed hundreds more Jamaican specimens and the institutions housing them. Most of the available online catalogues presented specimens not mentioned on GBIF.

In addition, I put out a call to the Natural Sciences Collections Association's (NatSCA) mailing list to ask for any information on specimens collected by William Thomas March or any of the misspelled names I had identified as associated with him and his specimens.

BIOGRAPHY

So, who exactly was William Thomas March? He was born a 'free man of colour', who lived and died in St. Catherine, Spanish Town, Jamaica. In today's terms a 'coloured' person refers to a black person. March was



Fig. 1. The Jamaican bird skin specimens collected by William Thomas March stored in the Vertebrate Zoology collection at World Museum, National Museums, Liverpool © National Museums Liverpool (World Museum: NML-VZ T1134, NML-VZ T760, NML-VZ T5652, NML-VZ 1989.66.1279, NML-VZ T19525, NML-VZ T12817, NML-VZ T9981, NML-VZ T1128, NML-VZ T14037, NML-VZ T14031/ Olivia Beavers).

a child of a 'free coloured' couple – Foster March and Mary Luisa Willis Thomas Matthews who had 10 children including William (FamilySearch 2022; UCL Department of History 2023). His mother was described as 'Mestee', meaning 'a person who is one quarter black' and his paternal grandmother Elizabeth Rogers, was described as a 'Free Mulatto' meaning a person with one black and one white parent (UCL Department of History 2023). These terms are classified as 'old mixed-heritage groups' (Wilkinson 2020).

W. T. March had brown skin (as referenced by Levy 2013) and came from a mixed heritage of black and privileged white family members (Fig. 2). In 1748, his paternal grandfather passed 'An Act to entitle his children [birthed] by Elizabeth Rogers, a free Mulatto, to the same rights and privileges with English subjects born of white parents' (UCL Department of History 2023). This Act almost certainly helped William Thomas March's life and status as a free man of colour compared to other less privileged Jamaicans with black ancestry who were discriminated against during this time. The history of such arrangements is well documented by Daniel Livesay in his Inheritance, Family, and Mixed-Race Jamaicans, 1700-1761 (Livesay 2018).

William Thomas March was a privileged free person of colour: he was an attorney at law, an elected member of the House of Assembly for St. Catherine in 1837, a Treasurer of Beckford's Free School in 1841, a Trustee of the Spanish Town Savings Bank, a Vestryman in St. Catherine between 1839 and 1854 and went on to become the Deputy Clerk and then a Clerk of the Supreme Court. March was the Island Secretary/Secretary to the Governor of Jamaica from 1868 to 1872 and a member of the Council of the Royal Society of Arts in Jamaica.

One of his closest scientific collaborations was with Spencer Fullerton Baird who was the first curator of the National Museum at the Smithsonian in 1850 and later the second Smithsonian Secretary from 1878-1887. Baird asked March to send Jamaican bird skins for the new collections. In several letters Baird corresponded with March to gain his knowledge of Jamaican flora and fauna (Levy 2013). Baird dedicated the subspecies Melanospiza bicolor marchii (Baird, S.F. 1863) to March (Fig. 3). Baird noted: "If, as I think most probable, the Jamaican species is thus without a name, to no one could it with more propriety be dedicated than to Mr. March, who has done so much towards extending our knowledge of the natural history of his island." – S. F. Baird, (March 1863). This shows how highly regarded March was as a Jamaican naturalist among contemporary scientists.

In 1863 and 1864, March published his 'Notes on the birds of Jamaica' Part i and ii, in Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. These notes

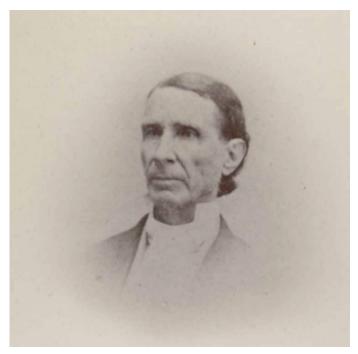


Fig. 2. William Thomas March photograph (0658). Courtesy of the Archives of the Gray Herbarium, Harvard University.

list migrant, resident and endemic species with detailed descriptions accompanied by footnotes from Baird and Richard Hill (March 1863; March 1864, Levy 2013).

As detailed by Catherine Levy's (2013) biographical paper and on the Jamaica Almanacs website, March accomplished many significant milestones. He had a long career in both political and civic roles and was a member of the Council of the Royal Society of Arts in Jamaica whose 'principal objects were to encourage the development of the productive and industrial resources of the colony, and to endeavour to turn them to substantial account in the great marts of the world's commerce' (Levy 2013).

Zoological Specimens

March collected both Jamaican mammal and bird skins which are housed in museums across the globe. The number of Jamaican bird skins collected outweighs the mammals, probably because Jamaica has few endemic mammals compared to endemic birds. March's handful of Jamaican mammal skins (as located in museums thus far) comprise of various bat species, *Rattus rattus* and a now extinct Jamaican Rice Rat originally labelled as *Oryzomys couesi antillarum*. He also collected the type specimens of *Eumops glaucinus glaucinus* (Wagner 1843) and *Macrotus waterhousii jamaicensis* Rehn 1904.

Often on specimen labels William Thomas March's name is mislabelled as W.J. Marsh, W. (T.) Marsh, W. E. Marsh, W. L. Marsh or W.W. Marsh. To the best of my knowledge, all letters, notes and Jamaican specimens where his name is mislabelled, reference the exact places where W.T. March



Fig. 3. A Melanospiza bicolor marchii (Baird, S.F. 1863) specimen named in William Thomas March's honour by Spencer Fullerton Baird (World Museum: NML-VZ T10453/ Olivia Beavers).

was collecting at that specific time and within those locations. The JSTOR website also notes the same errors in his name in museum records. To date, I have located William Thomas March's specimens in the institutions summarised in Table 1.

There are still more locations to be discovered, including a specimen labelled No. 24352 in the Smithsonian Institution's U.S. National Museum Bulletin 221, Type Bird Specimens, which in 1877 was sent to the Mombusho Museum, Tokyo, and 'has long since disappeared' (Deignan 1961, p. 532). In some cases, I retrieved additional specimen numbers to the GBIF dataset via online catalogues from individual museums. Both specimens from the cited GBIF dataset as well as data from the online catalogues make up the specimen numbers in Table 1.

In addition to the 517 zoological specimens I located using the online Smithsonian online catalogue, Banks and Hole Jr., noted that there were 982 specimens of 153 species, eggs of 47 species, some partial skeletons and missing specimens all unreported from March's later specimen donations. Consequently, it is not clear how many specimens there might be in total at the Smithsonian (Banks and Hole 1993).

World Museum Specimens

One of March's birds, the Bahama Mockingbird, was listed as a "co-type" (now syntype) from the Smithsonian Institution's collection, based on its original label and publication reference (March 1863). Three of the syntypes are held at the Smithsonian NMNH and one (Fig. 4) was re-located to World Museum as a gift presented to Canon Henry Baker Tristram (1822-1906) – whose collection was sold in 1896 to Liverpool Museum, the predecessor of World Museum. The Smithsonian Institution 'sent [the bird] to Henry B. Tristram on June 9, 1870' according to Deignan (1961, p. 415).

Some of March's bird skins, within World Museum, were originally in the Smithsonian NMNH collection and have retained their original Smithsonian labels. Some were bought and others were gifted to Henry Baker Tristram in the 1800s. The skins were then bought from Tristram by Liverpool Museum (now World Museum) and became part of its founding collections. World Museum has 10 bird specimens collected by March (see Appendix Figs. A-J).

Table 1. William Thomas March's specimens distribution and total numbers calculated from individual institutions' online catalogues and GBIF.org (22 June 2023) GBIF Occurrence Download https://doi.org/10.15468/dl.syf6pa

Recent Institution	Number	Internationally Standardised Acronyms
Botanical Specimens		<u> </u>
Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical, CIAT	2	CIAT
Harvard University Herbaria	25	A, AMES, ECON,
Meise Botanic Garden (formerly National Botanic	21	FH,GH, NEBC BR
Garden of Belgium)		
Missouri Botanical Gardens	17	MO
National Museum of Natural History, Paris	1	P, PC
Naturalis Biodiversity Centre (NL)	1	AMD, L, U, WAG
Royal Botanic Gardens National Herbarium of Victoria	33	MEL
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew	78	K
Staatliche Naturwissenschaftliche Sammlungen Bayerns	81	M
The Field Museum of Natural History	15	F
The New York Botanical Garden Herbarium	48	NY
Type Herbarium, Gottingen	64	GOET
Zoological Specimens		
American Natural History Museum	200	
Florida Museum of Natural History	2	
Manchester Museum	2	
Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University	43	
National Museum of Ireland	166	
National Museums, Scotland	1	
Natural History Museum Denmark	1	
Natural History Museum, Tring	62	
Naturalis Biodiversity Centre (NL)	4	
Ohio State University Tetrapod Division – Bird Collection; Museum of Biological Diversity, Ohio State Smithsonian Natural History Museum	8 517	
University of Michigan Museum of Zoology	43	
World Museum, National Museums Liverpool	10	
TOTAL	1445	

Zoological and Botanical Type Specimens

Two specimens labelled as type and co-type, collected by March, were sent to the Royal Dublin Society (now possibly housed in the National Museum of Ireland); described by Dr. Alexander Carte (1805–1881) and illustrated by Joseph Smit in Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London (Carte 1866; Levy 2013). These specimens were of the Blue

Mountain Duck or Jamaican Petrel *Pterodroma caribbea* an endemic seabird now thought to be extinct. March wrote to Baird in 1861 saying: 'The burrowing duck mentioned by Mr. Hill is *Prion caribea* I think, they are difficult to be got, being only found in the Blue Mountains but I will try for a pair for you – I sent a pair to Dublin some time ago



Fig. 4. A syntype of *Mimus gundlachii hillii* (Bahama Mockingbird), one of four syntype specimens collected by William Thomas March. The specimens of this subspecies were described by March in *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia* in 1863 (World Museum: NML-VZ T5625/ Olivia Beavers).

to be identified, but I have not yet heard if I am correct in the name...' (Levy 2013).

I corresponded with Paolo Viscardi, Keeper of Natural History at the National Museum of Ireland, and he confirmed there are many more of March's specimens in their collections (personal e-mail correspondence, Olivia Beavers to Paolo Viscardi, January 2023). It is unclear however, whether the birds in Figures 5a, 5b and 6 are the original specimens collected by William Thomas March or different specimens associated with Admiral Leopold McClintock (1819–1907). Without doubt, the original type specimens were collected by William Thomas March. Whether these specimens now labelled as the type and co-type in the collections are the original specimens, is yet to be confirmed. As Paolo Viscardi communicated:

'All labels now with the specimens are post-1877 so original labels that would identify these as March or McClintock acquisitions are absent. As there are only two birds in the collection and not four as indicated from the publication by Carte combined with the register entry from 1869 – the possibility that the two birds are entered twice in the system must be considered.

"It is worth noting that the specimens described by Carte in 1866 were the ones sent by March to the Royal Dublin Society, which rather coincidentally McClintock (who was Commodore of the Jamaica Division at the time) was elected to in 1865. It is possible that although the specimens have an entry for September 9th in the 1869 donation book they may have been the same specimens that were sent by March via McClintock and there was simply a delay in formally registering the donation (although it is also possible that the original specimens were destroyed and McClintock acquired replacements)" (personal e-mail correspondence, Paolo Viscardi to Olivia Beavers, January 2023)

To date, using online databases and museum catalogues, I have found that March collected 114 type specimens of birds, mammals and botanical specimens, presented in Table 2. It should be noted that there could be additional specimens that are yet to be re-discovered due to William Thomas March not being clearly documented as the source.

Five of the 12 type specimens at the Smithsonian were described by Robert Ridgway (1850–1929), the first full-time curator of the Department of Birds at the Smithsonian at the time of the donations from March. Ridgway used many of March's birds (Fig. 7) to prepare his 'Birds of North and Middle America' but rarely mentioned the individual specimens used and therefore, outside of the Smithsonian, ornithologists were not aware of this unworked collection (Banks and Hole 1993).

Through correspondence between Richard Hill and Charles Darwin (Fig. 8), March was credited in supplying insect specimens to Darwin: "Mr March, a naturalist very well known to Sir William Hooker, — from whom I procured these specimens, promises me a complete suite from the Queen downwards. He has been searching over his Farm in the Salt pond plain for our Meliponas, but without success. He intends to supply me with a joint of a tree containing the Sacklets, — when he finds a hive." March has been described as 'one of Jamaica's leading botanists' (Levy 2013). His first true passion was botany and he sent botanical samples to Sir William Jackson Hooker (Director of Kew Gardens 1841–1865).

Botanical Specimens

While searching for zoological specimens collected by William Thomas March, I also came across a series of botanical specimens in various institutions across the world noted in Tables 1 and 2. Again, confusion over his name has led to some herbarium sheets being recorded as collected by M. March, Mr. March or simply just 'collected by March' (Figs. 9 and 10).

Letters between William Thomas March and Sir William Jackson Hooker document that plant specimens were exchanged between the two, and that March originally sent around 2000 botanical specimens to Hooker.

On a recent research visit to the Economic Botany Collection at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the curatorial team was able to show me a selection of wood specimens (Appendix K and L) that March collected, including a sample of gum. There are also records of fruit samples preserved in spirit which I hope to see on another visit.

March proposed the idea of launching his own botanical magazine in England, complete with coloured plates created by a Jamaican lithographer, Miss Catherine Eloise Dubuisson, who visited Hooker and RBG Kew in 1857. Another project, which Sir William Jackson Hooker agreed to offer his assistance on, was March's handbook of [Jamaican] ferns. March was encouraged by his friends to publish the latter, as detailed in letters from February 1861 and April 1861. It is unclear whether these projects were fulfilled.

CONCLUSION

Writing about March, Levy (2013) has described him as 'much-neglected'. I must agree with that summation given that March's contributions to Jamaican zoology and botany have gone relativly un-noticed in recent times — despite working with and helping to propel the careers of some of the most highly praised naturalists of his time. He was a pioneer in providing some of the first biological data available for the Caribbean with his exceptional knowledge as a local resident naturalist. His collection of type specimens and



Figs. 5a. & 5b. Blue Mountain Duck or Jamaican Petrel co-type specimen. The original co-type bird specimen was collected by William Thomas March but the specimen's label says that they came from Admiral Leopold McClintock in 1869. 'Original labels that would identify these as March or McClintock acquisitions are absent.' (Image courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History).

now extinct specimens will have helped researchers who focussed on Caribbean biodiversity, and continues to provide historical data for current scientists.

As I have documented in this article, much of March's lifetime contribution is housed internationally under different names. With further research, I hope to locate more of his specimens to document a more complete history of William Thomas March's collections and their whereabouts, and to create a catalogue of his specimens to celebrate his work.

Another important outcome of this project is the work continuing to make the Vertebrate Zoology collections at World Museum Liverpool accessible to all and especially to those in the Caribbean – from where the majority of March's specimens originate.

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I would like to thank Catherine Levy whose papers about William Thomas March were fundamental in starting my research. I would also like to thank Paolo Viscardi, Keeper of Natural History at the National Museum of Ireland, for providing further historical information on William Thomas March's specimens in Dublin and the images of



Fig. 6. Blue Mountain Duck or Jamaican Petrel type specimen. The original type bird specimen was collected by William Thomas March but the specimen's label says that they came from Admiral Leopold McClintock in 1869. 'Original labels that would identify these as March or McClintock acquisitions are absent. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History.

Table 2 Type specimens collected by March and the institutions that currently store them

Institution		Number of Type Specimens	Type of Material
Harvard University Herbaria		11	Botanical
Meise Botanic Garden		1	Botanical
Missouri Botanical Gardens		5	Botanical
Royal Botanic Gardens: Kew		9	Botanical
The New York Botanical Garden Herbarium		8	Botanical
Type Herbarium: Gottingen (GOET)		64	Botanical
National Museum of Ireland		2	Zoological
Smithsonian Natural History Museum		12	Zoological
The Field Museum of Natural History		1	Zoological
World Museum: National Museums Liverpool		1	Zoological
	TOTAL	114	



Fig. 7. Plate XVII. illustrating a male Vervain hummingbird, nest and eggs all collected by William Thomas March. Image courtesy of the *Report of National Museum*, 1890. – *Ridgway*.

the Caribbean petrels. My thanks also go to Mike Rutherford for editing this paper, for inviting me to speak on William Thomas March in the webinar: "Natural History Specimens & Knowledge Co-Production: The Case of the Jamaican Giant Galliwasp", and for introducing me to colleagues at the Institute of Jamaica and the University of the West Indies. Furthermore, I would like to thank the curators who

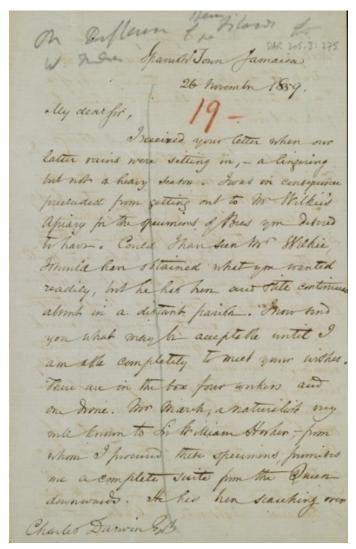


Fig. 8. Darwin Correspondence Project, "Letter no. 2557" 1859. A letter from Richard Hill to Charles Darwin mentioning the specimens collected by March. Images of original letters from the Cambridge University Library collections are courtesy of Cambridge University Digital Library (Darwin Correspondence Project, 1859).

responded when I asked for further information on March's collections over the NatSCA JISCMail. A special thanks to the Economic Botany Collection's team at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew for facilitating my visit to see the collections. Finally, I would like to thank the Living World Journal editors, the peer reviewer Gerhard Aubrecht, and two anonymous reviewers for their support with this paper.



Fig. 9. K000528934 Lectotype of *Stemodia durantifolia* (L.) Sw. var. angustifolia Griseb. collected in Jamaica by 'Mr. March' 1858. An example of William Thomas March's contribution to botany collections at Royal Botanic Garden, Kew. Image courtesy of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.



Fig. 10. K000324492 *Peperomia tenella* (Sw.) A.Dietr. collected in Jamaica by 'Marsh'. An example of how easy it is to overlook William Thomas March's contributions to natural science collections. Image courtesy of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

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Fig. A. Scientific Name: Coccyzus vetula (Linnaeus, 1758)

Nickname; Common Name: Old Woman Bird, Ring Tail; Jamaican Lizard-

Cuckoo

Date of Collection: Before 1896

Collection locality: Spanish Town, Jamaica



Fig. B. Scientific Name: Coccyzus americanus (Linnaeus, C 1758) Nickname; Common Name: Yellow-billed Cuckoo Date of Collection: 03.1866

Collection locality: Jamaica





Fig. C. Scientific Name: Mimus gundlachii hilli March, 1864

Nickname; Common Name: Spanish mockingbird; Bahama Mockingbird (hillii)

Date of Collection: 1862.10.31

Collection locality: Near Spanish Town, Jamaica

Accession Number: World Museum NML-VZ T5652 formerly 26803 in U.S. National Museum

Bulletin 221 Type Specimens of Birds (Deignan, 1961, p.415).



Fig. D. Scientific Name: *Myiarchus stolidus* (Gosse, 1847) Nickname; Common Name: Tom Fool; Stolid Flycatcher

Date of Collection: 1865.02

Collection locality: Spanish Town, Jamaica

Sex: Male

Accession Number: World Museum NML-VZ 1989.66.1279



Fig. E. Scientific Name: *Tyrannus caudifasciatus jamaicensis* (Chapman, FM 1892) **Nickname; Common Name:** Jamaican Petchary; Loggerhead Kingbird (jamaicensis)

Date of Collection: 1861.04

Collection locality: Near Spanish Town, Jamaica

Sex: Male

Accession Number: World Museum NML-VZ T19525

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Fig. F. Scientific Name: *Tiaris olivaceus* (Linnaeus, 1766) Nickname; Common Name: Grassbird; Yellow-faced Grassquit

Date of Collection: 1861.11.04

Collection locality: Spanish Town, Jamaica



Fig. G. Scientific Name: Calidris minutilla (Vieillot, 1819)

Nickname; Common Name: Least Sandpiper

Date of Collection: 1862.10.03

Collection locality: Near Spanish Town, Jamaica

Sex: Female



Fig. H. Scientific Name: Euneornis campestris (Linnaeus, 1758)

Nickname; Common Name: Bluequit, Long Mouth Bluequit, Blue badas; Orangequit

Date of Collection: 1865.03.18

Collection locality: Spanish Town, Jamaica

Sex: Male



Fig. I. Scientific Name: Melopyrrha violacea ruficollis (J.F. Gmelin, 1789)

Nickname; Common Name: Black Sparrow, Jack Sparrow, Cotton tree sparrow; Greater Antillean Bullfinch (ruficollis)

Date of Collection: Before 1896

Collection locality: Near Spanish Town, Jamaica

Sex: Male



Fig. J. Scientific Name: *Tachornis phoenicobia* Gosse, P.H. 1847 Nickname; Common Name: Rain bird; Antillean Palm-Swift

Date of Collection: Before 1896

Collection locality: Spanish Town, Jamaica



Fig. K. Gum/Resin of *Anacardium occidentale*, L. alongside the relevant accession register entry (highlighted yellow). Kew Economic Botany Collections, catalogue number 61854.



Fig. L. A sample of Ilex obcordata Sw., collected by W.T. March, from the Kew Economic Botany Collection, catalogue number 4672.