

# Cuba March 2019



## Preamble and Planning

Cuba had long been a desired destination for us as it holds a suite of endemic birds, including the smallest bird in the world, Bee Hummingbird. It is also a fascinating country from a cultural point of view and Havana old town gives a marvellous glimpse into the past being a lively, vibrant city in a faded Spanish colonial style. Cuba is often mentioned as a 'Museum of the 1950s', although this seems mainly to refer to the pre-revolution (1959) American cars that abound. (A trade embargo enforced by USA after the Fidel Castro's revolution means no cars have been imported since that date). These cars are loved, passed down through generations and are invariably in immaculate condition.

Cuba can be an expensive destination from a bird tour point of view. It is quite possible to hire a car and self-drive but as the key birding sites are many kilometres apart we wanted to hire a driver for a custom tour with just 4 participants. In the event this proved problematic as our chosen ground agents (Havavatur: <http://www.havanatour.co.uk>) informed us that we would also have to take along one of their representatives as a non-birding tour guide. Maybe this is a requirement of the communist state system but as the car/driver/rep combination was only a little dearer than the quoted self-drive option it turned into a no-brainer. Havanatour also have a London office and a UK based birding consultant, Andy Mitchell, a bird guide who organised the birding side of our tour (cubabirdtours: <https://www.cubabirdingtours.com>). The state system, unfathomable at times, then threw up another snag. We were informed that our tour had been allocated a fixed number of kilometres but as the distances had been calculated from hotel to hotel they had failed to take into account the extra distance needed to be driven from the hotels to various birding sites and back. A surcharge of £50 per person covered this extra kilometre-age. The price for this custom tour, with a spacious 10-seater vehicle, personal driver, extra kilometres, Havanatour representative/facilitator, all accommodations, meals and local bird guides, totalled a very reasonable £1133. The only extras now were a few

snack lunches, beer money, tips and, of course, the long haul flight. We wanted the convenience of flying from/to Manchester so our flights were booked with Thomas Cook Airlines, arriving at Varadero but departing from Havana to Manchester (with the Thomas Cook's German affiliates, Condor Airlines) the downside of this return leg being a UK overshoot to change planes in Frankfurt. These flights cost £759 and cheaper options could have been found via Gatwick. We had given Andy a target bird list and our aim was to see all the **Greater Antillean regional endemics** and **25 Cuban endemics**. We discounted searching for 2 endemics - Cuban Kite, which is very rare in the extreme east and hence not on our itinerary, and Zapata Rail, which may well be extinct. In the event this proved successful, virtually a clean sweep, with only one regional endemic missed.

### Sites and Outline Itinerary

Mar 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>. Arrived Varadero and taxi transfer to Havanatour office in Havana to pick up our driver and tour vehicle. Then further westwards to Hotel Mirador in San Diego de los Baños near La Güira N.P. (2 nights Full Board).

Mar 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup>. Long drive east to Cayo Coco. (2 nights in all-inclusive Hotel Sol Cayo Coco).

Mar 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup>. South east through Camaguey and Najasa to Finca la Belen in the Sierra del Chorillo. (2 nights Half Board).

Mar 14<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup>. West to the resort of Playa Larga. Accommodation at Hotel Playa Larga to explore Zapata N.P. (4 nights Half Board)

Mar 18<sup>th</sup>. Drive north-west to Havana for walking tour of old town. Depart Havana.

### The Trip

March 8<sup>th</sup>. The outbound flight took longer than expected (9h 40m) due to 250mph jet - stream headwinds, which caused a detour via mainland Canada. Once outside arrivals at Varadero we were met by Armando, our Havatour representative, and changed ££ into CUCs (Cuban Convertible Peso). Cuba has two currencies CUPs (Cuban Peso) for locals and CUCs for tourists, with a 25-fold difference in value. We had read warnings about Cadeca (official money exchange office) rip-offs and were very attentive during the exchange. The first problem was that any of our £20 notes with the slightest defect were rejected by the teller, so take only pristine notes. Second problem, although we were certain we had received exactly the right number of CUCs, we failed to repeat the counting exercise and reject any CUC notes that were slightly torn. This cost us later in the trip when we found one of our 20CUC notes was unusable (they can be exchanged at certain banks in Havana but it would have been a time consuming exercise). We simply added it to our rep's tip.



We set out westwards from Varadero to Havana in a taxi, met our personal driver, Renardo, transferred luggage to a state-owned, Chinese 10-seater minibus and set out for the village of San Diego de los Baños, near Parc la Güira in the Viñales region. We arrived at the comfortable Hotel Mirador at 18.45. Here we met our local bird guide, Cesar, and made plans for the next day.

March 9<sup>th</sup>. Birds around the hotel included **Cuban Blackbirds, Cuban Oriole, Antillean Palm Swifts, Greater Antillean Grackles and a Great Lizard Cuckoo**. After breakfast we again met Cesar and were on the road for 07.30. Whilst the birding in this area is excellent there are only 3 key birds that most birders target, all the others can be seen later on the tour. So it was that we made our way into La Güira National Park marvelling at our first **Cuban Todys, La Sagra's Flycatchers**, Western Spindalis and **Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds**.



Western Spindalis





Yellow-headed Warbler



Cuban Green Woodpecker

Many North American wood warblers migrate south to winter in Cuba, Palm Warblers and American Redstarts were common but we also noted our first Black-and-white Warblers, Northern Parulas and endemic **Yellow-headed Warblers** here. First sightings also of other good birds included **Cuban Pewee**, **Cuban Emeralds**, Red-legged Thrushes and **Cuban Green Woodpeckers**. Further on are Cuevas de los Portales, an interesting cave system where Che Guevara moved his headquarters during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Here he played chess whilst the rest of the world faced nuclear Armageddon. A small entrance fee is expected.





Ceucas de los Portillas



Cuban Stream Anole

The caves and river system were home to Cuban Stream Anole, an large endemic lizard that we were told is distantly related to alligators and crocodiles. One can see the similarity. Also in the caves were roosting Mexican Free-tailed Bats and Cuban Fruit-eating Bats.

From a birding perspective this is a good place to find nesting Cave Swallows, and also the key endemic, **Cuban Solitaire**, a spectacular songster with unspectacular plumage.

We later moved to lower elevations and explored the campsite and the more formal areas of Parc la Güira where we located our first **Giant Kingbirds**, **Cuban Trogons**, **Cuban Pewee** and the second key species, **Olive-capped Warbler**. As we were on a full board basis we went back to the hotel for lunch during the quiet period of the day.





Cuban Solitaire



Giant Kingbird—what a driller

Whilst the birding was spectacularly good much of the photography was problematic. Many shots seemed to be of fast-moving subjects against the light and difficulties with autofocus didn't help. Some of those included here are less than optimum but give a flavour of what was seen. American Kestrels came in two colour morphs with either white or red underparts. We lent non-birding Armando a spare pair of binoculars and he was getting quite keen, pointing out some of the commoner species.



At around 14.30, after lunch, we drove to Paso Real Fish Ponds. This was a pleasant re-acquaintance with many North American birds. White and Brown Pelicans, Snail Kites, Crested Caracaras, Belted Kingfishers and an assortment of heron/egret species. White-headed Ospreys were the resident *ridgwayi* subspecies whilst wildfowl was represented by Lesser Scaup and waders by Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers. A spanking plumaged Cape May Warbler vied for attention with an equally immaculate Yellow-throated Warbler. Nearby farmland held five Eastern Meadowlarks.



Paso Real Fish Ponds



American White Pelicans with one Brown Pelican interloper



As the temperatures had cooled somewhat we paid a second visit to Parc la Güira. Additional species included Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Black-whiskered Vireos, Red-legged Honeycreepers, plus a **Cuban Emerald** on a tiny nest, better looks at a confiding **Cuban Trogon** with its bizarre tail and another delightful Cuban Tody. With that we retired back to the hotel for a meal, a couple of beers and a mull over the day's events. Eight Cuban endemics on our first birding day with a bonus of 9 regional endemics, not a bad start (the other key endemic of this area, Cuban Grassquit, would have to wait until tomorrow).



Cuban Trogon



Cuban Tody





TOP: Red-legged Thrush

MIDDLE: Cave Swallow

Loggerhead Kingbird  
(Cuban race - Grey mantle)

American Kestrel  
(Interesting hybrid of White and  
Red phases)

BOTTOM: Poor photo of Olive-  
capped Warbler





March 10<sup>th</sup>. A fairly relaxed start for a birding trip with alarms set for 06.15. The weather was again hot and sunny but this was a dedicated driving day east to Cayo Coco; we were expecting 8 hours in the vehicle but with a few stops. First stop was a well know farm near Terrazas where the farmer runs the small side-line business of a Grassquit feeding station. Having first been welcomed to his house he sprinkled a little seed on a nearby wall and within seconds we were feasting our eyes on at least 20 **Cuban Grassquits**, a quite difficult bird to see elsewhere, accompanied by a few Yellow-faced Grassquits for comparison.



Cuban Grassquit (male)



Yellow-faced Grassquit (with 3 female Cuban Grassquits)



We still had a long journey ahead so didn't linger at the farm but pushed on eastwards. Our lunch stop was at Finca Fiesta Campansina, not far from the Playa Larga turn off on the Autopista Nacional. The adjoining small zoo was tacky but the coffees here were exceptionally good, as were the tame warblers.



Black-throated Blue Warbler

We were then back on the Autopista passing burning sugar plantations and skirting Santa Clara to make one further comfort stop at Taguasco, which apparently is famous for selling fudge. Turning north at Ciego de Avila we were soon on the causeway across to Cayo Coco.



Cayo Coco causeway

As the sun set we only stopped briefly on the causeway to note a couple of large heron flocks; c60 Tricoloured Herons and c40 Little Blue Herons, with the occasional Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns thrown in. Dedicated birding trip lodgings can often verge on the austere so our accommodation for the next 2 nights in an upmarket all-inclusive hotel was a very pleasant change. The fresh fish grill and buffet were exceptional and quite a few beers and cuba libras later we went to bed with alarms set for 05.45.

March 11th. We met with our new local guide Raynier, my namesake, and headed for a night club spot, Cueva de Jabalí (Wild Boar Cave) which is also a well known Quail-dove stake out. Here we found at least five **Key West Quail-doves** with a supporting cast of Common Ground and Zenaida Doves. The early morning light meant slow shutter speeds and high IOS ratings so photographic opportunities were not optimum. At the feeding tray female Painted Bunting, Ovenbird and Grey Catbird put in appearances but another couple of key species were also nearby, **Cuban Bullfinch** and **Zapata Sparrow**.



Key West Quail Dove

After the Quail-doves we spent quite a chunk of valuable time in a scrubby area near the hotels where Raynier had seen Bahama Mockingbird and Thick-billed Vireo just a couple of days previously. We failed to find either.

Much suitable habitat was destroyed by hurricane Irma in 2017 and this, together with increasing pressure from hotel developments, has led to these two birds become quite difficult to locate.



We moved on for some leisurely birding from the causeway, viewing yesterday's large heron flocks in better light but now with the addition of scores of Reddish, Snowy and Great White Egrets, Neotropic Cormorants by the hundred and a large mixed wader flock containing both Black-necked Stilts and Willets. Two subspecies of Willets were present, 'Eastern' and 'Western', with a minority of the shorter-billed, browner-plumaged 'Eastern' Willets. These could be candidates for a split but either one would do in Great Britain!



'Western Willet' (extreme left) and 'Eastern' Willet (extreme right)



Black-necked Stilts



After we had had our heron and wader fix we moved on to an area in the south of Cayo Coco that Raynier simply called El Jato Road. This area still held an outside possibility for the Mockingbird but more importantly afforded good views of **Oriente Warblers**, **Cuban Vireos**, **Cuban Bullfinches**, **Great Lizard Cuckoo**, **Cuban Black Hawks** and White-crowned Pigeon. However, the hoped for Cuban Gnatcatcher, and particularly Bahama Mockingbird, were becoming troublesome.



Oriente Warbler



Cuban Vireo





Cuban Bullfinch



Great Lizard Cuckoo

A small, roadside mangrove lagoon gave us some additional species, namely Blue-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Great Blue Heron, Ovenbird, Lesser Yellowlegs, Least Grebes, a Northern Waterthrush and the ubiquitous Palm Warblers and Cape May Warblers.

Overhead flew **Cuban Black Hawks**, Merlin, Crested Caracara and Osprey.

The habitat here was not as damaged as elsewhere on Cayo Coco. The recent hurricane, especially around the hotel complexes, has uprooted great swathes of scrub and all to be seen now is a wilderness of dead brushwood.

With that we took a lunch break back at the all-inclusive enjoying the tame Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns on the beach and a confiding Yellow-bellied Sapsucker next to the swimming pool.





American Royal Tern



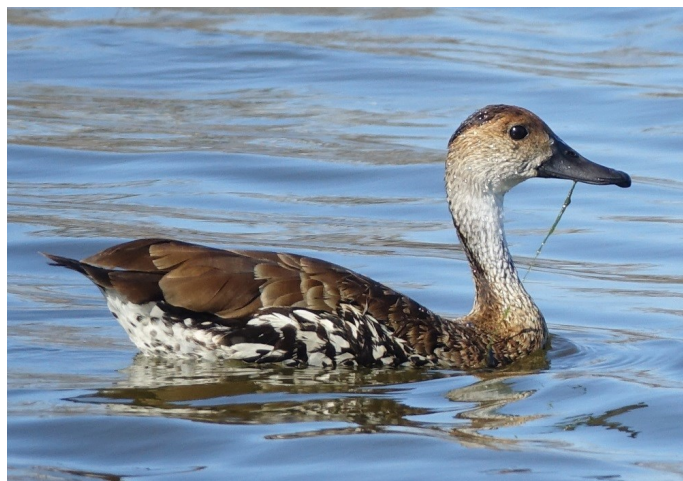
Laughing Gull

We tried the local scrub area again for Bahama Mockingbird and Thick-billed Vireo. Plenty of Northern Mockingbirds to be seen but that was all. Then, along a rubbish strewn track we heard a **Thick-billed Vireo** singing. It eventually gave good views as it half hid in the bushes but sadly no photographs. Nearby mangrove fringes held 3 Least Sandpipers and a couple of Clapper Rails. We again cut our Mockingbird losses and headed for Cayo Guillermo to try the wetlands for some other targets. Here we found West Indian Whistling Ducks, American Flamingos, American Coots and the now split Common Gallinules.





American Flamingo



West Indian Whistling Duck



Blue-winged Teal



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in the hotel grounds

One last attempt on Cayo Guillermo for Bahama Mockingbird then back to the hotel. After dinner we went night birding which didn't provide Greater Antillean Nightjar but gave us American Barn Owl (another split according to I.O.C.) and a Yellow-crowned Night Heron.



12th March. Alarms were set for 05.30 but the morning started with heavy rain showers. We had a last half-hearted attempt at the Mockingbird and Thick-billed Vireo at the nearby scrub where we had the Clapper Rails and found a nice Yellow Warbler, then tried El Jato road for a second time. All of yesterday's birds were again seen but this time we scored with 3 **Cuban Gnatcatchers**. We had abandoned all hope of Bahama Mockingbird by this stage so relaxed with some general birding and trip ticks in form of Roseate Spoonbills, Short-billed Dowitchers, Semi-palmated Plovers and Killdeers. All that remained was a last blow-out lunch at Hotel Sol Cayo Coco and an afternoon journey of nearly 5 hours through Camaguey and Najasa to arrive at our new accommodation, Rancho La Belen. This was at

the opposite end of the spectrum to the touristy Cayo Coco. The rustic Finca la Belen is a working horse ranch, way out in the middle of the reserve in the Sierra de Najasa. Other accommodation can be found in Camaguey but this would have necessitated even earlier starts to make the 45 minute commute into the reserve. At least we were right on the spot and from the minibus windows gained an immediate insight of what we might expect the next day with tree-roosting Limpkins and unidentified Crows (Cuban Crow and Palm Crow both occur). Meals here, however, lacked any sophistication or imagination. After dinner we saw 2 more Barn Owls and heard a Cuban Pygmy Owl.



Yellow Warbler  
(above)

Cuban Gnatcatcher  
(right)





March 13th. We met our new local guide, Camilo, and drove just a couple of kilometres to the start of a trail head at Sendero de las Aves. Here we did a superb circular walk. Red-legged Thrushes were plentiful, **Cuban Palm Crows**, with their weak calls and feathered nostrils, were quickly separated from **Cuban Crows**. Showy **West Indian Woodpeckers**, noisy fly-over **Cuban Parakeets** and our first **Cuban Amazons**, but the star of the show was a cute **Cuban Pygmy Owl**. Camilo also knew his butterflies and pointed out many endemics. Again we ate back at the Rancho but lunch didn't really differ from last night's dinner.



Plain Pigeon



West Indian Woodpecker

The afternoon session started with a visit to a nearby water body, Lago Cuncuni. This turned into a trip ticking exercise and we soon logged Anhingas, Purple Gallinules, Northern Jacanas etc. This was all very nice but an easy ride for the guide so we requested that we returned to Sendero de las Aves for a second time. A short distance from the road there is a horse feeding shelter and here we waited whilst scanning the nearby hill sides. Many of the morning's birds, such as **Cuban Parakeets** and **Plain Pigeons** afforded better views but we were waiting for what was one of the most difficult birds on our hit list. After about an hour the shout went up, "**Gundlach's Hawk**" and we watched it speed away from the nearby crest until it disappeared from view. Excellent, not every trip gets this one.



With that we headed back to the Rancho as the sun was setting for our third helping of fried chicken, plantain, rice and beans, with a curious pickled side-salad and a small dish of marmalade for desert. At least the beers were decent. It is worth mentioning that we sampled two local beers, Crystal and Bucanero. We felt the latter had more taste.

14th March. We only had one more target for this area, Scaly-naped Pigeon, and were considering an early departure when a different local guide, Jorge, turned up unexpectedly. We suggested a shorter session and he took us on an excellent trail opposite the Rancho. He already knew the brief and tried hard to find a Scaly-naped Pigeon but to no avail. We were, however, treated to even better views of **Cuban Pygmy Owl**, **Plain Pigeons**, a **Great Lizard Cuckoo** complete with lizard prey and many more of the birds with which we had become so familiar since the start of the trip. With that we returned to the Rancho and departed at 09.45. Today was another longish driving day, returning on the Autopista Nacionale to Playa Larga, a distance of 465 kilometres.



Cuban Pygmy Owl

We had a nice lunch stop at Rio Azul and eventually met up with yet another local guide, Kiko near Finca Fiesta Campastina (we had stopped here early on in the trip). Each area has its own specialist guide and Andy Mitchell's arrangements were working perfectly. It was also useful to have Spanish speaking Armando with us to phone ahead and sort out these meetings with guides. As we were located at Playa Larga for 4 nights we laid out a longer term strategy with Kiko for our targets and, as there were 3 other birding groups in town, Kiko suggested we first visit to La Turba, which he said was more suitable for small groups. To be continued in part 2...