

# Cuba March 2019



## PART 2





15th March. We had made arrangements with our local bird guide, Kiko, to enter Zapata Swamp and visit La Turba. The weather was again hot and sunny, but with scattered cloud, and after parking up in the middle of the extensive swamp we walked a trail to view from various locations between the trees. We were now seeing many Red-legged Thrushes and Common Yellowthroats as well as the ubiquitous Palm Warblers, Cape May Warblers, Black-and-white Warblers, American Redstarts and Ovenbirds. Then, two endemics in quick succession. A **Zapata Wren** was enticed into view and chose to sing from a perch no more than 2 metres away, this was quickly followed by a couple of **Zapata Sparrows** on the trail.



Zapata Wren



Mission accomplished and it was only 08.30. As we left, a cuckoo species that flew down the track in front of the minibus was almost certainly a Mangrove Cuckoo.



Zapata Sparrow



Palm Warbler

Our next port of call was just to the north of Playa Larga. This was to see the one bird that was our group's most wanted, indeed, one of the main reasons for devising the whole trip. We stopped outside a fairly ordinary house in the small village of Palpite and noted the inscription over the door, 'Casa del Zunzun'. It is not giving too much away to say that this translates as 'House of the **Bee Hummingbird**'.





Casa del Zunzun

We were invited around the back of the house where sugar-filled hummingbird feeders had been hung and we didn't have long to wait. The minute **Bee Hummingbirds**, 3 males and 3 females, were totally captivating. Bombing around like miniature hawk moths, two of the males would have an aerial battle, or a pair would rapidly chase each other. Then a male would display, towering like a Skylark until almost a dot, then plunging to the ground like a Peregrine stooping. When eventually perched, the black feathering lit up like a beacon. We have seen many hummingbird species on our travels but these were totally magical. The support act of **Cuban Emeralds** tried to please but couldn't steal the show.



Cuban Emerald





Female Bee Hummingbirds are nice enough...



Males are still excellent even when not catching the sun...





A little more colour as the sun came up...



Then it turned its head... Kerpow!



It was still only 10.00 so off we went to woodland at Soplillar on this most spectacular of mornings. In the Soplillar forest we found more Yellow-headed Warblers, more Cuban Vireos, Ovenbirds and Prairie Warblers. Then the next special endemic miraculously appeared as two **Grey-fronted Quail-doves** sedately walked across a clearing and entered the scrub to the right. The trail was split at this point so we went round head them off and waited, only to be gob-smacked as a **Blue-headed Quail-dove** emerged in their place.



Grey-fronted Quail-dove



Blue-headed Quail-dove



As if this wasn't enough Kiko then found the pair of roosting **Greater Antillean Nightjars** he had been searching for. Quite a session!

Well pleased we retired for lunch at the touristy Cueva de los Peces. We didn't dive with the fish but observed five habituated **Blue-headed Quail-doves** picking over scraps thrown from the kitchen window, their blue heads were turning black due to this un-natural diet. Also here were tame **Cuban Trogons**, **Greater Antillean Grackles** and the usual Palm and Black-throated Blue Warblers.



Greater Antillean Nightjar (with a second one photo-bombing to the right)



'Blue and Black ' headed Quail-dove. Blackening plumage due to un-natural diet of kitchen scraps



There was more interest at Cueva de los Peces in the form of Northern Curly-tailed Lizards, a range of superb American automobiles in the car park and, over the road, a magnificent coastline where we watched scuba divers for a while. We had done well with target birds for the day, we only had 3 more specials to see for a clean sweep of the available Cuban endemics and these were promised for tomorrow. In the afternoon, therefore, we chose to visit some nearby Salinas to see what we could find.



Northern Curly-tailed Lizard *Leiocephalus carinatus*



Rocky coastline near Cueva de los Peces



At Las Salinas de Brito, on the western side of the Bay of Pigs, are tower platforms overlooking saline lagoons, which were absolutely crammed with birds. With scopes and tripods we quickly found trip birds such as Wood Storks, White Ibises, Greater Yellowlegs (conveniently alongside Lesser Yellowlegs). **Cuban Black Hawks** vied with a Turkey Vulture over a carcass and American White Pelicans were everywhere. A scattered tern flock contained approximately 25 Caspian Terns, 20 Royal Terns and 8 Gull-billed Terns. Lots of white herons and egrets to sift through with white phases of Little Blue Heron, Reddish Egret and Great Blue Heron amongst the Snowy and Great White Egrets.



One of the many hundreds of Turkey Vultures we saw



Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs conveniently side by side





Typical habitat at Las Salinas de Brito



Reddish Egret (White phase)



Little Blue Heron (Blue phase)



16th March. The previous evening we had chatted with two other bird tour groups who had arrived that day, 'AviFauna' from Sweden and a party of Americans on a 'Rockjumper' tour. As the party sizes were 14 and 8 respectively we were privately grateful to be just a small group of four. Today we were heading for Bermejas, which is through Puerto Girón to the east of Bay of Pigs. But the day didn't quite pan out as we expected. It transpired that as Kiko was moving out of his area he needed to liaise with the Bermejas local guide, Osvaldo. This would have been no problem except Osvaldo was also guiding the Swedish group, we were now a party of 18 plus numerous guides. We became aware of the situation at our first stop where the Swedes were already ensconced at a Quail-dove feeding station in a forested area. It was difficult viewing here to see much the same doves as the previous day, with the notable exception of a Ruddy Quail-dove, our 4th Quail-dove species of the trip. We wanted to leave as soon as possible but had to follow the Swedes' bus to the Osvaldo's next stop in what looked very much like savanna-type habitat. Now we began to understand Osvaldo's strategy of combining groups as everyone strung out across the palm savannah until we reached a particular palm with a promising nest hole half way up. Osvaldo wanted to show us the key birds (quite a profitable business for him) but also keep disturbance to a minimum. When everyone was in place he gently scratched the trunk and immediately up popped a couple of **Bare-legged Owls** peering out of the hole. Clearly there will be people reading this who disagree with this strategy but it was done as quickly and sympathetically as possible and, in my view, conservationists like Osvaldo should be encouraged, he is far outnumbered by hunters.



Bare-legged Owl



Osvaldo then announced that he knew of six **Fernandina's Flicker** nests in the area and in a matter of moments one flew by. Another key endemic under the belt and only one to go.



Savannah-type habitat at Bermejas



Fernandina's Flicker

These endemic birds were falling thick and fast and after a very short drive up the road we stopped yet again, this time in a wetter, more swampy area. Within seconds of exiting the vehicles our last endemic was secured.



From a patch of reeds out flew 2 **Red-shouldered Blackbirds**, probably a pair. We had to confess that if in North America we would have passed these off for Red-winged Blackbirds, but the latter show extreme sexual dimorphism with the females being brown and streaked, whereas Red-shouldered males and females have similar plumage. Make of that what you will. Unfortunately neither bird was fully visible and photography was difficult.



Red-shouldered Blackbird

We were still in the company of the Swedish group and the party size was much too large for a nervous King Rail that called, but stayed well hidden. A little easier, but not much, was a Sora Rail creeping along the fringes of some more open water. We wanted a light lunch so, leaving the Swedes, we visited a lovely café in Puerto Girón. As this was privately owned they had an incentive to go the 'extra mile', something that is notably lacking in state run restaurants, where everything is delivered to a formula. As an aside, Puerto Girón is the site where CIA backed Batista supporters and American troops landed in the famous 'Bay of Pigs' invasion of 1961. Cubans will proudly tell you that the invaders surrendered after only 72 hours and that these events made Castro a national hero, (as the sign says "First great defeat of imperialist yankies in Latin America").





We returned in the afternoon to Bermejas and eventually had an immature King Rail and adult Sora Rail in the same binocular field of view. The advantage of small groups!

Later we met up with Osvaldo again and worked the forest behind the Quail-dove feeding areas. Our targets here were a couple of North American skulkers, Worm-eating and Swainson's Warblers.

On Osvaldo's advice we tried the Senderos los Lagunitas trail and sat quietly for a while on a log watching over a drinking pool. A succession of birds came to drink. Common Ground Doves, Black-whiskered Vireo, Black-throated Blue Warblers, American Redstarts, **Cuban Vireo**, Tawny-shouldered Blackbird and a fly-by **Grey-fronted Quail-dove** were seen, then... a Worm-eating Warbler. Elsewhere on the trail we heard a Swainson's Warbler but couldn't coax it into the open.

In view of our success over the past two days we said our farewells to Kiko a day early and returned to the hotel. In previous years a Stygian Owl nest had been located close to the hotel, but not this year. However, the owl still visited the hotel grounds, last sighting just two days previously. Kiko had pointed out the favourite trees so after dinner we tried some spotlighting, unfortunately without any success as nothing was seen or heard.

17th March. We had now seen all our target Cuban endemics and all but one of the Greater Antillean endemics plus nearly all our other targets. After a discussion and we decided that a second look at the **Bee Hummingbirds**, then a chill-out day sinking a few beers and swimming in the Caribbean Sea or hotel pool, was preferable to chasing the only remaining possible new bird in the area (Swainson's Warbler).





However, suffering a little from birding withdrawal symptoms in the late afternoon, we toured the hotel grounds, finding many of the now familiar species the best of which were 5 **Cuban Amazons**, Yellow-throated Warblers and a number of Red-legged Thrushes.



Cuban Amazon



Yellow-throated Warbler

We had another search for the Stygian Owl after dusk, this time together with the Swedish group. Slightly more success as we did hear the owl but it called, unseen, from deep within the nearby forest. The only sightings were of Killdeer and Little Blue Heron.



18th March. No birding today and a leisurely start leaving at 09.10 for the 190 Km drive to Havana. The usual Turkey Vultures, Northern Mockingbirds, **Greater Antillean Grackles** and American Kestrels were seen en route, also a Crested Caracara carrying nesting material.

On entering Havana we first drove on a cultural tour of Greater Havana visiting many famous places including Revolution Square, Christopher Columbus Cemetery and a small park with its bronze statue of John Lennon sat on a park bench. But it was the cars that stole the show, an amazing variety and all in immaculate condition.





There followed a super lunch in Havana Old Town in the privately owned 'Rum Rum' restaurant and an afternoon walking tour soaking up the vibrant street scenes, music and old colonial plazas. Just as we were nearing the end of the walk the heavens opened and we had our first proper rain of the holiday. All that remained was to be dropped off at the airport to make the long and uneventful journey home.

Other Wildlife. Apart from bats the only other mammal we saw was the introduced Small Indian Mongoose, at Bermejas. Space does not permit the inclusion of any butterfly photographs although they were spectacular. We saw only a fraction of the 196 species that have been recorded. Also notable was an endemic Slider Turtle, *trachemis derucata* and the carnage as Land Crabs spectacularly failed to dodge traffic as they swarmed across the road from forest to sea. Lastly, it is not every day you witness a 6cm Wasp fighting, and stunning, a large Tarantula then dragging it off as a food source for when its egg hatches.



Summary. This trip was a great success. As previously mentioned we saw all 25 **Cuban endemics**, apart from Cuban Kite and the impossible Zapata Rail. We also saw all but one **Greater Antillean endemics**, with only Bahama Mockingbird escaping us despite our best efforts. Furthermore, on our hit list of other species we wished to see we really only missed Scaly-naped Pigeon, with Swainson's Warbler and Stygian Owl heard only. If trips are to be measured by numbers we saw a total of 147 bird species, but much more than this we saw spectacular wildlife and also thoroughly enjoyed the cultural aspects. Touring with a Cuban rep certainly gave us a much deeper insight into this fascinating island.