



Cuba Birding Tour 2023 Trip Report

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Cuba is the largest island in the West Indies and boasts an array of unique avifauna found nowhere else on earth (not to mention the smallest bird in the world, the Bee Hummingbird)! Our birding focussed trip in March was a huge success with 164 species of birds including all possible endemic species, and plenty of Caribbean specialties and neotropic migrants to keep us busy along the way.

Day 1: Arrival in Cuba

Most participants flew into Veradero and shuttled to our starting hotel in central Havana. All participants and leaders met in the lobby for our first supper and to discuss the adventure ahead.



Havana Cuba © Yousif Attia

Day 2: Havana to Viñales

We met for breakfast, checked out, loaded the bus and started the day with a few of the locals in front of the hotel before departure. The large windows on our very comfortable bus allowed for some drive-by birding, which was dominated by **Turkey Vultures, Cattle Egrets, Mourning Doves, Northern Mockingbirds**, and newly arrived **Gray Kingbirds**. We arrived at Las Terrazas for our first official birding. It wasn't long before we were treated to point-blank views of our first target, the very attractive **Cuban Grassquit**. Cuban Grassquits are a declining species due to the pet trade and found only in Cuba and parts of the Bahamas. It was encouraging to see that the species was bouncing back, with the help of eco-tourism driven conservation efforts. We had our fill of the grassquits and were distracted by none other than the national bird of Cuba, the endemic **Cuban Trogon**. Unique among trogons of the world because of the serrated pattern on their tail, we had memorable close views of the plumage details.



Cuban Trogon © Yousif Attia



Cuban Grassquit © Yousif Attia

We also had our first looks at the more common and widespread endemics and Caribbean specialties. **West Indian Woodpecker**, **Smooth-billed Ani**, **Cuban Pewee**, **Loggerhead Kingbird**, **Cuban Blackbird**, **Greater Antillean Grackle**, Cuban race of **Red-legged Thrush**, **Western Spindalis**, would be detected regularly for the duration of the trip. We also had close views of the near-endemic **La Sagra's Flycatcher**, and even a surprise **Fernandina's Flicker** made

a brief appearance. Here also, we noticed some familiar faces that would stay familiar for the duration of our time in Cuba. **American Redstart**, **Cape May Warbler** and **Palm Warbler** seemed to be at every turn. Another species that would be around for the duration of the trip was **Black-whiskered Vireo**, a species that winters further south and migrates to the Caribbean to breed. Just before moving on to our next birding stop, a fly-by of a **Gundlach's Hawk** was our first of several encounters with this much-sought after accipiter.



Birding Las Terrazas © Yousif Attia



Western Spinalis © Yousif Attia

Our next stop, overlooking a wetland, provided our first good looks at waterbirds including **Purple Gallinule**, **Limpkin**, **Snail Kite**, and **Belted Kingfisher**. A **Cuban Slider (turtle)** was also a noteworthy non-bird find. Three **Broad-winged Hawks** circled overhead and some **Antillean Palm Swifts** put on a show as they swooped low trying to access their nests in the palm frond roofs of the buildings nearby. We also spotted our first of several **Tennessee Warblers** for the day, an indication that migration was ramping up. We had time for one more stop before lunch to search for roosting **Stygian Owl**. We found not one but two owls in the pine forest, and had our first looks at **Olive-capped Warbler**. Our lunch stop was very birdy, so we hung around the property and added more local residents and migrants including a few more **Cuban Grassquits**, **Red-legged Honeycreepers**, a **Black-throated Green Warbler** and an endemic butterfly, the **Cuban Calisto**. We also found a migrating **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** and the local Cuban race of **Northern Flicker**, our fourth and fifth woodpeckers for the day!



Cuban Slider © Yousif Attia



Tennessee Warbler © Yousif Attia

We continued west to Hacienda Cortina and La Guera National Park. Recent hurricane, Ian, caused significant damage to the forest in some areas. We searched for historically known locations for Giant Kingbird, but the habitat seemed to have been destroyed. One endemic **Yellow-headed Warbler** was a worthy consolation. One **Louisiana Waterthrush** and a **Green Heron** were along a drying creekbed. We pressed on to Viñales, where we would spend the night.



Yellow-headed Warbler © Yousif Attia

Day 3: Viñales and travel to Zapata Swamp

We woke up to have breakfast and enjoy the sunrise overlooking the unique limestone mountains and flat agricultural lands that make this region so iconic. After an efficient checkout, we were on our way to the Cueva del Indio. The birding here was excellent and as soon as we stepped out of the bus, we were greeted with the haunting song of our main target for the day, the **Cuban Solitaire**. Although not much to look at, this Cuban endemic has one of the most incredible songs, and we were treated to several. The solitaires proved difficult to spot, but eventually we all had scope views of at least two singing males. Other highlights here included **Scaly-naped Pigeon**, and even better looks at **Cuban Green Woodpecker**.



Viñales © Yousif Attia



Looking at Cuban Solitaire © Yousif Attia

We spent most of the day traveling east towards Havana, but had time for one stop to get improved looks at the near-endemic **Olive-capped Warbler**. While not uncommon, this species is local to pine forests of the extreme west and east of Cuba, and can be frustratingly difficult to get good looks at. We had an excellent lunch in Havana, then worked our way south towards Zapata, and the town of Playa Giron. As we neared Play Giron, we experienced a spectacle the region is known for. Hundreds of land crabs cross the road to get from their terrestrial homes in the coastal forest to the beach where they lay eggs. And to think, the peak season had not yet started! We also had several encounters with **Crested Caracara** that were feeding on dead crabs along the road. We checked into Play Giron where we would spend the coming three nights.





Black Land Crabs crossing road © Yousif Attia

Day 4: Zapata Swamp - Playa Giron, Bermejas, and Los Hondones

We were up early to check the Bermejas blind area for quail-doves. Sure enough, we first spotted one, then two, then up to six **Blue-headed Quail-Doves**. Also among the **Zenaida Doves** was one shy **Key West Quail-Dove**. We were pleased with these, but an important target, the Gray-fronted Quail-Dove was missing in action. The forest was teeming with life and some additional snooping around provided our best looks at **Cuban Pygmy-Owl**, and other locals like **Cuban Trogon**, **Cuban Tody**, and the Cuban race of **American Kestrel**.



Birding Bermejas © Yousif Attia



Blue-headed Quail-Dove © Yousif Attia

A walk through the woods at Bermejas provided our first views of **Cuban Parakeet**, **Bare-legged Owl**, **Great Lizard-Cuckoo**. Migrants were also around and we were lucky to spy a very shy, uncommon overwintering **Swainson's Warbler**. As the morning progressed, we also stopped by a location known to attract the **Bee Hummingbird**, the smallest bird in the world and endemic to Cuba. Although we had a couple fly-bys, we would have to wait for later in the afternoon to get the

looks we were hoping for.



Cuban Pygmy-Owl © Yousif Attia



Cuban Parakeet © Yousif Attia

After lunch, we checked out a town called Los Hondones. Our hosts at Rocio's Garden welcomed us to their yard to enjoy a birding bonanza. **Yellow-faced Grassquits** and **Shiny Cowbirds** were common at the feeders, while **Cuban Emeralds** zipped around every which way. A nearby yard had

a **Bee Hummingbird** on its territory and we finally had jaw-dropping views of this impossibly tiny bird. We added a few more migrants to our list including **Northern Parula**, plenty of **Cape May Warbler** and a **Worm-eating Warbler**. We were treated to some fresh coconut water by our hosts, and many agreed this was one of the most enjoyable parts of the trip!



Bee Hummingbird © Yousif Attia



Cuban Emerald © Yousif Attia

Day 5: Zapata Swamp - Santo Tomas, Playa Larga, and Soplillar

We had another early morning with an important and very localized target: the Zapata Wren. We left extra early so we could search for **Cuban Nightjar** on the way. We had great success with the nightjar on the road to Santo Tomas. At Santo Tomas, we boarded some floating gondola style canal boats that took us deep into the sawgrass marshes. **Zapata Wren** are an early nesting species, so despite hearing at least three individuals, we did not get a look at the secretive species. We did get our first looks at **Zapata Sparrow** and over 50 **White-crowned Pigeon** flew over the marshes. The walk back to the bus also provided an extended view at **Cuban Parrot**.



Cuban Parrot © Yousif Attia



Birding Zapata marsh © Yousif Attia

Our lunch stop in Playa Larga was scenic and birdy. We had our first looks at Cuban Black Hawk and Royal Tern, while a large flock of Cuban Martins, Cave Swallow circled over the bay. After lunch, we went to the Soplillar area to try for better looks at some more species and have a chance at Gray-fronted Quail-Dove. Our walk proved to be productive as we observed nests of **Bare-legged Owl**, **Cuban Pygmy-Owl**, and **Fernandina's Flicker**. We even witnessed a pair interaction as the male and female flickers swapped places for incubation duty.



Bare-legged Owl © Yousif Attia



Fernandina's Flicker © Yousif Attia



Birding Soplillar, Zapata © Yousif Attia

A late afternoon stroll around our hotel in Playa Giron, situated on the beach produced some waterbirds including **Laughing Gull**, **Black-bellied Plover**, **Ruddy Turnstone**, and **Little Blue Heron**. After dark, a **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron** was spotted during supper.



Ruddy Turnstone © Yousif Attia

Day 6: Bermejas, Cienfuegos, and travel to Trinidad

One of our main targets for the Zapata Swamp area, the Gray-fronted Quail-Dove was still missing. Luckily, we were close to Bermejas refuge, so opted for an early morning last-ditch effort. We were rewarded with one beautiful male Gray-fronted that gave us a show from the blind. After breakfast and checkout, we worked our way east towards Cienfuegos. We made a few successful stops to try for better looks at the localized endemic, **Red-shouldered Blackbird**. A flooded rice field provides some new birds in the form of a Northern Harrier, Northern Jacana, a small group of Glossy Ibis.



Gray-fronted Quail-Dove © Yousif Attia



Red-shouldered Blackbird © Yousif Attia



Birding La Hermita © Yousif Attia

We enjoyed a delightful seafood inspired lunch in Cienfuegos and picked up a few birds overlooking the bay, including **Brown Pelican**, **Neotropic Cormorant** and **Sandwich Tern**. Our next stop was Jardín Botánico de Cienfuegos, a historically known location for **Gundlach's Hawk**. We had two brief flyovers, but yet to get a good look at this species. Shortly after arriving we successfully tracked one down, and enjoyed prolonged scope views from a distance.



Gundlach's Hawk © Yousif Attia



Black-and-white Warbler © Yousif Attia

We still had some ground to cover on our way to Trinidad, but had time for one more endemic surprise. While Cuban Gnatcatchers are fairly reliable in the Cayo Coco area where we would end the trip, they also occur in a few isolated pockets on the south coast. We checked out one spot, just in case and were rewarded with great looks at a cooperative pair of Cuban Gnatcatchers! Not too shabby for a day designated mostly for travel. We would spend the night in Trinidad.

Day 7: Trinidad, Sancti Spiritus and travel to Cayo Coco

While today was mostly reserved for travel to the Cayo Coco area for the last leg of the journey, we had two important targets to search for along the Escambray Mountains between Trinidad and Sancti Spiritus. Our good fortune continued as we made one productive stop near La Hermita where we had excellent looks at a pair of **Giant Kingbirds**. We even observed them collecting nest material and beginning nest building! We also had our best looks at the Cuban race of **Eastern Meadowlark**, which along with the Cuban Kestrel, is another strong candidate for a future species split. Also in the area, we encountered our first and only large flocks of endemic **Cuban Crows**. A little bit more effort was required to tease out the Cuban race of **Palm Crow**, a species shared with the island of Hispaniola, but considered a separate species by some authorities.



Giant Kingbird © Yousif Attia



Palm Crow © Yousif Attia

The afternoon drive was punctuated by an enjoyable lunch stop where we birded the grounds while waiting for the food. We rolled into Cayo Coco, making some brief stops on the causeway and other wetlands before settling in to our final destination for the last three nights of the tour.

Day 8: Cayo Coco, Cayo Paredon Grande, and Cayo Guillermo

With only one endemic remaining, we had the luxury of spending time looking for some tricky Caribbean specialties. We went out fairly early this morning in search of **Thick-billed Vireo**, an uncommon breeder on Cayo Paredon Grande. This species is known to be secretive during the breeding season, so the best we could muster was hearing a male singing. Our consolation however was an uncharacteristically cooperative **Mangrove Cuckoo** that gave us walk-away views.



Mangrove Cuckoo © Yousif Attia



Zapata Sparrow © Yousif Attia

We later went to Cueva Del Jabali, a well known birding location where some water drips attract many birds. Here we had excellent looks at our final endemic, **Oriente Warbler!** Many species we had already encountered were also in evidence including many **Cuban Bullfinches**, **Great Lizard-Cuckoos**, **Zapata Sparrows**, and **Cuban Green Woodpecker** excavating a nest at eye level! A quick stop at the Wastewater Treatment ponds racked in a bunch of new birds for our trip including a few shorebirds, some duck species, and several **Least Grebes**.



Oriente Warbler © Yousif Attia



Cuban Bullfinch © Yousif Attia

After lunch and a siesta, we were back on the road. First, a quick stop at the beach allowed us to tally two **Piping Plovers** along with **Sanderlings** and other shorebirds. We then headed northward towards Cayo Guillermo where we primarily focussed on waterbirds including the white morph **Great Blue Heron, American Flamingo, Clapper Rail, Sora**. In the shorebird department, we tracked down **Black-necked Stilts, Willets, Short-billed Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpipers**, both yellowlegs, and even three **Marbled Godwits**, a rarity for the area. A small group of **White-cheeked Pintail** and a lone late **American Wigeon** were more welcome additions to our growing list. We had a hard time tearing ourselves away from the wetland birds, but eventually made our way to the end of Cayo Guillermo. We collected one more Caribbean specialty, the **Bahama Mockingbird**, and also had great looks at a pair of **Merlins**.



American Flamingos © Yousif Attia

Day 9: Cayo Coco and Cayo Paredon Grande

Today was our last full day in Cuba. We collectively decided to try another search for **Thick-billed Vireo** on Cayo Paredon Grande. Despite a solid effort, we could not improve on our heard only status. Nearby we explored some of the typical Cayo Coco forest where we had our best looks at **Cuban Vireo**, an endemic species that was present throughout most of the trip. We also found another pair of the endemic **Cuban Gnatcatcher**. A lone gull in the mangrove turned out to be our only **Lesser Black-backed Gull** of the trip.



Cuban Vireo © Yousif Attia



Cuban Gnatcatcher © Yousif Attia

We spent the rest of the morning checking out various beaches and lagoons adding a few more lingering migrants, including four **Semipalmated Plovers**. One hotel on Cayo Coco, known to harbor both Scaly-breasted and Tricolored Munia was visited, but the birds weren't cooperating. We did get a great look at a **White-eyed Vireo** here.





Birding at Cayo Coco © Yousif Attia

The last hours of the day were spent exploring Sitio La Güira where a bonanza of neotropic migrants were feeding in and around the pond and fig trees there. It was here that our first and only **Yellow-throated Vireo** finally made an appearance.

Day 10: Departure

A pre-breakfast walk allowed for close looks at West Indian Whistling-Ducks and some more Cuban Martins near the hotel. Another walk after breakfast around the hotel grounds produced a few new migrants including Baltimore Oriole and Summer Tanager. We also noted a pair of copulating Cuban Black Hawks right on the hotel grounds!



Cuban Black Hawk © Yousif Attia

Some participants booked extended stays, while others traveled home. With 164 species of birds, numerous lizards, butterflies and more, our Cuba birding tour was at an end.



Eagle-Eye Tours Cuba Birding Tour 2023

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