Eagle-Eye Tours



Puerto Rico Trip Report 2024

Link: Puerto Rico Trip Report 2024

At last! Eagle-Eye Tours returns to the “island of enchantment” for the first time in four years – post Covid! Given that the full complement of 12 participants had signed up, it appears that birders are keen to get back to the host of endemic bird species along with everything else this wonderful island has to offer. **Day 1.** A couple of people had opted to arrive a few days earlier than the start of the tour, making the most of the local snorkelling opportunities. The whole group met in the evening as planned and headed to an excellent local restaurant where we set the mood for the rest of the week, sampling the unique Puerto Rican cuisine and getting along famously. As we walked back to our hotel, one couple remarked to me: “this is going to be a fun group”. They were to be proven absolutely correct! **Day 2.** And off we went. First stop: El Yunque National Forest, the island’s main rainforest at the extreme east end. After the long and winding drive upwards, we stepped out of the vehicles to be greeted by our first two endemics: Puerto Rican Woodpecker and Puerto Rican Oriole. Scaly-naped Pigeons rushed back and forth overhead, a constant chorus of Black-whiskered Vireos kept us scanning the forest canopy, and the ubiquitous and aptly named Coqui Frogs persistently reminded us of their presence, but our real targets today were the two east end hummingbirds. I was concerned that missing them here might mean missing them altogether. Unfortunately, the only hummers that deigned to show were Green Mango and Puerto Rican Emerald, both endemic, but both widespread across the island.



El Yunque hike © Paul Prior

Our next endemics for the trip were the perennial favorite Puerto Rican Tody, and then an uncharacteristically cooperative Puerto Rican Bullfinch which responded perfectly to a broadcast song. Also seen hereabouts were several neotropical migrants and some typical Caribbean species, such as Black-faced Grassquit, Bananaquit, and Loggerhead Kingbird. Light rain didn't dampen our spirits too much, and when the sun occasionally broke through the views were glorious.



Puerto Rican Tody, El Yunque © Paul Prior

Having discovered a great little restaurant in the El Yunque Treehouse, we drove back to Luquillo,

on the coast, and waited out the afternoon rain at our hotel. Once the weather looked more promising we headed to the nearby El Coredor Ecologico del Noreste where we spent a very pleasant hour or so watching Grey Kingbirds, Black-faced Grassquits, and a small migrant songbird flock that held Black-and-white Warbler, Northern Parula, Northern Waterthrush and of course Bananaquits. **Day 3.** Still very much in the west end, we headed to Humacao, where Alcides chatted with the park staff who allowed us to enter despite the Monday closure. We strolled around the entrance area and happened upon a Green-throated Carib (one of the two east end hummers that had evaded us the day before) and our first Puerto Rican Flycatcher. Ducking along a narrow connecting trail, we reached the main track and proceeded to the various observation points that allowed us views of the lagoons where small numbers of Ring-necked Ducks and Pied-billed Grebes fed and fished, together with assorted herons and egrets. But the primary interest was along the main track: it was here that we found Mangrove Cuckoo, and our first exotica: Tri-coloured Munia. Well, actually, the abundant Green Iguanas were the first of Puerto Rico's many introduced species that we encountered.

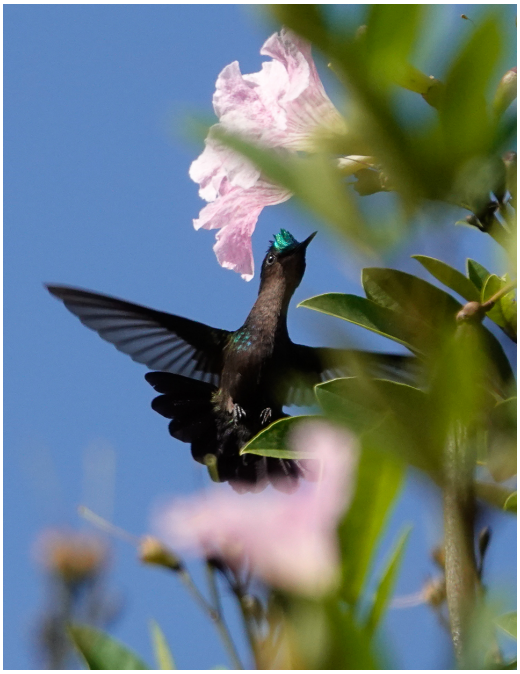


Mangrove Cuckoo © Paul Prior

After lunch, as we set out on the long and rather torturous drive inland to the Casa Grande Mountain Retreat, Alcides led us on a small detour to the village of Aguirre. Here we pulled into an unassuming little car parking area and were instructed to keep an eye on the trio of small, blossoming "oak" trees. Sure enough, within a minute or so, an Antillean Crested Hummingbird zoomed in and started visiting every flower on the trees. Wow! The benefits of local knowledge – what a star (I mean both the hummer and our trusty guide). We made the most of the opportunity and amassed a total of three of the little crested guys, and even another Green-throated Carib, and then we headed into the village to check out the local Monk Parakeet colony.



Antillean Crested Hummingbird © Paul Prior



Antillean Crested Hummingbird © Paul Prior

Now a little behind schedule, we headed into the hills to the rugged interior of the island, past wonderful forest slopes and canyons. The drive was long and very, very windy but at last we reached Casa Grande, albeit after dark and therefore had no real insight into the local habitat. It was a beautiful complex, and the set menu supper was delicious. A handful of us tried unsuccessfully to draw a pair of Puerto Rican Owls out of hiding but given our plans for such an early start the

following day, we didn't pursue this too intently. **Day 4.** The staff at Casa Grande did us a huge favour and provided breakfast and a takeout lunch for our 7 am departure, a couple of hours ahead of their schedule. We made good time on our drive to Rio Abajo State Forest, parked at the entrance gate and started the hike along the park road. Almost immediately, Alcides got us onto a pair of Puerto Rican Parrots foraging in the open branches of a roadside teak tree. These birds have really only been viewable in the past few years, and this might be the first time the species has featured on an Eagle Eye Tour! Not seen in the last two visits, and certainly not on my previous visit in 2007.



Puerto Rican Parrot © Paul Prior

With this mega under our belts, we could now relax and concentrate on the many other species that Rio Abajo has to offer. Puerto Rican Todies were very much in evidence, as were our first Adelaide's Warblers. Puerto Rican Vireo and Lesser Antillean Pee-wee took a little more coaxing, as did the weird and wonderful Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo. Each one of these species gave cracking good looks and then we came across another pair of Puerto Rican Parrots, this time feeding quietly in the forest sub canopy, well below the circling local Broad-winged Hawks. Just an absolutely brilliant morning, the only dull spot being the complete lack of any additional Anole species to break the monotony of yet more Cresteds. We picnicked at the park entrance where we were joined by a tody, a peewee, and a Red-legged Thrush (and another Crested Anole!).



Crested Anole © Paul Prior

Onwards to the west, we arrived at our hotel (home for the next three days) just outside of Ponce, took a short siesta, and then drove down through the scrub of the Punta Cucharas Nature Reserve to the coast (but minus one intrepid crew member who had opted to Uber all the way back up to Casa Grande for … some reason). Tide was high and therefore the majority of the shorebirds were restricted to a mud-bar at the far end of the lagoon, but we were amply entertained by the smaller numbers near the beach: both yellowlegs, Black-necked Stilts, Least and Stilt Sandpipers, Black-bellied Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Semipalmated Plover, together with several herons, a Clapper Rail, a couple of “Golden” Warblers (the Caribbean Yellow Warbler), and a mystery crake.



Stilt Sandpipers and Lesser Yellowlegs © Paul Prior

Day 5. Back into the hills, this time to the Maricao State Forest. In the entrance area we were treated to much better looks at Puerto Rican Oriole and Pearly-eyed Thrashers before we started the hike into the park. As we set off Alcides was asked as to the likelihood of us encountering the recently split Puerto Rican Euphonia; he was sad to report that, since the last hurricane, this species has become extremely scarce and difficult to find. Of course, no sooner had Alcides said this than the distinctive, clear, piercing whistle of a Euphonia could be heard, and very soon we were all looking at this little beauty. Today's "wow" moment … but it would turn out not to be the only one.



Puerto Rican Euphonia © Paul Prior

We continued along the trail, searching for the wonderfully named Elfin-woods Warbler, passing Puerto Rican Spindalis, and more Todies. We reached a likely looking spot and positioned ourselves to wait in the hopes of a brief glimpse of our target. The first warbler to visit turned out to be a Northern Parula, but then, as this bird foraged low in the understory and passed by us, it was joined by … an Elfin-woods Warbler! At first only the lucky few at the rear of the group got any looks but, as this individual continued to feed nearby in deeper cover, everyone managed a view or two. A second bird had been heard singing a little way along the trail and so we moved on down and repositioned. This time the bird was in view a little longer (chowing down on a large green "lacewing"), and then we realized the Puerto Rican Emerald that had buzzed us a couple of times was actually trying to get to her nest. As it was, she quickly became accustomed to us and returned to her incubating despite the audience of fourteen.



Puerto Rican Emerald © Paul Prior

We moved on and left her in peace. Having happened upon two major rarities, the only local bird that we had yet to find was the far commoner Tanager. We turned back and tried, tried, and tried, but eventually it was only as we approached the carpark that at the last this important endemic (the sole member of its genus anywhere in the world) jumped up and revealed itself: Puerto Rican Tanager. All in all, an excellent morning and time for lunch. We headed back down to the coast, and after lunch, took a stroll around town where we managed to confirm African Collared-Doves, and then happened upon a bank of blooming shrubs, complete with attendant Puerto Rican Mango, and Puerto Rican Emerald. Continuing the enormous success of this day, we then bumped into a tree, where a small flock of Greater Antillean Grackles had been joined by four of the extremely endangered Yellow-shouldered Blackbird. The “wow” moments just kept coming – and the day was not over yet.



Yellow-shouldered Blackbird © Paul Prior

It being too far to head back to Ponce for a siesta, the group was game to continue birding in the dry-forest scrub of the Parguera Nature Reserve. Here we were treated to wonderful views of both Adelaide's and Prairie Warblers, Puerto Rican Flycatcher, Puerto Rican Bullfinch, and scores of patrolling Wandering Glider dragonflies. The nearby saltpans provided us with distant views of more shorebirds, a flock of seven Prairie Warblers (!) and astonishingly good looks at another Clapper Rail.



Adelaide's Warbler © Paul Prior

We started the long drive back to Ponce, but then decided we should make a small detour to the Guanica Forest Reserve to try for the two night birds. We hiked a short distance up the park road and waited for nightfall. Sure enough, both the Nightjar and the Owl began calling pretty much on cue, but were rather distant. We played the Owl and - just as at Casa Grande - the birds came very close to revealing themselves, but sadly remained just out of sight. **Day 6.** In stark contrast to yesterday's amazing morning we were to experience the only complete washout of the trip. We returned to Guanica Forest with a couple of minor targets in mind but ended up absolutely drenched with very few birds to show for it. However, as might be expected from our crowd of stalwarts, not one person complained (well, OK, except for me). We got back to the vans and the rain stopped - and as we drove out the park, the sun came out and shone on the brilliant orange of a Venezuelan Troupial posing at the entrance gate. We now headed further west to the Laguna Cartagena, an opportunity for us to dry out in the blazing sunshine out on the open marsh. The front vehicle lucked in on a Yellow-faced Grassquit, and then as the group headed out along the main dyke, the two or three front runners watched a hen West Indian Whistling-duck hurry her brood of eight ducklings across the path. At the first patch of open water, it became evident that the various marsh birds were not in the least bit concerned by our staring scopes, going about their foraging, pruning and roosting with ne'er a care. Common and Purple Gallinules, a Sora, White-cheeked Pintails, Blue-winged Teal and four hen Masked Ducks all stayed near the trail. Certainly, there were larger numbers of the same species at the further reaches of the wetland – many more teal (including one Green-winged), Ring-necked Ducks, the odd Limpkin and Glossy Ibis – but we were well provided with great looks at many species.



Masked Duck © Paul Prior

Trailside there were the now familiar Grey Kingbirds, a pair of Puerto Rican Flycatchers, a very obliging Mangrove Cuckoo, and even a wintering Merlin. A trek to the observation tower produced nothing new and so we now beat a retreat from the sun, took a late lunch, and drove all the way back to our hotel on the outskirts of Ponce. The only other birding of the day was an unsuccessful attempt to draw in the Puerto Rican Nightjars that we'd noticed calling the previous two evenings – so close, and yet so far. **Day 7.** An early start had us parked and ready to bird at Cabo Rojo National Park before the sun became too intense. Straight out of the vans we were met by more Venezuelan

Troupials, a beautiful Orange-cheeked Waxbill, and a pair of Indian Silverbills - all introduced exotics, but quite lovely just the same. We were here, however, to fill a gap created by our washout at Guanica the previous day: Caribbean Elenia. Sure enough, as we proceeded along the trail, we encountered several of these, one of our number even spotting an active nest in the low canopy. The coastal lagoons provided our first Royal Terns, a flyby flock of Stilt Sandpipers, Brown Pelicans, and distant Semipalmated Plover, but we needed to make tracks to the north shore of the island in search of Tropicbirds. After a rather long drive we reached the Atlantic coast and wandered down to the lookout at Los Merenderos de Guajataca. There over the sparkling blue water of the Atlantic were a couple of dozen White-tailed Tropicbirds. We were now nearing the end of our week and this would've been an excellent last stop, but Alcides had just one more site to show us. First lunch.



White-tailed Tropicbird © Paul Prior

Well-fed yet again, we drove a short distance back to the Atlantic shore and pulled in alongside the freshwater pond at Charca Salobre Los Amadores. And what a wonderful final stop it was. Here we scoped bathing and feeding Glossy Ibis and Black-necked Stilts (82 and 112 of each), good numbers of White-cheeked Pintail and Blue-winged Teal, a lone hen Lesser Scaup, and four or five Least Grebes (a pair with a nest and a pair with three tiny grebelets).



Glossy Ibis and Black-necked Stilts © Paul Prior

And that was it! The long drive back to San Juan passed quickly, and we returned to our original hotel, then repeated the first night's excellent restaurant meal. Conversation and laughter flowed freely, as it had for the entirety of the trip – new friends and new memories made, and a pretty good tally of lifers for everyone. Alcides – a first time guide for Eagle Eye Tours – proved priceless, and personally I would gladly travel with each and everyone of the 13 people who helped make Eagle Eye's return to the enchanted island so wonderful. Thanks again to everyone.



EET group 2024

Puerto Rico 2024 species list