Eagle-Eye Tours



Puerto Rico Trip Report (March 2025)

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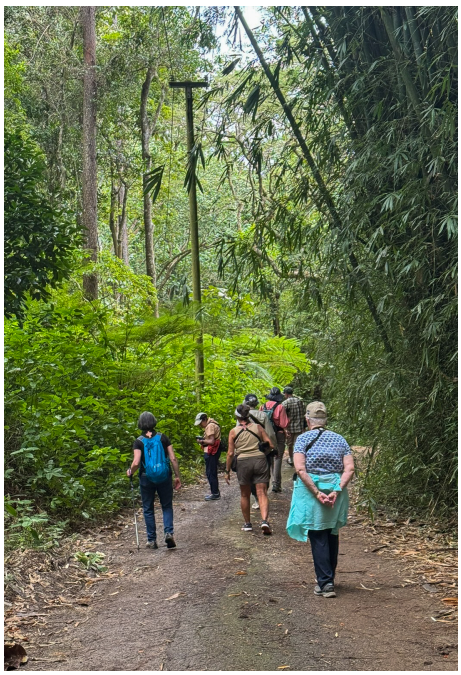
After weeks of snow, ice and gloom, it was a very real pleasure to head south and join Alcides and the crew of eight fellow travellers on La Isla del Encanto. Several people had opted to make the most of their trip by arriving early enough to visit San Juan's historic old town, and then all ten of us convened for supper on the first evening of the tour proper.

Day 2

A pre-dawn start saw us well on the way to perhaps the most important stop of the trip: the State Forest de Rio Abajo is one of only two sites on the island (and therefore in the world) where intensive efforts to bring the Puerto Rican Amazon back from the brink of extinction have shown great success. We arrived in good time and headed straight up the main track, scouring the canopy for glimpses of the several parrots that we could hear calling back-and-forth. At first, we had to make do with brief views of birds in flight but at last a couple of cooperative perched individuals showed fairly well. After an hour of near continuous squawks and screeches the parrots quietened down and one would never have known they were there. Certainly, the early start had paid off.



Searching for Puerto Rican Amazon at Rio Abajo © Paul Prior

Now we turned our attention to significantly easier targets. Adelaide's Warbler responded well to our broadcast, a singing bird flying into the trailside sub-canopy. We would encounter this little stunner repeatedly throughout the rest of the tour, in pretty much every forest type other than mangrove. Next came Puerto Rican Bullfinch, Puerto Rican Vireo, Puerto Rican Pewee, and repeated views of Bananaquits. Circling overhead was a very scruffy Broad-winged Hawk, an endemic and sedentary sub-species (ssp. *brunnescens*), and then we bumped into our first Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, always an impressive bird. But as ever the real crowd-pleaser was Puerto Rican Tody, another species that we would be glad to meet time and time again on this tour. Meanwhile, non-avian treats were regularly encountered – beautifully patterned butterflies, impressively large tree-snails, and every few steps scattered more Crested Anoles.



Green Flasher butterfly © Paul Prior

Returning to the vehicles, we opted to explore the picnic area at the trailhead. Alcides was proving to be lightning fast at picking out hard-to-see birds that were either foraging or simply resting in the understory, and now he spotted another pair of Puerto Rican Amazons, quietly searching for potential nest-cavities. We had to be quick to get onto these all-too-briefly stationary birds before they'd move to the next candidate tree. At this time of day, the birds - having already finished all their early morning conversations - were moving about in near silence and once out of sight they proved impossible to relocate. Meanwhile, the more open picnic area provided excellent opportunities to see Puerto Rican Woodpeckers and Loggerhead Kingbirds, both species attending nests. We now drove to lunch and then to our hotel in Arecibo. After a brief siesta we headed back inland to our second birding destination, Cambalache State Forest. Here we were able to find all our target species in close proximity to the main car park: a pair of Puerto Rican Flycatchers, a very confiding Mangrove Cuckoo, great looks at Puerto Rican Bullfinch, day-glo orange Venezuelan Troupials, and an even better encounter with Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo.



Mangrove Cuckoo © Paul Prior

Day 3

A slightly later start today with our first two wetland sites situated just a relatively short distance from the hotel. Between them the ponds at Sobre los Amadores and at Yeguada held excellent numbers of Blue-winged Teal, White-cheeked Pintail, Black-necked Stilts, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Common Gallinules. The Charca Salobre also provided looks at Least Grebe and we had fun watching the local Monk Parakeets and Greater Antillean Grackles get very excited about an American Kestrel carrying its lizard prey. Charco Yeguada held smaller numbers of additional shorebirds: Stilt Sandpipers, Wilson's Snipe, and Semipalmated Sandpiper; and the neighbouring farmyard had been invaded by a mob of over 100 Glossy Ibis! We continued driving along the island's north coast, making a very pleasant stop at Eugenio Maria de Hostos for dozens of White-tailed Tropicbirds. As we left the cliff-top area one of our crew spotted a very obliging pair of Puerto Rican Spindalis, and then someone else drew our attention to a Puerto Rican Mango perched nearby. We settled in for the long drive across the east end of the island, calling in at Mayaguez, first to visit Punta Boca Marina where the ruined foundations of the old dock provided roosting perches for scores of Terns - Royal and Sandwich - and a Lesser Black-backed Gull. After this we continued into downtown Mayaguez for lunch and then rejoined the drive to Parguera and The Nautilus Hotel, our home for the next three nights.



Sandwich Tern © Paul Prior

We had arrived in good time and everyone still had the energy to take a late afternoon hike around the local Nature Reserve. Here we were treated to looks at a foraging flock of handsome Prairie Warblers, and our best views of Adelaide's Warbler. Across the road the disused salt pans were rather bird-less, except for 'scope views of Clapper Rail, Willet, Black-bellied Plover, and nice looks at the local sub-species of Yellow Warbler, a.k.a. "Puerto Rican Golden Warbler" (ssp. *cruciana*). Approaching dusk, Alcides took us to a location on the edge of town where we hoped to see Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds flying to roost with the local grackles. Several small flocks of this endangered species flew by, but flight views were really rather unsatisfactory.

Day 4

One of the highlights of previous Puerto Rico tours has been the visit to the National Park at Maricao and this year was no different except unlike previous years we barely had to move more than a few metres from the carpark before we had encountered every single one of our targets! First off was a rather all-too-mobile Puerto Rican Euphonia, but given how difficult this species has become to find since the last major hurricane, we were more than happy. Then without missing a beat, we were looking at the main attraction: Elfin-woods Warbler. There was a pair of adults feeding in the canopy while lower down and much more viewable was a seemingly very independent juvenile bird.



Juvenile Elfin-woods Warbler © Paul Prior

One of our team then spotted a Puerto Rican Oriole which quickly became a foraging pair; next some judicious use of playback brought in a very cooperative pair of Puerto Rican Tanagers, followed by our first Pearly-eyed Thrasher. It was a pretty crazy half-hour of birding!



Puerto Rican Tanager © Paul Prior

We opted to walk a little way along the main trail in part to afford us a view back down to the south coast towards Parguera and Mona Island. This hike also brought us more great looks at Puerto Rican Tody, a quartet of duelling Puerto Rican Bullfinches, and a huge Puerto Rican Ameiva for the

herpetologically inclined. Back at the vans we were serenaded by a handsome (but vocally challenged) Red-legged Thrush - a firm favourite on this trip. After lunch and a siesta we headed east to Laguna Cartagena which had been so productive in previous years. This year our visit was a bust. The wetland, left unmanaged for the past few seasons, is now completely choked with vegetation and we managed just a lone Purple Gallinule. We cut our losses and headed instead for the mudflats at Cabo Rojo. En route we stopped for great looks at a foraging flock of Orange-cheeked Waxbills and a gang of Smooth-billed Ani. The 'flats themselves hosted good numbers of Lesser Yellowlegs, more Stilt Sandpipers, plus a few Ruddy Turnstone and Black-bellied Plovers, but best of all was an unexpected Brown Booby perched on a nearshore snag.



Orange-cheeked Waxbill © Paul Prior

We headed back to Parguera, stopping on the east edge of town to try to improve on our views of Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds heading to roost. We managed more flyover views, but still not entirely satisfying. BVD ("better views desired") was the consensus. As darkness fell, we drove to a hillside just out of town; the road was a little busy but sure enough there was an impressive chorus of Puerto Rican Nightjars. Searching for eye-shine we managed to get flashlight views of a couple of birds, but there was a limit to how close we could draw these birds in. An overflying Short-eared Owl was a nice bonus and perhaps a good reason for the nightjars staying put and hidden away. All in all, a really excellent day despite the fail at Laguna Cartagena.

Day 5

Another early start this time to the lowland dry forest at Guanica - the site where the Eagle Eye Tour had gotten drenched by an unseasonable downpour in 2024. No such problem today: we enjoyed an easy, dry hike, encountering Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, lots of Pearly-eyed Thrashers, best views yet of Puerto Rican Tody, a very excited Caribbean Elaenia, and 2(!!) Puerto Rican Racers (the first thanks to the eagle-eyed searching of one of our team).



Puerto Rican Tody © Paul Prior

We drove the very scenic coast road to reach the Caribbean just below Guanica, but by now it was getting a little late and baking hot. A pair of American Oystercatchers on the beach, a Pearly-eyed Thrasher up close and personal, and a handful of Brown Pelicans fishing offshore was all we could muster.



Pearly-eyed Thrasher © Paul Prior

After lunch in Parguera we headed west to a wetland that Alcides had scouted out in the hopes of making up for Cartagena's missing ducks. Certainly, the pond at Camino Hernandez, in the town of

Combate, was worth the visit with excellent numbers of Blue-winged Teal, White-cheeked Pintail, Black-necked Stilt, Lesser Yellowlegs, 3 Northern Shovellers and even a Sora. Meanwhile, there was a Yellow-shouldered Blackbird sat in the tree over our heads, and a motley collection of Eurasian and African Collared Doves. Next, we drove further west again to Cabo Rojo, where more Lesser Yellowlegs and Stilt Sandpipers fed in the shallow lagoons, and a Caribbean Elaenia and a female Prairie Warbler were foraging in the shoreline shrubs. Rain now stopped play, and so we headed back to the hotel. After supper, a few hardy souls joined Alcides and I for a rather futile search for Puerto Rican Owl at the Guanica National Park entrance. We heard one - together with several nightjars - but sadly, it stayed well out of view.

Day 6

An early start for the long drive east, stopping (the same as last year) at Aguirre for a mini hummingbird-fest'. The handful of robles ("oaks") were in full bloom and sure enough were attended by 3 Green-throated Caribs and a couple of Antillian Crested Hummingbirds.



Green-throated Carib © Paul Prior

Once we'd had our fill of these little dazzlers, we proceeded to the adjacent town to check out the Monk Parakeet colony where we were surprised to find a pair of Red-crowned Amazons occupying one of the Monks' huge stick-nests. An even more pleasant surprise was the presence of two pairs of Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds, one of the males ardently showing-off his glorious yellow shoulders to his partner. Personally, I had no idea that this species occurred so far east of the core population located around Parguera.



Yellow-shouldered Blackbird © Paul Prior

Alcides had heard of a Plain Pigeon being seen further east in Patillas so we made a detour to check out the river valley near the town. It was a long-shot and unsurprisingly there was no sign of this island rarity. But we enjoyed the change of habitat and spent time watching the Snowy Egrets, Little Blue and Tricoloured Herons feeding in the shallow rapids. From here we made for Humacao, stopping nearby for an unfortunately rather long lunch. Humacao in the early afternoon was a little birdless, presumably any ducks having retreated to the shade of the mangrove banks. Pied-billed Grebe was new and we spent time checking out the Anoles, some tiny fish, and even a Small Indian Mongoose - although given the amount of damage, the latter causes to the native fauna perhaps we shouldn't have been quite so pleased to see it.

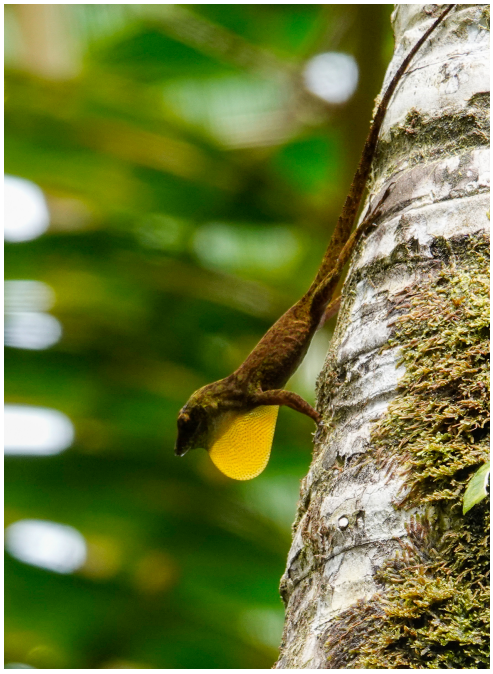
Day 7

Having overnighted in Luquillo, we were well-placed to reach the famous El Yunque National Forest just after the front gates opened at 8am. It being a Sunday the park road was crowded with local and not-so-local visitors, hopefully all just as impressed by the wonderful, lush rainforest as we were.



Scaly-naped Pigeon © Paul Prior

Placing this visit at the tail-end of the tours really paid off: we'd already seen all the endemic bird species and therefore could relax and really take in the ambiance of this extra-special place. It was a rare pleasure to step away from targeted birding for a while and marvel at all the other nature on show: from giant tree-snails and gorgeous orchids, to colour-morphing anoles and splendid tree ferns. Birds that after our week on the island we were now quite familiar with continued to show with good looks at Scaly-naped Pigeon and Puerto Rican Spindalis. It was hard to leave this beautiful park but by 11am we were starting to wilt in the heat.



Colour-morphing Anole (Before) © Paul Prior



Colour-morphing Anole (After) © Paul Prior

After yet another excellent meal, sampling various Puerto Rican cuisine, we headed to a very last birding stop, the near-coastal habitats at Corredor Ecologico del Noreste. From the lead vehicle people glimpsed a Yellow-faced Grassquit hidden in a very mobile flock of Orange-cheeked Waxbills. We parked and scanned the adjacent field, and although the waxbills showed very well, the Yellow-faced Grassquits seemed flightier and rarely sat still long enough (the more numerous Black-faced Grassquits were much more cooperative). We continued along the muddy track, parked, and walked a short distance to a small waterhole where we managed to pull in a couple of Northern Parulas, American Redstarts and a Black-whiskered Vireo. But it was now time to head to San Juan for our last night prior to our return to reality, sad to be leaving this enchanted island the next day.



Our group © Paul Prior

It had been another wonderful visit and it was often remarked during the tour that too many people simply associate Puerto Rico with beaches and palm trees, but the island has so much more to offer once you start exploring inland. The interior rolling hills and mountains present glorious vistas, with extensive lush forest habitats. For the avid lister there are 18 endemic bird species, and additional endemic subspecies, most of which are relatively easy to find; then once you've had your fill of all these wonderful birds there are hosts of lizards, snails and plants, many found only in this fabulous place. And then of course there's the unique culture – friendly folk, excellent food, art and crafts – all within such easy reach of mainland America. It really is worth making that short trip to find such a treasure!



Sampling the local cuisine © Paul Prior

Puerto Rico 2025 species list