



The Birds of Cuba April 2018

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This was a long trip- 11 days in Cuba and 32 in Mexico. Mexico is a big country and to cover it thoroughly most bird tour companies offer up to 3 separate tours with even more extensions. We only wanted to visit Mexico once and put together one comprehensive trip to cover most of the many endemics. Before leaving I thought Mexico would prove to be more interesting than Cuba and to my surprise found it to be exactly the other way round.



Cuba was full of surprises- Life as you might expect under a communist government is very different to our way of life, but Cuba has a vibrant culture, a patient and tolerant people, and I have to say some of the most beautiful girls in the world. You can break your neck in Havana just turning your head in admiration!! The birding was surprising too- I never expected great shots of the Bee Hummingbird- the smallest bird in the world- nor did I expect to see and photograph 3 separate species of Quail-Dove- now that is just ridiculous!

There is no easy way to get to Cuba. Ten hours to Amsterdam on KLM and another ten to Havana. We arrived at 18.15pm and found our way to our Casa for the night. The only form of private enterprise allowed in Cuba is that of people running their own B&B's- and the only time we used hotels was when they were just more practicable or there were just no B&B's as on Cayo Coco. Our guides were to pick us up at 9.00am the following morning but they phoned to say they had problems with the hire car (van actually) and would be in touch later. Our Casa was a stone's throw from the famous Hotel Nacional on the sea front, so we spent an hour birding from our 7th floor balcony overlooking the hotel and its grounds. We were with our friends the Lovells so we had a leisurely breakfast and waited and waited and WAITED.. We Sms'd our guides- our local hosts tried to call – the phones were switched off- What to do now? This had actually never happened to me on a birding trip before- At 12.pm we phoned the UK tour operator in London- they were amazed- these guides were always so reliable. They sent some one round to see us. Would we like some lunch and a drive around Havana in one of the old American convertible cars? And so it was while we were having lunch that our guides finally phoned to say they had got a new van- They had had to wait for some one to drive it 100 kilometres to Havana but why they had switched their phones off we never really found out. Our guides were a university lecturer- a chap in his fifties and his son-who drove but also knew his birds. They apologised profusely for losing the morning but promised we would still see all of Cuba's birds.

We headed 2.5 hours west to Vinales and La Guira National Park, the most scenic part of Cuba we visited- and started our birding with an hours' daylight left. We were looking for Olive-capped Warbler a pine forest specialist and he came out quickly to the call. Next up was Gundlach's Hawk- a difficult secretive bird that we caught moving quickly from tree to tree-and as dusk was falling we managed to bag a Crescent-eyed (Cuban) Pewee, La Sagre's Flycatcher and finally a Loggerhead Kingbird. An amazing way to end the day.



La Guira NP is home to one of the much desired Cuban warblers- Yellow-headed warbler and this was our main target in a piece of quiet woodland early the next morning. Here we were to have one of the best hours birding I have ever had, with new birds coming in such quick succession you at times didn't know which way to look. We had started



the day with a Cuban Tody a new family for the Lovells. It took 5 minutes to find the Yellow-headed Warbler plus lots of other migrating Wood warblers passing through. We didn't know whether to look at a Cuban Bullfinch or a Cuban Trogon- one of the friendliest Trogon's I have ever met, before our attention was diverted to a Great Lizard Cuckoo on the move. We had better looks at Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds (saw them first in Havana) and found the first of many Cuban Green Woodpeckers. Next up the Cuban Solitaire required some searching for, but not before we had found a Cuban Grassquit, another difficult and tricky

bird our guide said we were fortunate to see. And as things started to quieten down we had another Tody to finish off the morning.

The afternoon saw us in another part of La Guira NP. We walked another pine forest and nondescript bush track and the birds kept coming- Red-legged Thrush, followed by Western Spindalis- another family for the Lovells, and our first and only views of Cuban Vireo. Next great views of Red-legged Honeycreeper and to finish a West Indian Woodpecker.

We only needed just over 40 birds in Cuba and here we were 15 birds to the good in a day and a half. We left Vinales early in the morning- it was another long drive down the A1, the major dual carriageway running east-west across the Island. Traffic for such a major road was light and 50% of the vehicles were the old 1950/1960s cars and trucks still kept on the road (in some cases only just) by the engineering skills and ingenuity of their owners. I asked our driver in Havana how much his 1956 Ford convertible would cost to buy and he told me to start at \$40000- an immense amount of money in Cuba where civil servants earn \$40 a month and even doctors earn only \$50 a month. Now you know why we have so many Cuban doctors here in South Africa. In comparison we paid our young tour guide on our last day in Havana \$20 an hour. Such discrepancies surely cannot last for long.

We were heading back east towards Havana before swinging off to the South to the famous Zapata swamp- an Immense wetland where up to 90% of Cuba's birds have been found. We based ourselves in Playa Larga for 3 nights a fishing village on the coast close to the Bay of Pigs where the famous invasion by CIA -trained Cuban rebels in 1961 was ignominiously routed by Castro's soldiers. There are memorials to the dead and captured American tanks still on show around the village.

As we drove into the Zapata nature reserve our guide said to us the Bee Hummingbird is pretty difficult to see in the reserve but we could stop off at friends' house where he could guarantee us good views if we would like to do that or we could go and find a late lunch somewhere. No prizes for guessing the correct answer. So we visited a very humble home in a village 10 kilometres from Playa Larga and entered a garden full of flowering bushes. There are two hummers in Cuba. The Cuban Emerald and the Bee Hummingbird. Our host pointed to the nearest bush where a Cuban Emerald rested in the heat of the day- We looked puzzled- No he said and pointed again and there deep in the bush sat the tiniest, most exquisite little bird- literally no bigger than a large bumble bee.

There were lots of feeders in his garden but his garden was small and I battled to get far enough away to use a 400 lens. Still for an hour we watched the Hummers go and go. There was fruit





on a table and Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds and Cuban Orioles came in for lunch, joined by Black-throated Blue Warbler. Our next surprise was to be told that a Cuban Pygmy Owl who had just caught a lizard was in the tree next door. Finally the girls were asked if they would like to hold a feeder and let the Bee Hummingbird feed just inches from their faces. How about that for a finale!!

Access to Zapata Swamp is limited, but the next morning we were following a track for several kilometres lined on both sides by channels of water choked with reeds and Sawgrass. Our targets were the

Zapata Wren and Sparrow. The mythical Zapata Rail our guide had seen only once in his 30 year birding career- and that was 23 years ago. We tried to call out the wren in several places with no luck but picked up a couple of Zapata Sparrows on the track as we walked back to the van. One final attempt and our luck was in. Movement on the other side of the channel revealed a Zapata Wren who gave us brief views before moving along.

Next we drove back to Playa Larga and out along the bay to one of the famous dive and snorkelling sites. Here we tried for Blue-headed Quail-Dove but it was too late in the day so we headed for lunch stopping only to admire a Northern Flicker and more American Redstarts. Our next expedition that afternoon saw us heading for the savannahs which were frequently covered with palm trees. Dead palm trees are favourite nesting sites for Woodpeckers and even Owls. We were after Fernandino's Flicker. Our guide had one palm tree in mind only to find it had been cut down since his last visit- still there were plenty more dead palms and one close by, covered in woodpecker holes revealed our Flicker. We then spotted another Great Lizard Cuckoo who decided to make his escape by climbing down the tree and running off across the savannah like a Ground-cuckoo. We found a couple of Killdeers in the grass too and were walking back to the van with dusk falling when a small flock of Cuban Parakeets flew in- a great way to end the day.

Our final day in Playa Larga was to be devoted to the Quail-Doves. I had no idea how our guide could be so confident we would find Blue-headed and White-fronted (Grey-headed) Quail-Doves when I knew from personal experience how difficult it was to get even a glimpse of similar birds. Our guide however was full of little secrets. We arrived at the track entering the forest just after dawn to be met by a ranger who escorted us to a blind telling us to not move and be quiet. The screen was quite tall and difficult to lift the camera over but I need not have worried. Suddenly from our left two Blue-headed Quail-Doves potted out of the forest, walked round the blind and started feeding behind us only 2 metres away. It suddenly clicked- these birds were being fed every day. I just hoped they would stay around for the light to improve so we could get some decent shots. Some Zenaida Doves joined the party and finally the White-fronted Quail-doves arrived- what an astonishing experience to see these secretive forest doves feeding right in front of us!! totally oblivious to our presence.

Anything after that would be an anti-climax and I suppose it was, but the Red-shouldered Blackbirds (very similar to the Red-winged Blackbirds found in the US) are very localised and in this area are known from only one small marsh. And as a final treat for the morning we were off again looking for more dead palm trees. Having located the correct tree, a simple scraping along the





trunk (not knocking) and from the top appeared a Cuban Screech Owl to investigate. Not a bad morning heh.

The afternoon excursion was to another village where the Cuban Amazon (Rose-throated Parrot) was known to come in to roost. It was a long wait and with dusk falling I thought we were going to be unlucky. A couple of White-crowned Pigeons gave the Lovells a new bird- it had taken us hours to track down this bird in Florida last year. And then at last a raucous call

gave away the presence of a pair of Parrots and there was still sufficient light to admire their rosy throats. A really tremendous days' birding. Tomorrow we would be crossing the island heading for the North east coast and Cayo Coco

Cayo Coco situated on a small island some thirty kilometres off the North-east coast of Cuba is reached by a tolled causeway which crosses a very shallow inlet of the sea. It is one of Cuba's major tourist hotspots. The Cuban government in partnership with various major hotel chains has constructed a dozen or more monstrously big resorts along the coast line. Chartered flights land thousands of Canadian and European tourists here each week – ferried to the resorts by scores of luxury coaches where they will lie in the sun and eat and drink themselves stupid. All the resorts are full board with free booze because there is simply nowhere else to go on the island. It is mass tourism at its absolute worst and unfortunately because there was nowhere else to stay we finished up in one of these resorts as well. Ours had 10 three storied units giving 60 bedrooms per unit. 600 rooms with 3 to 4 people per room gives over 2000 people staying there at any one time. The buffet catered for over 1000 people per sitting- one chef told me they cooked over 3000 eggs per day and yet the food was surprisingly good with as much wine, beer or cocktails as you could drink. Shame you could do nothing about the company. They did have three more smaller restaurants where you had to book and here they charged for wine as they only sold it by the bottle but at \$10 a bottle it was still excellent value and at least you could dine in a more intimate atmosphere.

The island consists of low lying coastal scrub most of which had been further flattened by Hurricane Katrina last year. The devastation was considerable and I wondered how many birds had survived the experience. We were only looking for a handful of birds here with the major target being the other Cuban Warbler- the Oriente Warbler and again he wasn't too difficult to find . Our friends needed West Indian Whistling Duck but we had no luck on the small lake we visited but we did find Wilson's Snipe. Key West Quail-Dove was not around and we gave up as the light started to fail.

The morning after an early breakfast- shared with only a couple of hundred people we were off to find the Cuban Gnatcatcher. Our Guide knew exactly where to look for it and he eventually came in to the call. We encountered Cuban Black Hawk along the way but the Whistling Duck proved as tricky as ever. We did however manage to track down a Mangrove Cuckoo which seemed pretty relaxed and gave us nice views. On





our way back for lunch we stopped by another resort where we picked up Cuban Martin- so all in all not a bad morning. The afternoon saw us chasing the Duck and Quail Dove once again. We checked the Quail-dove site again with no luck and decided to leave to look for the Duck just as some Dutch birders arrived. We were just climbing in the van when they called to say the Quail-Dove had put in an appearance and sure enough a single bird was pottering around a tiny open area amongst the trees. The light was going and we decided to give the Duck a final attempt on the small lake and the gods were indeed with us because we found the

Whistling Duck perched out on a tree limb over the water. This left us with only the Bahamas Mockingbird to find in the morning before heading off to our final stop Najasa. We looked long and hard in the morning with no luck- our only real dip on the trip.

Najasa lies in the South east of the Island close to where our guide Pedro lived. Again it was a long drive and we only arrived late in the evening. Our lodgings for the next two nights were on a ranch which was used to breed horses. Two birds that we needed here were the Cuban Crow and Cuban Palm Crow- not the most exciting birds in the world but they are extremely localised in Cuba and with practice you can start to distinguish the one from the other. Next up was the Giant Kingbird and again our guide knew exactly where to look so by 9.00am we were asking what else can we find. Plain Pigeon was on the cards even though we had seen it in the DR- I still needed a reasonable photograph- best I could do was a bird sitting on the telephone wire.

Our last bird was another Cuban Oriole before preparing for the long drive back to Havana. Pedro insisted on coming back with us and catching the bus back home. We had the next morning to explore Havana as our plane only left for Cancun and on to Guadalajara late that afternoon.

So this was a very different birding trip- the pace was relaxed as we did not have too many birds to find, and the weather was really pleasant- not at all humid as I had expected, and after a shaky start we enjoyed every minute of it. Cuba comes highly recommended. One final note- you have to change your money into something called C.A.C's the Peso currency used exclusively by tourists. One C.A.C equates to one US dollar. Cubans don't like the Americans so they only get 80 cents to the Dollar, whereas they love the Canadians and so the Canadian dollar buys 1.20 CAC. The pound and the Euro are roughly at the same rates that they are to the dollar meaning you get 1.34 or 1.15 respectively. So short answer- don't take US Dollars to Cuba.

