



Western Cuba Birding

February 1 – 8, 2020



Leaders

Dr. C. Hiram Gonzalez Alonso – Ornithologist, Institute of Ecology & Systematics, Havana, Cuba
Atilla Perez, National Guide

Brian Rapoza – TAS Field Trip Coordinator, Miami, FL

Participants

Annette Bittaker (GA), Vernon and Diane Burkhart (FL), Linda Humphries (FL), Raye Hurwitz (TX),
Colin Knight (FL), Maxine Long (FL), John Mangold (FL), Bob and Alice Pace (FL), Lydia Quinones (TX),
Betty Smay (FL)

Lodging

2/1 – 2/2: Hotel Sevilla (La Habana)

2/3 – 2/4: Hotel Mirador, San Diego de los Baños (Pinar Del Rio)

2/5 – 2/7: Hotel Playa Larga, Zapata Peninsula (Matanzas)

Daily Summaries (birds in **bold** indicates the group's first encounter with that species)

Day 1 – Saturday, 2/1: Participants arrived in Havana today from three different cities: Tampa (early morning), Miami (late morning) and Houston (late afternoon). As participants arrived, they were shuttled from the airport to our hotel in Havana. After lunch at our hotel, we visited Alamar Organoponico Gardens, an organic farm outside Havana that supplies produce to many Havana-area restaurants. We spotted a few birds during our tour of the farm, including **Smooth-billed Ani, Cattle Egret, Turkey Vulture, Cuban Emerald, Scaly-breasted Munia, Palm Warbler** and **Greater Antillean Grackle**. Except for the munias, we would see these birds on an almost daily basis. We returned to our hotel just before a rainstorm moved through the city. Skies cleared by late afternoon; we had dinner at La Terraza de Cojimar, one of Ernest Hemmingway's favorite restaurants.



Alamar Organoponico Gardens
Photo by Brian Rapoza

Day 2 – Sunday, 2/2: Today's activity, a historical and cultural tour of Havana's old city, didn't begin until mid-morning, providing time for a leisurely breakfast and even a little exploration on our own around our hotel. Our walking tour of Havana Vieja included stops at a cigar shop and a church, and took us through several plazas,



Havana Vieja
Photo by Brian Rapoza

including Plaza de Armas, Plaza de San Francisco and Plaza Vieja. We also saw many of the colorful vintage cars that have become so iconic in Cuba. We scanned every garden and patch of greenery we passed along the way, glimpsing a few new birds, including **Mourning Dove, Red-legged Thrush, Northern Mockingbird, and Cape May and Yellow-throated Warbler. Rock Pigeons, Eurasian Collared-Doves and House Sparrows** were ubiquitous. Before lunch, at Mojito's near Plaza Vieja, we stopped at the Almacenes San Jose Artisans Market on the Havana Bay waterfront, where participants bought local handicrafts or other souvenirs. Dinner was at a restaurant near the waterfront, just a short walk from our hotel. After dinner, football fans in the group spent the evening watching the end of the Super Bowl, broadcast in Spanish, of course.

Day 3 – Monday, 2/3: Birding began in earnest today as we left Havana and headed west on the national highway towards San Diego de los Baños, in Pinar Del Rio Provence. En-route, we visited Las Terrazas, in the Sierra del Rosario of Artemisa Provence. Our first stop in this area was at Finca Rosario, a pig farm that is reliable for the endemic Cuban Grassquit. Ground corn was poured onto a tray feeder, setting off an instant feeding frenzy as **Cuban** and **Yellow-faced Grassquits, Cuban Blackbirds** and at least one **Shiny Cowbird** swarmed the feeder. Nearby, another endemic, **Cuban Pygmy-Owl**, was discovered. Other birds seen during our visit included **Common Ground-Dove, Killdeer, Red-tailed Hawk, West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Pewee, Loggerhead Kingbird** and **Red-legged Honeycreeper**. A Cuban Trogon was heard but never came into view.



Cuban Pygmy-Owl
Photo by John Mangold



Cuban Trogon
Photo by John Mangold

Our next stop was at Sierra del Rosario Biosphere Reserve (declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1985), where we encountered several Cuban endemics: a pair of **Cuban Trogons**, plus **Cuban Tody**, **Cuban Green Woodpecker** and **Yellow-headed Warbler**. Other birds seen during our very productive walk included **Antillean Palm-Swift**, Cuban Emerald, **Northern Flicker**, **La Sagra's Flycatcher**, **Yellow-throated Vireo**, Red-legged Thrush, **Western Spindalis**, **Tawny-shouldered Blackbird**, Red-legged Honeycreeper, **Cuban Bullfinch** and seven warbler species: **Black-and-white Warbler**, **Common Yellowthroat**, **American Redstart**, **Northern Parula**, **Black-throated Blue Warbler**, **Yellow-throated Warbler** and **Black-throated Green Warbler**. Before leaving the reserve, we investigated a small patch of pine forest where we found **Olive-capped Warblers** and three **Stygian Owls** on a day roost; two adults and a youngster!

After lunch at a nearby restaurant, we returned to the national highway and continued west into Pinar Del Rio Provence. Just over the provincial border in Los Palacios, we stopped at fishponds along the highway, where we found a nice selection of birds, including **Black-necked Stilt**, **Spotted Sandpiper**, **Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorant**, **Brown Pelican**, **Great and Snowy Egret**, **Great Blue**, **Little Blue**, **Tricolored and Green Heron**, **Osprey**, **Snail Kite**, **American Kestrel** (Cuban race) and **Prairie Warbler**. We then left the highway and drove north to San Diego de los Baños, at the southern edge of Sierra de los Organos and the gateway to La Güera National Park. After checking into our hotel, some of us birded around the hotel grounds. Among the birds found was the only **Magnolia Warbler** seen on the tour.



Cueva de los Portales
Photo by Brian Rapoza

Day 4 – Tuesday, 2/4: After an early breakfast, we spent the morning at Cueva de los Portales in the mountains of La Güera National Park. We were joined by the local guide, Cesar. Cueva de los Portales is a limestone cave that was Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s headquarters during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. His cinder-block office within the cave is one of the main



Yellow-headed Warbler
Photo by John Mangold

attractions for visitors. Our main target bird in this area was the endemic **Cuban Solitaire**; we heard its hauntingly beautiful song as soon as we arrived. Viewing one proved more challenging, but eventually, a couple of birds were located by the guides and were seen by most participants. Another target was **Scaly-naped Pigeon**; we had brief looks at several outside the cave entrance. Other birds seen before entering the cave included **White-winged Dove**, **Great Lizard-Cuckoo**, La Sagra’s Flycatcher and Red-legged Thrush. **Cave Swallows** were seen flying in and out of the cave entrance and a **Barn Owl** flushed just as we entered. Two bat species were also encountered within the caves.

New birds were spotted near the cave entrance as we exited, including **Louisiana Waterthrush**, Cuban Tody and Yellow-headed Warbler. An endemic Cuban Vireo was heard there but couldn’t be located. **Cuban Martins** (an endemic breeder) and endemic **Cuban Orioles** were seen

by some participants on the walk back to the bus. We made several stops on our way out of the national park. Our first stop was at a wet area that was a known location for the rare **Giant Kingbird**. Our guides quickly found a pair that perched right in the open for us, vocalizing incessantly. A **Purple Gallinule** was also seen there. We encountered a few Olive-capped Warblers in pines farther down the road. Birds seen during a stop near the park entrance included Cuban Green Woodpecker, **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** and **Tennessee Warbler**. A pair of



Viñales Valley
Photo by Brian Rapoza

Eastern Meadowlarks were spotted in a pasture not far from the park entrance.

After leaving La Güera National Park, we drove west to Viñales, a small town located in a spectacular mountain valley dominated by unique rock formations known as mogotes. We ate lunch at Finca Agroecologica El Paraiso, a restaurant and organic farm overlooking the valley, then paid a visit to Nils Navarro, an artist, taxonomist and birding guide whose field guide, *Endemic Birds of Cuba*, was published in 2015. During a visit to Miami in October 2015, Nils gave a presentation about his just-published field guide at the birding festival at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. During our visit to Nils' home in Viñales, Nils showed us many of his original watercolors of birds that were used to illustrate his book. Nils also shared with us his plans to author a

more comprehensive field guide to the birds of Cuba. After saying goodbye to Nils and his family and making a quick stop at a Viñales Valley overlook, we headed back to our hotel for our final night in Pinar Del Rio.

Day 5 – Wednesday, 2/5: Today was mostly a travel day as we bid adios to San Diego de los Baños and headed east to the Zapata Peninsula. We made a birding stop at Nina Bonita Reservoir near Havana, where we added **Lesser Scaup**, **Common Gallinule** and **American Coot** to our trip list. Hundreds of Antillean Palm-Swifts were circling over the reservoir during our visit. Later, we made a “technical stop” (aka restroom break) at Parador “La Finquita” where, according to our guides, one could find the best piña coladas in all of Cuba. After trying one, we couldn't argue with their claim.



Cuban Tody
Photo by John Mangold



Zapata Sparrow
Photo by John Mangold

Our lunch stop was at Finca Fiesta Campesina, near the town of Australia on the road leading into the Zapata Swamp. After lunch, we made a quick stop where the road

crossed sawgrass marsh to try for the endemic Red-shouldered Blackbird, but none were found. Mid-afternoon, we arrived at our lodge, a beach resort on the Bay of Pigs and our home for the next three nights. A pair of **Cuban Crows** greeted us as we arrived. Later in the afternoon, we birded a patch of semideciduous forest in Soplillar, a nearby village. We were joined by Silverio, the local guide, who quickly led us to a **Greater Antillean Nightjar** day-roosting in the forest. Other birds seen there included **Zenaida Dove**, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, **Cuban Vireo**, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and **Ovenbird**.

Day 6 – Thursday, 2/6: This morning, we rose early for our visit to Santo Tomas, a remote village in the middle of the Zapata Swamp. Our two main target species today were Zapata Wren and Zapata Sparrow, and seeing these endemic birds required us to be on-site shortly after sunrise. Santo Tomas is reached via a more than 30-kilometer long unpaved road. After a very long, bumpy ride we reached the village and met the boatmen who would take us into the swamp. We had four small boats at our disposal, with three participants, a leader and a boatman in each boat. Not long after setting off down the canal that provides access into the swamp, we heard our first target bird, the sparrow. Three **Zapata Sparrows** eventually flew into a bare tree alongside the canal, allowing everyone to get good looks. One down, and one to go.



Zapata Wren

Photo by John Mangold

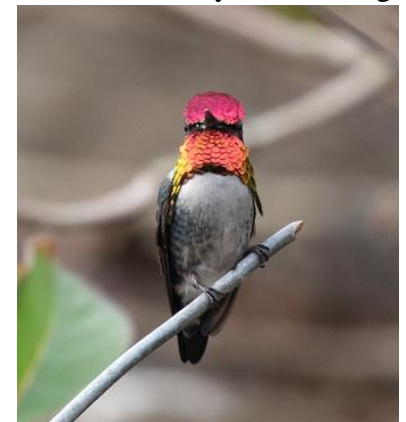
We continued down the canal, flushing many birds as we went; those we identified included **White-crowned Pigeon, Belted Kingfisher** and **Northern Waterthrush**. Eventually, we reached a boardwalk, where everyone clambered out of the boats. The boardwalk led to a wooden observation platform where we assembled and patiently waited for birds to appear. As has been our good fortune throughout this tour, we didn't have to wait long before a bird was heard in the distance. It was our second target, a **Zapata Wren!** But we needed one to come close enough to see it. This part of the drama took a bit longer, but eventually, a wren teed up directly in front of us, singing its little heart out. Victory was ours!



Casa de Bernabe

Photo by Brian Rapoza

We piled back into the boats and backtracked to our starting point, flushing birds upstream that we likely had earlier flushed downstream. Bird activity was still high as we walked through the village back to our bus. Among the many birds encountered around the village were Great Lizard Cuckoo, **Limpkin**, Cuban Trogon, West Indian Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Cuban Pewee, **Gray Catbird**, **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, Yellow-headed Warbler, Cuban Oriole and Tawny-shouldered Blackbird.



Bee Hummingbird

Photo by John Mangold

The drive back didn't seem to take quite as long as it did earlier in the morning. As we neared the end of the unpaved road, our guides announced that they had a "small surprise" for us. In the town of Palpite, we visited a home with a sign in front that gave away our "small surprise." In the backyard, a firebush was swarming with hummingbirds, including at least five



American Flamingo

Photo by John Mangold

endemic **Bee Hummingbirds**, the smallest bird in the world! These tiny gems appeared fearless, allowing visitors to approach very closely. The homeowner, Bernabe, invited participants to hold up a small hummingbird feeder, allowing them to feed the hummingbirds by hand. The yard also had a tray feeder that attracted swarms of Cuban Orioles, Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds, Cuban Blackbirds and even a Cape May and a few Black-throated Blue Warblers!

We had lunch at a beachside restaurant back at the lodge, then were given a couple of hours for siesta. Mid-afternoon, we visited Las Salinas, an area of abandoned saltpans on the west side of the Bay of Pigs. This area attracts a variety of shorebirds and wading birds, including flocks of **American Flamingo**. In

addition to about thirty flamingos, we saw Black-necked Stilt, **Black-bellied Plover**, **Willet**, **Greater** and **Lesser Yellowlegs**, **Ruddy Turnstone**, Laughing Gull, Royal and **Caspian Tern**, **Wood Stork**, **Magnificent Frigatebird**, Brown and **American White Pelican**, Great, Snowy and **Reddish Egret**, Little Blue, Tricolored and Green Heron, White Ibis and **Roseate Spoonbill**. We also saw several individuals of the Cuban race of **Yellow Warbler**. We even picked up a new endemic, **Cuban Black Hawk**, which we found feeding on blue crabs attracted to water flowing through a culvert.



Blue-headed Quail-Dove
Photo by John Mangold

Day 7 – Friday, 2/7: For our last full day of birding, we began near Bermejas, a community on the east side of the Bay of Pigs. Our first stop



Gray-fronted Quail-Dove
Photo by John Mangold

was a dove feeding station which attracted endemic **Blue-headed** and **Gray-fronted Quail Doves**. A couple of Zenaida Doves also joined the mix. Initially, we viewed the birds from behind a wall, but eventually, the quail-doves were walking under our feet, seemingly oblivious to our presence! Returning to the road, we quickly found another endemic, **Fernandina’s Flicker!** Also present were several **Cuban Parrots** and a couple of West Indian Woodpeckers.

We reboarded the bus and drove east, stopping along the road when the guides spotted a small flock of endemic **Cuban Parakeets**. Continuing east, we stopped in an area of sawgrass marsh to try to find Red-shouldered Blackbirds. We once again struck out on the blackbirds, but did see Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Limpkin, **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron**, Red-tailed Hawk and **Crested Caracara** during this stop. Backtracking to the woodland area that housed the dove feeding station, we walked, accompanied by the feeding station caretaker, deep into the forest to a broken palm snag. The caretaker rubbed the palm snag with a stick, and out of the top popped a **Bare-legged Owl**, our fifth endemic of the morning! Birds seen elsewhere in this woodland included Cuban Tody, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Pewee, Loggerhead Kingbird and Red-legged Thrush.



Bare-legged Owl
Photo by John Mangold



Cueva de la Peces
Photo by Brian Rapoza

We spent the rest of the morning in Playa Giron, a coastal community that played a central role in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in April, 1961. We visited a museum commemorating the battle, as well as a market across the street. We stopped for lunch at Cueva de la Peces, a coastal restaurant built alongside a cenote (blue hole) that has become a popular attraction for swimmers and divers. The cenote is surrounded by forest that was teeming with birds during our visit. Several Blue-headed Quail-Doves were feeding right around the restaurant. Other birds seen there included White-crowned Pigeon, Cuban Emerald, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Green Woodpecker, West Indian Woodpecker, Loggerhead Kingbird, Red-legged Thrush, Western Spindalis,

Yellow-headed Warbler, Cuban Blackbird and Greater Antillean Grackle, plus six species of migrant warblers: Ovenbird, Black-and-white Warbler, America Redstart, Cape May Warbler, Northern Parula and Black-throated Blue Warbler.

By popular demand, we returned to Palpete in the afternoon for another visit to Casa de Bernabe. The same cast of characters were present: Bee Hummingbirds, Cuban Emeralds, Cuban Orioles, Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds, Cuban Blackbirds, Cape May and Black-throated Blue Warblers, plus an additional “small surprise,” a Cuban Pygmy-Owl! The rest of the afternoon was devoted to birding around the Playa Larga resort or lounging by the pool. We had a fabulous farewell dinner at a family-owned restaurant near the resort.



Atilla, Silverio, Liber and Hiram

Photo by Brian Rapoza

Day 8 – Saturday, 2/8: This morning, we bid farewell to Playa Larga and began our return drive back to Havana. Along the way, we made a roadside stop outside a crocodile farm and were able to see several crocs from the bus (the farm raises both Cuban and American crocodiles). Passing the sawgrass marsh where we first tried for Red-shouldered Blackbird, we made one last attempt, hearing a distant bird calling, but it wasn't close enough to see. Of all the Cuban endemics we had a chance to see on this tour (we were too far west to see Cuban Gnatcatcher or Oriente Warbler), the blackbird, along with the rare Gundlach's Hawk and the mega-rare Zapata Rail, were the only ones we missed. Our incredible success on this tour was made possible by our fantastic guides:

- Dr. Hiram Gonzalez, our birding guide (An ornithological legend, Dr. Gonzalez, along with Dr. Jerome Jackson and the late Ted Parker, were among the last people to ever encounter a living Ivory-billed Woodpecker!)
- Atilla Perez, our Cuban national guide (his knowledge of Cuban history and culture, as well as its natural history and bird life, was amazing. We learned so much from him. He really took care of us every step of the way.)
- Liber Guerra, our bus driver. (Always professional in his dress, manners and driving skills, but a lot of fun as well!)
- All of the local guides who helped us along the way, in particular Cesar and Silverio.

I'd also like to thank all of the hotel and restaurant staffs who made our stay such a pleasure. I definitely look forward to birding in Cuba again very soon.

Brian Rapoza

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Field Trip Coordinator

Tropical Audubon Society

Bird List (CE = Cuban endemic, WIE = West Indian endemic)

The following 120 species were seen by most participants:

(All bird photos courtesy of John Mangold)

- Lesser Scaup
- American Flamingo
- Rock Pigeon
- Scaly-naped Pigeon (WIE)
- White-crowned Pigeon
- Eurasian Collared Dove
- Common Ground-Dove
- Blue-headed Quail-Dove (CE)
- Gray-fronted Quail-Dove (CE)
- White-winged Dove
- Zenaida Dove (WIE)
- Mourning Dove
- Smooth-billed Ani
- Great Lizard-Cuckoo (WIE)
- Greater Antillean Nightjar (WIE)
- Antillean Palm-Swift (WIE)
- Bee Hummingbird (CE)
- Cuban Emerald (WIE)
- Common Gallinule
- American Coot
- Purple Gallinule
- Limpkin
- Black-necked Stilt
- Black-bellied Plover
- Killdeer
- Ruddy Turnstone
- Spotted Sandpiper
- Greater Yellowlegs
- Willet
- Lesser Yellowlegs
- Laughing Gull
- Caspian Tern
- Royal Tern
- Wood Stork
- Magnificent Frigatebird
- Anhinga
- Neotropic Cormorant
- Double-crested Cormorant
- American White Pelican



Scaly-naped Pigeon



Zenaida Dove



Smooth-billed Ani



Antillean Palm Swift



Cuban Emerald



Cuban Black Hawk



Stygian Owl



Cuban Green Woodpecker

- Brown Pelican
- Great Blue Heron
- Great Egret
- Snowy Egret
- Little Blue Heron
- Tricolored Heron
- Reddish Egret
- Cattle Egret
- Green Heron
- Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
- White Ibis
- Roseate Spoonbill
- Turkey Vulture
- Osprey
- Snail Kite
- Cuban Black Hawk (CE)
- Red-tailed Hawk
- Barn Owl
- Bare-legged Owl (CE)
- Cuban Pygmy-Owl (CE)
- Stygian Owl
- Cuban Trogon (CE)
- Cuban Tody (CE)
- Belted Kingfisher
- Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
- Cuban Green Woodpecker (CE)
- West Indian Woodpecker (WIE)
- Northern Flicker
- Fernandina's Flicker (CE)
- Crested Caracara
- American Kestrel
- Cuban Parrot (WIE)
- Cuban Parakeet (CE)
- Cuban Pewee (WIE)
- La Sagra's Flycatcher (WIE)
- Loggerhead Kingbird (WIE)
- Giant Kingbird (WIE)
- Cuban Vireo (CE)
- Yellow-throated Vireo
- Cuban Crow (WIE)
- Cuban Martin (CE – breeding)
- Cave Swallow
- Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
- Zapata Wren (CE)



West Indian Woodpecker



Fernandina's Flicker



Cuban Parrot



Cuban Parakeet



Cuban Pewee



Loggerhead Kingbird



Giant Kingbird



Cuban Vireo

- Gray Catbird
- Northern Mockingbird
- Cuban Solitaire (CE)
- Red-legged Thrush (WIE)
- Scaly-breasted Munia
- House Sparrow
- Zapata Sparrow (CE)
- Western Spindalis (WIE)
- Yellow-headed Warbler (CE)
- Eastern Meadowlark
- Cuban Oriole (CE)
- Tawny-shouldered Blackbird (WIE)
- Shiny Cowbird
- Cuban Blackbird (CE)
- Greater Antillean Grackle (WIE)
- Ovenbird
- Louisiana Waterthrush
- Northern Waterthrush
- Black-and-white Warbler
- Tennessee Warbler
- Common Yellowthroat
- American Redstart
- Cape May Warbler
- Northern Parula
- Magnolia Warbler
- Cuban Yellow Warbler
- Black-throated Blue Warbler
- Palm Warbler
- Olive-capped Warbler (WIE)
- Yellow-rumped Warbler
- Yellow-throated Warbler
- Prairie Warbler
- Black-throated Green Warbler
- Red-legged Honeycreeper
- Yellow-faced Grassquit
- Cuban Bullfinch (WIE)
- Cuban Grassquit (CE)



Cuban Solitaire



Red-legged Thrush



Western Spindalis



Cuban Oriole



Tawny-shouldered Blackbird



Cuban Blackbird



Greater Antillean Grackle



Olive-capped Warbler



Red-legged Honeycreeper



Cuban Bullfinch



Cuban Grassquit