

Cuba. March/April 2004. R.C.Taylor. J.R.Duffie

This holiday was a last minute affair, an attempt to escape the doldrums of early spring in Cleveland and see some exotic birds with relative ease in 10 days. A chance sighting of a photograph of a Cuban Tody and the added bonus of the world's smallest bird (Bee Hummingbird) sealed the location. I arranged this trip with the help of Andy Mitchell of [Havanatour](#). Andy is a frequent visitor to the island and proved very helpful with sites for all of the endemics and other great birding locations. We eventually settled on an itinerary of 12 days; according to Andy Mitchell this would be a bit of a rush but time was short so needs must. As it happened we had more than enough time and we cleaned up at each site with time to spare. Havanatour made all of the necessary arrangements (Flights, car hire, b+b accommodation) and sent me tokens for all of them. This all ran perfectly smoothly. They seemed very competitive on prices and searching on the internet failed to find cheaper alternatives.

English is not very widely spoken and as we speak no Spanish it was often difficult, although we got by. Certainly a little Spanish would be a great help.

All visitors to the island need an easily obtained Tourist Visa Card.

US dollars were widely accepted, plenty of \$1 bills for tips, and the culture is very tip orientated. Unfortunately since Nov 2004 the government withdrew American dollars from Cuba so most tourists now take Euros. There are 2 versions of the Peso; one for Cubans and one for tourists, it all seems very complicated! Credit cards are not widely accepted but as we paid for everything in advance we did not need that much cash.

We stayed in hotels, all 3 * apart from the all inclusive 5* on Cayo Coco. They were all up to a good standard, although the food left a little to be desired, it was fine but the portions were very small.

Many people stay in casa particulars, basically local people who put you up with them. It may be OK for some, and seems to be cheaper, but this was not our cup of tea!

We only drank bottled water, apparently a sensible precaution, although I forgot and brushed my teeth in tap water and paid the price by being very ill for 3 days.

Travel around the island is easy, the roads are of a reasonable standard, very quiet away from the towns, although the Highway Code is not well practiced and you need your wits about you (no worse than Rome, Paris etc)! Driving at night is interesting, and possibly too dangerous unless absolutely necessary as you often meet horse and carts coming towards you on the wrong side of the road. Also road signs are virtually non existent and those that are there are often wrong, resulting in us regularly getting lost, especially around the capital. On several occasions our map had roads marked that were not there, for example a major road marked as going all the way to a particular city actually ended in a field about 70 miles short! We eventually worked out that we should have turned off in a village and taken the minor roads to the city. Very confusing! Our Toyota Yaris, although small, did the job perfectly. A word of caution though is that petrol is only available to tourists at certain petrol stations, and these are not that regular. We had one very close call near Havana and even in emergencies the other stations refuse to serve you. After that we filled up more regularly.

Everywhere you go there are lots of people hitching lifts. It is part of the way of life on the island and locals with cars are stopped by officials at designated points and their cars are filled. We made a point of not picking people up, on advice received, as they will take advantage and take you well out of your way. You get plenty of dirty looks when you do not stop with space in your car. However we got lumbered on several occasions, by workers at hotels we stayed at, a drunken man who fell in front of the car forcing us to stop and by police who flag you down only to get in and direct you in the direction they want to go.

We got pulled over by traffic police once; we were never sure what for. He basically wanted a bribe and for the sake of ease we paid him \$20. Wrong I know, but not being able to speak Spanish it seemed the easiest course of action.

Cuba is well known for the old American cars used by the locals. There are still many around, but most are in a state of disrepair and many Cubans took Castro up on the offer to swap them for brand new Ladas shipped in from Russia. The government seem to want to stockpile them as tourist attractions before they all break down.

We flew Air France from Newcastle to Paris then on to Havana. I did not find it a particularly pleasant experience, the service was very poor, it was cramped and the English films were dubbed over in various languages, amazingly not English though!

Also on both occasions the bus taking us to the transit area in Paris got lost forcing us to spend ages on a bus. To me they seemed poor and I will not be using Air France again.

31st March

Frustratingly we arrived at dusk, sorted our car with ease, obtained directions and headed west in the dark – a very hairy proposition! 2 Barn Owls were our first taste of Caribbean birding. We eventually arrived at Hotel Los Jasmines in Pinar Del Rio in the west of the island and were shown to our room very quickly.

1st April

Dawn revealed the most stunning view possible as the hotel was perched on top of a cliff at the head of the Vinales Valley. It is apparently one of the finest examples of Karst scenery, with huge Mogotes (lumps of limestone with a round top) rising vertically out of the flat valley floor.

A short drive took us to our first birding site at Dos Hermanos, enlivened by a huge dinosaur mural. The main target here was Cuban Solitaire giving its fantastic song from the cliffs. It gave us a good introduction to the West Indian avifauna and birds such as Zenaida Dove, Smooth Billed Ani, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Antillean Palm Swift, Western Spindalis and Greater Antillean Oriole were to become daily companions. It was not long before Cuban Tody appeared, and it was truly stunning, living up to all expectations. Other endemics seen here included the brilliant Cuban Trogon, the national bird, the smart Red-legged Thrush (like a giant Sardinian Warbler!) and the huge Great Lizard Cuckoo. A walk down the valley, taking in some almost invisible lost valleys, added the rare Cuban and Yellow-faced Grassquits as well as the Cuban Vireo, Martin, Bullfinch and Blackbird. By now it was becoming very hot so we retreated to the hotel for a siesta. Venturing back out late afternoon as the heat abated we headed to the Hotel La Ermita

where we soon bagged 2 of the 3 endemic wood warblers, Olive-capped and Yellow-headed. The brilliant Red-legged Honeycreeper responded quickly to pishing, as did several Cuban Emeralds and with that we had practically cleaned up here.



The Vinales Valley

2nd April

We were back out at dawn covering the same areas as yesterday, seeing roughly the same birds, adding an obliging Cuban Pygmy Owl to the list. A few North American wood warblers were here also, including Common Yellowthroat, Black-throated Green Warbler, Ovenbird, American Redstart and Prairie Warbler.



The brilliant Cuban Tody



Cuba's national bird, the Cuban Trogon

3rd April

After checking out of our hotel we set off early morning on the long drive east. A brief stop at a lake before Havana saw a few ducks added to the trip list and a Spotted Sandpiper. Havana proved tricky to navigate around but we eventually found our way round and early evening we arrived at the start of the 26 mile long causeway onto Cayo Coco. Security is tight here as it is only a tourist holiday resort with a selection of 5* all inclusive hotels. Apart from essential maintenance staff, all Cubans are bussed off the island each night!

With the light fading we stopped at a likely looking area and soon found a range of waterbirds, including some very pink Caribbean Flamingos. The nearby mangroves held a selection of warblers, best amongst them being a Magnolia Warbler.

We quickly located the Hotel Melia, checked in, had a meal and then went out looking for Nightjars. We soon found some but they seemed to be Chuck-wills Widows, not the Greater Antillean Nightjars everyone else sees here. We confirmed these the next day as several were seen coming in off the sea and we found two dead on the road.



Oriente Warbler



Yellow-headed Warbler

4th April

Dawn this morning and we scored with 4 of the tricky (and highly endangered) West Indian Whistling Duck on the lake near the hotel. We spent the rest of the morning birding the areas of forest left on the island. The main prize here were 2 Zapata Sparrows watched feeding under some scrub by the track off the road to La Playa Flamingo and 2 Ruddy Quail-doves briefly on the roadside. This whole area was excellent for birds (but plagued by mosquitoes, the hotel areas are fumigated every night, very unpleasant) and other new birds seen here included Common Black Hawk (a distinctive race), White-crowned Pigeon, Grey and Loggerhead Kingbirds, Cuban Gnatcatcher and the other endemic wood warbler, Oriente Warbler. Being during migration time this whole area was awash with such gems as Black and White, Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, Palm and Yellow Warblers.

A midday visit to Cayo Guillermo in scorching heat seemed doomed to failure with Bahama Mockingbird. However a spell of pishing from the comfort of the car persuaded at least 8 to sit on top of the bushes. It also attracted at least 100 previously unseen Palm Warblers and a host of Cuban Emeralds to show themselves.

That evening we headed off to Cayo Paredon Grande to look for the rare and endangered Thick-billed Vireo. A couple of hours searching the coastal scrub here eventually revealed a male singing by the track inland of the car park, along with a good selection of by now familiar Cuban birds.



Zapata Sparrow

5th April

We said goodbye to the decadence of the Hotel Melia and headed back towards the causeway (both glad to leave this “fake” area and return to Cuba “proper”). On the way there we fluked a Gundlach’s Hawk which we took to be a real bonus as they are supposed to be very tricky. As it happened we saw at least 5 more during the trip! Regular stops at likely looking mangrove clumps proved to be really good birding as some of the trees were fruiting and acted as a magnet to flocks of North American Wood Warblers, and the mudflats produced a good range of waders and waterbirds. Amazingly we found a Bananaquit near La Silla restaurant, a really rare bird on Cuba.

At this point I had become very ill. I have very little memory of the rest of the day driving to Camaguey apart from occasional stops for vomiting. We found the house of Pedro Regadaglo in Najassa (it is the second on the left after the sharp left hand bend on entering the village, he may have moved recently but he is well known by the locals) and

made arrangements for birding with him tomorrow. Due to my almost unconscious state we decided to find our hotel and get some rest. This was the only hotel we had issue with. It was the Hotel Gran in the centre of Camaguey, itself not a bad hotel but it was 1.5 hours drive to get back to the birding areas and finding the hotel in this mad town took ages (literally!). Unfortunately as the town has a one way system designed by a madman and most of it is pedestrianised it could take up to 1 hour to travel the short distance from the main route in to the hotel. To make matters worse we passed the Hotel Camaguey each time on the outskirts of town. This would be a better proposition for birders, unless you like the idea of walking the historic town of Camaguey.

6th April

We spent the day with Pedro today, great company and very knowledgeable. Firstly he showed us Giant Kingbirds at a nest near his house. These highly endangered endemics are “his” birds; he is the world authority and has written many papers on them.



Giant Kingbird

Other endemic birds in the area included Cuban Crow and the incredible sounding Cuban Palm Crow, Cuban Parrot and Parakeet and the aptly named Plain Pigeon. Wood warblers were again in evidence here with a stunning Cape May Warbler and several Worm Eating Warblers being the highlights as well as over 30 Northern Jacanas on a nearby lake.

We bade Pedro farewell and faced up to the prospect of 1 hour battling with cyclists and jay walkers in Camaguey!

7th April

We left the mayhem of Camaguey one last time and headed back west towards Zapata. As we had time on our side we took the scenic route via Trinidad on the south coast. Several stops did not produce any ticks but the landscape was fantastic and we saw Gundlach's Hawk and Cuban Gnatcatcher, the latter well out of its known range.

We arrived at our hotel late evening, were directed to our beachside chalet and then attempted to find the local guides. Failing on this we attempted some birding but saw

very little apart from 3 Ovenbirds, 40 Cuban Parrots and the seemingly common Gundlach's Hawk!

Walking to the restaurant after dark we were accosted by a Del Boy type character on a moped. He announced himself to be El Chino, the main local guide and more importantly he was able to take us out over the next 4 days. This was a real result as he turned out to be superb, very knowledgeable about where all of the birds are, very keen and hard working and a good laugh to be out with.

8th April

The Zapata area is a fantastic area of remnant forest, still fairly large but getting smaller due to illegal logging and hurricanes. We were shown the damage done by Hurricane Michelle in November 2001 and huge areas of forest were still flat. Apparently this benefits certain species but often result in certain species going missing for prolonged periods. The worry is that it may be permanent one of these times.

We were out early this morning with El Chino and 2 Spanish birders. Our first port of call soon found us watching the supreme Bee Hummingbird, one of the main reasons for the visit. When the sun caught this male right the red on the head was positively stunning and it is impossible to describe just how small it is.



The world's smallest bird!

A short drive away was a clearing and a hole in a dead tree therein produced a Fernandina's Flicker, a surprisingly great looking ground dwelling woodpecker, highly endangered due to fragmentation of habitat.



A similar looking tree not far away, when tapped at the base, produced a curious pair of Bare-legged Owls which sat looking at us from close range. Birding in this area was fantastic and whilst walking around a superb selection of birds was seen. As the temperatures soared we agreed on a siesta, arranging to meet up again late afternoon. We took the opportunity to visit the Crocodile Farm on the way back to the main road and soon saw the endemic Red-shouldered Blackbird along with some Northern Jacanas amongst the “Cuban” Crocodiles.

This evening we were back with El Chino on our own and we headed out down some very narrow tracks into the forest, where we managed reasonable views of both Grey-headed and Key West Quail-doves.

Just after dark we were taken to a stand of trees where a quick blast of a tape produced stunning views of a magnificent Stygian Owl.

9th April

Another early start with our guide saw us watching 2 newly arrived Greater Antillean Nighthawks hawking over the road in front of us. The morning was spent in a “new” area of forest, adding Northern Flicker, Tree Swallow and Broad-winged Hawk to our trip list along with another pair of Bee Hummingbirds.

For the afternoon session we were joined by another 2 British birders and the highlights were another Key West Quail-dove, 15 Cuban Parrots and a Swainson’s Warbler. Just after dark a Greater Antillean Nightjar was seen on the road in the car headlights, confirming to us that we had been watching the wrong species on Cayo Coco.

10th April

Dawn this morning saw us getting better views of the nightjar as one responded to a tape and gave close views in decent light. From here we drove very deep into the forest, had to remove a fallen tree from the track and began playing a tape of Blue-headed Quail-dove at a point known by our guide. One was soon responding, but seeing it proved very tricky. In the end it took 2 hours, but it was well worth it as it perched in full view on a branch 10 feet away, a truly stunning bird, and living up to all of the billing! Also in the area were 2 more Bee Hummers and an Indigo Bunting.



The awesome Blue-headed Quail-dove!

The other British birders wanted to search for birds we had seen before with El Chino so we headed off down the coast to tick off the Bay of Pigs, scene of that fateful American landing. A look out to sea here produced several distant Bridled Terns but little else. A huge thunderstorm passed over late afternoon and this seemed to cause all of the Land Crabs to head towards the sea – in their millions. The whole area was covered in them, literally. The road was a scene of carnage as each passing vehicle squashed thousands, our tactic to lessen this was to follow in the wake of any large trucks we could. Even so we still managed to get 2 punctures, easily fixed by a local. This passage lasted all night, as we returned from the restaurant it was tricky negotiating a path back and they were even climbing up the sides of our chalet!

11th April

We headed out this morning, with a total of 5 British birders, to an area of marsh to look for the rare Zapata Wren. A short walk through some 10 foot tall reeds (sharp so long trousers needed!) soon produced excellent views of this brilliant large wren (very like a Cactus Wren). Luck was on our side as we found 2 Spotted Rails feeding on the canal next to the car, an unexpected bonus. One of the group misheard Spotted for Zapata and for at least 1 hour thought we had stumbled upon one of the worlds most mythical birds! After this we drove about an hour to Rio Hatibonico, taking in the Cuban race of Eastern Meadowlark on the way. Here we searched for the local race of Zapata Sparrow, but it was not to be. American Purple Gallinule, 2 Fernandina's Flickers and another Zapata Wren were the highlights here. The journey back found a flock of 30 Tricoloured Mannikins by the roadside, a Cuban category C species!

For our final afternoon outing with El Chino we were joined by a further 5 British birders, much to the amusement of our guide who assumed all British were mad! Basically we just toured areas previously visited, getting great views of the 2 small Owls, the woodpeckers etc. The highlight though was a brief sighting of a Northern Potoo, an incredibly rare bird in Cuba, only seen by a handful of birders before. That evening (similarly crab infested) El Chino joined us for a meal in the restaurant with his wife and we bade him farewell.



Zapata Wren

12th April

We set off early on our last morning and went back to Rio Hatibonico. We failed again with Zapata Sparrow but managed a Grey-headed Quail-dove, 2 Snail Kites and a flyover Wood Stork. After a couple of hours we returned to the hotel, showered, checked out and headed back to Havana. Fortunately we allowed plenty of time as we got lost several times, but we still made it on time for our frankly poor flight back.

Systematic List:

Least Grebe
Pied-billed Grebe
Brown Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Neotropic Cormorant
Magnificent Frigatebird
Great Blue Heron
Great White Heron
Great Egret
Reddish Egret
Tricoloured Heron
Little Blue Heron
Snowy Egret
Cattle Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night Heron
White Ibis
Glossy Ibis
Roseate Spoonbill

Wood Stork
Greater Flamingo
West Indian Whistling Duck
American Wigeon
Blue-winged Teal
Ring-necked Duck
Wood Duck
Red-breasted Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Snail Kite
Gundlach's Hawk
Common Black-hawk
Broad-winged Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Northern Harrier
American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon
Crested Caracara
Helmeted Guineafowl
Limpkin
Spotted Rail
Purple Gallinule
Moorhen
American Coot
Northern Jacana
Black-necked Stilt
Killdeer
Short-billed Dowitcher
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Spotted Sandpiper
Willet
Laughing Gull /C
Ring-billed Gull 1
Sandwich Tern
Bridled Tern
Gull-billed Tern
Royal Tern
Caspian Tern
Feral Pigeon
White-crowned Pigeon
Plain Pigeon
Mourning Dove

Scaly-naped Pigeon
Zenaida Dove
White-winged Dove
Common Ground-dove
Grey-headed Quail-dove
Key West Quail-dove
Ruddy Quail-dove
Blue-headed Quail-dove
Cuban Parakeet
Cuban Parrot
Great Lizard-cuckoo
Smooth-billed Ani
Barn Owl
Bare-legged Owl
Cuban Pygmy-owl
Stygian Owl
Greater Antillean Nightjar
Greater Antillean Nighthawk
Chuck-will's Widow
Northern Potoo
Antillean Palm-swift
Cuban Emerald
Bee Hummingbird
Cuban Trogon
Belted Kingfisher
Cuban Tody
Bananaquit
West Indian Woodpecker
Cuban Green Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Fernandina's Flicker
Crescent-eyed Pewee
La Sagra's Flycatcher
Grey Kingbird
Loggerhead Kingbird
Giant Kingbird
Cuban Martin
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Cave Swallow
Barn Swallow
Zapata Wren
Grey Catbird
Bahama Mockingbird
Northern Mockingbird
Cuban Solitaire

Red-legged Thrush
Cuban Gnatcatcher
Palm Crow
Cuban Crow
House Sparrow
White-eyed Vireo
Thick-billed Vireo
Cuban Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Black-whiskered Vireo
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler (Golden)
Yellow Warbler (Mangrove)
Yellow Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler
Olive-capped Warbler
Prairie Warbler
Palm Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Worm-eating Warbler
Swainson's Warbler
Ovenbird
Prothonotary Warbler
Northern Waterthrush
Louisiana Waterthrush
Common Yellowthroat
Yellow-headed Warbler
Oriente Warbler
Hooded Warbler
Red-legged Honeycreeper
Western Stripe-headed Tanager
Cuban Bullfinch
Cuban Grassquit
Yellow-faced Grassquit
Zapata Sparrow
Red-shouldered Blackbird
Tawny-shouldered Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Cuban Blackbird
Greater Antillean Grackle

Shiny Cowbird
Greater Antillean Oriole