



CUBA: GREAT CARIBBEAN BIRDING AND ENDEMICIS

2 - 12 MARCH 2020



Cuban Tody (photo William Price) is one of our main targets on this tour.

The smallest bird on the planet, **Bee Hummingbird**, a myriad **Cuban Todies** and **Cuban Trogons** in every patch of scrub, and a host of other endemics and regional specials – all on an island paradise that is safe and full of history! Combining this 11-day Cuba tour with our Jamaica tour provides opportunities to see almost 60 single-island endemics spread across the two islands: Cuba, the largest of the Greater Antilles, and Jamaica, the smallest of the main islands in the group. In addition, we will have chances to find a number of multi-island endemics and regional specialties, some of which may, in the future, be upgraded in their taxonomic status.

This is a tour in which we aim to find all of Cuba's realistic avian endemics, a host of wider Caribbean endemics, and, finally, a bunch of north American migrants (like a stack of brightly-colored wood warblers), while also having time to snorkel during the heat of the day when not birding, to see the amazing architecture not only of Cuba's capital but also of Camagüey and other towns, and of course to enjoy the old American cars and the general atmosphere of this tropical paradise. It's quite an easy tour, in which we find the birds we need without too much trouble (except for a couple of them, such as the quail-doves, which require persistence).

Shortly after arriving in the charismatic city of Havana we immediately head to the picturesquely mountainous and very bird-rich La Güira National Park. Here we search the caves where Che Guevara hid during the Cuban missile crisis, looking for our first of many endemics, **Cuban Solitaire**. We then return to Havana, where we look, on foot, at some of the main historical sites and catch some of the amazing vibe.

With much anticipation we then proceed to Cuba's famous Zapata Swamp, one of the richest single sites throughout the West Indies, which continues across much of the western two thirds of this island – which is widely regarded as the last bastion of communism in the world, but is now gradually becoming slightly more liberalized. We will have good chances of finding all of Cuba's endemics, with the exception of the near-mythical Zapata Rail, whose voice is still not definitely known, and the extremely rare Cuban Kite, which is restricted to the extreme east of the island and requires a trip of near-expedition proportions for any chance of seeing it.

We then proceed to a chain of islands connected to the mainland by a 17 mile (27 km)-long causeway, seeking **Bahama Mockingbird**, some Cuban endemics reaching the western limit of their range here, **Mangrove Cuckoo**, and more.

Eventually we clean up on the birding at Sierra de Najasa and then either drive back to Havana for your international flights home or continue to Santiago de Cuba to island-hop to Jamaica for the next tour.

This trip can easily be combined with our **Jamaica at Its Best 2020** tour and, following that, with our **Complete Dominican Republic 2020** tour for a very comprehensive birding experience in the Caribbean.

Itinerary (11 days/10 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Cuba, transfer to La Güira National Park

We arrive in Havana and transfer the 129 km (80 miles) to La Güira National Park at the west end of the island. This highland region is still well forested and is consequently excellent for endemics. However, our principal targets will be the endemic **Cuban Solitaire** and near-endemic **Olive-capped Warbler**, both of which are usually readily found. Finally, we will check a different area for the now very localized **Cuban Grassquit**. Although still common in the eastern third of the island, finding one in Cuba has become rather difficult in recent years due to the fact that many have been trapped by cage bird enthusiasts.

Overnight: Hotel Islazul Mirador, La Güira

Day 2. Morning birding at La Güira, return to Havana for afternoon coach tour

While this is a birding trip, who can go to Cuba without looking at the historical sites and getting a feel for the amazing architecture? So, we clean up on the western Cuban bird specials before returning to Havana for a coach tour this afternoon and a morning walk in the old city the following morning.

Overnight: Hotel Sevilla, Havana

Day 3. Off to Zapata Swamp!

After much anticipation we will make the three-hour transfer to Playa Larga in the “Bay of Pigs” for a four-night stay in the Zapata Peninsula, one of the richest areas for birds in the entire West Indies region, with over 200 species having been recorded here. We should soon be seeing our first island endemics and regional specialties: **Cuban Blackbird**, **Cuban Oriole**, recently elevated to full species status, **Cuban Emerald**, **Cuban Crow**, and **Tawny-shouldered Blackbird**.

Overnight: Playa Larga

Days 4 – 6. Birding the Zapata Peninsula

Some of our main targets in this area will be the quail-doves, of which four species occur on the island. The spectacular **Blue-headed Quail-Dove**, which belongs to a monotypic genus, is the most difficult, whilst **Ruddy Quail-Dove** is widespread throughout much of the Neotropics, but **Key West Quail-Dove** is restricted to the Greater Antilles and the Florida Keys, and the globally threatened **Grey-fronted Quail-Dove** is confined to Cuba. Time and patience are always prerequisites in the quest for these birds. Woodpeckers are another feature of the region: **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** is a common winter migrant, while the regional endemic **West Indian Woodpecker** and the Cuban endemic **Cuban Green Woodpecker** are both reasonably common residents. Most prized, however, is the rare and declining Cuban endemic **Fernandina’s Flicker**, which is known from several sites in the area. The Bermejas Forest Reserve will be one of our most frequently-visited sites: **Cuban Amazon** (also known as Rose-throated or Cuban Parrot), **Cuban Parakeet**, and **Bare-legged Owl** are all regular there, in addition to the quail-doves and woodpeckers. We will search mixed flocks for the endemic **Yellow-headed Warbler**, **Cuban Vireo**, and **Cuban Bullfinch**, and be ever alert for the short, rattling call of a **Cuban Tody**. The beautiful **Cuban Trogon** (Cuba’s national bird) and the rather dowdier but still impressive **Great Lizard Cuckoo** are regular sights and sounds. We will keep a sharp watch for any signs of panic among the small birds, which may indicate the presence of the rare endemic **Gundlach’s Hawk**.

One morning we will make an earlier than usual start for a locality within the famous Zapata Swamp. The open woodland around the swamp will afford chances for **Northern** and **Louisiana**

Waterthrushes as well as three island endemics, **Cuban Pygmy Owl**, **Zapata Sparrow**, and **Red-shouldered Blackbird**. Our principal target, however, will be the extremely localized **Zapata Wren**, which is currently being seen at a site that does not require getting wet feet (unlike in the 1990s). This place is also home to **Spotted** and **King Rails**, **Sora**, and a range of common marsh birds, including various herons, **Belted Kingfisher**, and **Northern Harrier**, but chances of the ultra-rare and highly secretive Zapata Rail are effectively nil. Another species synonymous with Cuba is the smallest bird in the world, **Bee Hummingbird**. We will visit several of its known haunts during our time in Zapata, affording us fine chances to catch up with one of Cuba's most-desired bird species. We will also make a couple of early-evening excursions, one to find the endemic **Cuban Nightjar** (now classified as distinct from the form in Hispaniola), while, on the other hand, a pair of **Stygian Owls** is a regular feature of our hotel's grounds.

Each day will follow a similar pattern: After an early breakfast we will head to an adjacent area and bird until late morning before returning to the hotel for lunch and a short siesta, thereafter returning to the field mid-afternoon. During the mid-day rests you can either actually sleep, lounge on the beach at the hotel, or we can take you to some of the best snorkeling sites on earth (the reefs are extremely easily accessible without a boat). We can also make a visit to the museum at Playa Giron.

Overnight: Playa Larga

Days 7 – 8. Transfer to Cayo Coco, birding Cayo Coco and surrounds

We make the long (405 km/250 mile) transfer to Cayo Coco. The last 27 km (17 miles) is on an amazing causeway that links Cayo Coco with “mainland” Cuba. Just before doing this final little stretch we often look for **Mangrove Cuckoo** at our stakeout. Then we'll proceed north to the island of Cayo Coco, where we will spend two nights.

Before the causeway was built, Cayo Coco was a wilderness known only to fishermen (including Ernest Hemingway). Nowadays the region has been extensively developed for tourism, but especially during migration this is an exciting place to be, with a long list of rarities having been recorded. However, we will be mainly concentrating on finding the breeding specialties: an endemic subspecies of **Thick-billed Vireo** is found only here, while **Cuban Gnatcatcher** and **Oriente Warbler** are close to the westernmost limits of their ranges, and **Mangrove Cuckoo** and **Bahama Mockingbird** are, in Cuba, largely or wholly restricted to the area. Should we have missed it earlier, there is another chance for **Key West Quail-Dove**, while a different subspecies of **Zapata Sparrow** is much easier to see than in Zapata. Numbers of terns and gulls can be seen offshore, and the causeway is the best place in the West Indies to see **Red-breasted Merganser** as well as being the regular haunt of a large flock of **American Flamingos** and many waders and herons.

Overnight: Cayo Coco

Day 9. Transfer to Camagüey, birding en route, city tour

Transfer (200 km/125 miles) to Camagüey, the third-largest (and oldest) city in Cuba. We will bird on the way and after arriving in the city we will make the short trip to the city's cathedral to search for the endemic breeder, **Cuban Martin**, should we not have already encountered it in Zapata. This species, which is very similar to Purple Martin (which migrates through Cuba), is unknown anywhere else in the world, but is absent from the island between autumn and late January. We'll also do a tour of the city and then have lunch there. Even the most hardened

birder usually likes to spend an odd hour or two looking at other things in Cuba, especially on a tour like this, in which we typically find all the avian endemics, regional specials, and migrants anyway (subject to some amount of luck, of course!).

In the afternoon we'll drive to our accommodation to arrive in time for a short birding walk.

Overnight: Finca La Belén, Sierra del Chorrillo

Day 10. Birding the Sierra de Najasa

Today we'll make an early morning visit to the Sierra de Najasa, south of the city, where we will search for a range of highly specialized species, including the globally endangered **Plain Pigeon**, as well as both **Cuban Crow** and **Cuban Palm Crow** (facilitating an appreciation of the differences between these two all-black species). Also here is **Eastern Meadowlark** as well as another globally threatened bird, now endemic to Cuba, **Giant Kingbird**. Furthermore, we will also have additional chances for **Cuban Parakeet**, **Fernandina's Flicker**, **Gundlach's Hawk**, and yet more wintering North American warblers. We will also check a nearby lake for **West Indian Whistling Duck**.

Overnight: Finca La Belén, Sierra del Chorrillo

Day 11. Transfer to Havana, or to Santiago de Cuba for flight to Jamaica

We'll have a long journey back to Havana, if you are returning home, or to Santiago de Cuba for a flight to Jamaica, if you are joining us in Jamaica.

Important Note:

Please note that outside of Havana and Cayo Coco we use the best and most suitable accommodation that is available, but this might not be quite to the same standard that Birding Ecotours would normally use in other parts of the world.

Duration: 11 days
Group Size: 4 - 9
Date: 2 – 12 March 2020
Start: Havana, Cuba
End: Santiago de Cuba or Havana, Cuba

Price: £3913 per person sharing, assuming 4-9 participants. We offer a discount of 10 % for a group of 6 or more participants.

Single supplement: £332

Price includes:

Meals
 Unlimited bottled water
 Accommodation while on tour
 Guiding fees
 All transport while on tour

Price excludes:

International flights

Cuban exit taxes
Cuban Tourist Card
Items of a personal nature, such as gifts
Laundry
Personal insurance
Gratuities

Please note that the itinerary above cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.