

Birding Ecotours



CUBA BIRDING TOUR: ENDEMIC AND CULTURE IN PARADISE

01 - 12 MARCH 2023



Bee Hummingbird; the world's smallest bird species (Daniel Orozco)!

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 idyllic island paradise that is full of history and culture! Combining this 12-day Cuba tour with our [Jamaica birdwatching tour](#) provides opportunities to see almost 60 single-island endemics spread across two islands: Cuba, the largest of the [Greater Antilles](#), and Jamaica, the smallest of the main islands in the group. Then you can also combine these tours with our [Dominican Republic birding tour](#) to see an endemic family (Palmchat) and further suite of endemics of another large (second only to Cuba in size) Caribbean Island, Hispaniola. In addition, on this Cuba birding holiday, 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.



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

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 can require persistence).

We arrive in the charismatic city of Havana and overnight here, getting a great taste of Cuban architecture, culture, vibe - and getting acquainted with some of the more common birds of the West Indies. We then 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**.

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 which requires a trip of near-expedition proportions for any chance of seeing it, and the rare Cuban Kite in the far east of the island.

We then proceed to a chain of islands connected to the mainland by a 17-mile/27-kilometers-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 drive back to Havana where we have a bit of time to enjoy the city before your international flights depart the next day.

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

Itinerary (12 days/11 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Cuba and enjoy Havana

This is a travel day and you can arrive any time. You'll be met at the airport and transferred to your hotel in the historic old town part of Havana. You can explore on foot, either on your own or with our guide, whatever you prefer.

Overnight: Hotel Inglaterra, Havana (Old City)

Day 2. Transfer to La Güira National Park

Today we transfer the 80 miles/129 kilometers 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 the 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 3. Transfer to Zapata Swamp

After much anticipation, we will make the long (at least half a day) transfer to Playa Larga in the Bay of Pigs for a four-night stay on the Zapata Peninsula (encompassing the Zapata Swamp), 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 some of Cuba's best birds. **Cuban Blackbird**, **Cuban Oriole** (recently elevated to full species status), **Cuban Emerald**, **Cuban Crow** and **Tawny-shouldered Blackbird** are usually easy to find but kindly read on for some of the even more exciting birds!

Overnight: Playa Larga, Zapata Peninsula



Cuban Bullfinch is widespread around the island (photo Alan van Norman).

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, while **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**.



Blue-headed Quail-Dove will be targeted on the Zapata Peninsula (photo Daniel Orozco).

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 in the midafternoon. 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, Zapata Peninsula



Bare-legged Owl may be seen on a night-time excursion in Bermejas Forest Reserve (photo Alan van Norman).

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

We make the long (250 miles/405 kilometers) transfer to Cayo Coco. The last 17 miles/27 kilometers 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 paradisaical 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 the attractive **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 this 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 (125 miles/200 kilometers) 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



Fernandina's Flicker may be found in the Sierra de Najasa (photo Alan van Norman).

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 Near-threatened (IUCN) 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

We'll have a long journey back to Havana

Overnight: Inglaterra, Havana (Old City)

Day 12. Enjoying Havana and flight home or onwards to Dominican Republic

The previous afternoon and today, you have time to enjoy Havana on foot before flying onwards to our next Caribbean birding tour (Dominican Republic, which can also then be followed by Jamaica!) or home.

Please note that the itinerary 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. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different international guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling.

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 up to the same standard that Birding Ecotours would normally use in other parts of the world

Duration: 12 days

Group Size: 6 – 9

Dates: 01 – 12 March 2023

Start: Havana, Cuba

End: Havana, Cuba

Prices: £3650 per person sharing, assuming 6-9 participants, £470 surcharge for a group of only 4-5 (2023)

Single supplements: £375 (2023)

Price includes:

Meals

Unlimited bottled water

Accommodation while on tour

Guiding fees

All transport while on tour

Price excludes:

All flights

Cuban exit taxes

Items of a personal nature, such as gifts

Laundry

Personal insurance

Gratuities (please see our [tipping guidelines blog](#))