

ORNITHOLIDAYS TOUR TO CUBA
Endemic Birds & Winter Visitors

19 February – 01 March 2012



Leader: Mike Witherick

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A Personal Diary

Sunday, 19 February

Eight of us assembled at Gatwick for the midday direct flight to Havana. In the event, our departure and subsequent arrival were delayed by an hour. The Virgin Atlantic jumbo was absolutely full with 440 passengers. The service was good, but the food a little disappointing. It took us the best part of three hours to clear immigration and a security search, collect our baggage and change our Sterling into CUCs (Cuba tourist currency). With our tour courier Liban, we boarded the 16-seater bus driven by Adrian and made the 150 minute transfer to our hotel outside Viñales. We were allocated our rooms and, it being 15 minutes past midnight, made all speed for bed. Philip and Susan from Guelph were already in residence. Three hours later Michael and Janet arrived having flown from London via Madrid.

Monday, 20 February

There was a full turnout at 7 am for a spell of pre-breakfast birding in the grounds of the hotel. The light was not good because of a fair amount of cloud cover and in the end we decided to go for an early breakfast before other hotel guests started to turn up. Nonetheless, during our short time birding in the garden we came to grips with the likes of Great Antillean Grackle, West Indian Woodpecker, Antillean Palm Swift and Red-legged Thrush. We were impressed by the white plumage of the local American Kestrels. This is one of two distinctive morphs occurring in Cuba; the other has a rufous chest and belly. At the moment, both are classified as one subspecies, but they may shortly be recognised as an endemic species and known as Cuban Kestrel. Also seen well was a recently declared endemic – Cuban Oriole (formerly Greater Antillean Oriole or Black-cowled Oriole).

At 8.45am we boarded the bus and headed into Viñales to pick up Julius, our local bird guide for the morning. Although we had a paper voucher, we were soon informed by the local tourist office that it was not in order. It took a little while to sort this out, but eventually we were driving the short distance into the Valley of the Two Sisters, where we focused on one target species, namely the Cuban Solitaire – one of the more difficult and localised of the Cuban endemics. After a short while we were listening to the distinctive song of this species and eventually gained some views. At one time, a bird came into a tree just above our heads. I have never been so close, but the bird was very restless moving around the tree in a warbler-like manner. For some of the time, a Cuban Trogon (Cuba's national bird) vied with the Solitaire for our attention. Also seen in the vicinity was a flock of Yellow-faced Grassquits.

Around 11 am we decided to move to the other side of Viñales for another target species – Olive-headed Warbler. This is not an endemic, but it has a highly limited distribution on the island. We moved to a plantation of fairly young pines, first crossing a barbed wire fence which Brian tackled in a distinctly unorthodox manner. It was not long before we were surrounded by this surprisingly vocal species. Good views were obtained. But also in the same area we came across a lovely mix of species, including one endemic - the Cuban Grassquit. We also saw two 'near endemics', the Cuban Emerald and Cuban Pewee. Anne spotted a male American Redstart. We also saw some Palm and Prairie Warblers, as well as a pair of Western Spindalis. Two Anhingas were seen in flight, and shortly afterwards an Osprey flew by at a relatively low altitude.

Well satisfied with the morning's haul of birds, we then returned to the hotel for a leisurely lunch, first dropping Julius off in Viñales. After the meal, there was an hour or so of R & R to recharge the batteries for a spell of afternoon birding back in the Valley of the Two Sisters with its huge mural painted on a rock face and its spectacular mogote scenery (great mounds of limestone riddled with caves). However, our plans were thwarted when we happened across two employees of the Viñales National Park who informed us that we could not birdwatch there because we had no local bird guide! This left us with no option but to make our way back to the hotel. The only new bird seen during this brief outing was Smooth-billed Ani. Back in the

hotel grounds, birdlife was fairly muted save for the vocal and all-dominating Greater Antillean Grackles. We managed, however, to add two new species, namely Mourning Dove and Scaly-naped Pigeon.

We reassembled in the vicinity of the bar a little before 7 pm and then embarked on another substantial meal. Afterwards, we did the checklist and then went through the arrangements for tomorrow morning and our transfer to Playa Larga. Immediately afterwards, we hastened to our rooms to catch up on lost sleep.

Tuesday, 21 February

Everyone was down in the restaurant for the start of breakfast service at 7 am – cases were packed and ready for loading aboard the bus. With commendable punctuality, we were ready to start the drive to Playa Larga. However, between breakfast and boarding the bus we did manage to add one new species to the tour list – Tawny-shouldered Blackbird.

We made a detour into Havana to our ground agent's offices to collect some paperwork. During the break, the group showed due diligence and managed to find our first Cuban Blackbird. Another compensation of the detour was that we were able to enjoy a long drive along Havana's splendid waterfront. Given the quality of the urban roads, we were able to make speed through the capital and before long we had joined the *autopista* again and headed along to as far Australia. Here we turned off and took the road to Playa Larga distinctively flanked by memorials marking the locations where Cuban soldiers fell during the abortive invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. A force of exiled Cubans, backed by the US, attempted to overthrow the recently-installed Castro regime.

During our time on the *autopista*, we were impressed by a number of things: the way the national transport system works to provide cheap transport for the masses; the huge areas given over to the growing of sugar cane, and the degree to which the skies are dominated by Turkey Vultures. The only new species for the tour were Common Ground-Dove, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier, Brown Pelican, Royal Tern and Least Grebe.

Eventually, at around 2.30 pm, we reached our base for the next four nights at the head of the infamous Bay of Pigs. I was greatly delighted to learn that our local guide for much of our time in Playa Larga would be Angel, who had guided for me on three of my previous four Cuban tours. Soon we were sitting down to a most welcome lunch - the bean soup touched the spot and the fish was truly delicious. Once we had finished the meal and paid for our drinks, we decided to go straight into the field and leave the first occupation of our allocated chalets until our return.

We spent the next two hours birdwatching in the Palpite area – a habitat of dry, open woodland managing to survive on a massive area of limestone pavement. Two endemics were spotted for the first time – Fernandina's Flicker (after two false alarms caused by Northern Flickers) and Yellow-headed Warbler; we also viewed Magnolia Warblers, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and Cuban Pewee. An Ovenbird was seen a little later, much to the joy of Anne and Colin. Strangely, given the geology, we came across some wetland areas where we saw Little and Great Blue Herons, Neotropic Cormorant, Belted Kingfisher, Northern Jacana, Blue-winged Teal and Limpkin. We heard the distant call of Cuban Parrot. Other notable sightings included rufous morphs of the American Kestrel plus Cuban Oriole.

We arrived back at the hotel at 6 pm and the bus delivered us to our chalets. Given the lateness of our lunch, we opted to delay taking dinner until 8 pm. Thus everyone had a couple of hours in which to unpack, unwind and shower. After the meal, we did the checklist and went through the arrangements for tomorrow.

Wednesday, 22 February

We were meant to have a slightly earlier breakfast, but in the event we entered the restaurant at the normal breakfast opening time of 7 am. A large flock of Cuban Parrots started our birding day as they emerged from a mature tree on campus where they had spent the night. The morning was taken up with a long drive to and from the Rio Hatiguanico for a river cruise which lasted about two hours. Our best sightings were of a Cuban Kestrel, a number of Cuban Green Woodpeckers, several Cuban Pewees and a Common Yellowthroat. Great Blue Egrets were present in good numbers. We saw our first Green Heron and several Ospreys.

We returned to the hotel and sat down for lunch at 1.30 pm. In the afternoon we visited the Sendero Salinas. The open shallow waters with their mangrove fringes were found to have attracted an abundance and diversity of species. There were many highlights. These included the hundreds of richly pink Caribbean Flamingos and a lone Roseate Spoonbill which appeared on cue following a remark by Brian. Anne was particularly pleased to see the good numbers of the American White Pelicans. Matching them were the small flocks of White Ibis. I do not recall ever seeing so many Caspian Terns. In amongst them were some Royal Terns. A Gull-billed Tern flew over us late in the afternoon. A new species for my Cuban list was Black Skimmer – indeed we saw a flock of some 30 of them. It was strange that we should see only one gull – a Laughing Gull. Two Magnificent Frigatebirds put in an appearance, attracted no doubt by the feeding frenzy involving large numbers of Caspian Terns and Great Egrets. A number of the terns were forced to disgorge their recent catches.

When it came to the herons and egrets, we achieved more or less a full house of species, the only notable absentee being Green Heron. The rest were represented in good numbers. Reddish Egrets and Tricoloured Herons were particularly admired. Large flocks of Northern Shoveler and American Wigeon were seen, along with small numbers of American Coots. Some Belted Kingfishers perched obligingly. Our wader list included Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Black-bellied Plover, Willet, Short-billed Dowitcher, Semipalmated Plover and Western Sandpiper. We did well with our sightings of two raptor species, namely Cuban Black Hawk (one was stalked to within a few metres by Colin in photographic mode) and Northern Crested Caracara.

We returned to the hotel at 6.45 pm and an hour later assembled in the bar for a pre-prandial drink. Dinner and the checklist followed. The latter had to be called in the bar because of the live music in the dining room. All seemed keen to get to their rooms given that we would be taking an early breakfast tomorrow.

Thursday, 23 February

Everyone was in the restaurant before 6 am for our early breakfast and 30 minutes later we were all on board the bus. We made great speed for the 800-ha Bermeja reserve, arriving there just after 7 am. We were greeted by Orlando, the reserve warden, and quickly shown to a place behind a crude wooden screen. Much to our amazement, a few metres in front of us were no less than three Blue-headed Quail-Doves. Further down the track a Key West Quail-Dove showed well, keeping company with some Zenaida Doves. Two Catbirds were vocal and showed well. After a while, we left the reserve and went for a walk around a nearby farming hamlet where we came across the first of many La Sagra's Flycatchers. In the same flowering mango tree, we saw Yellow-throated and Black-throated Blue Warblers and a Cuban Oriole.

Some 30-minutes later, we crossed the road and entered the reserve again, and set off on foot along a forest trail. At an intersection close to a known quail-dove drinking hole we encountered two Grey-headed Quail-Doves, one down the track and the other up it. The latter came quite close. It says much about the field discipline of the group that 12 of us were able to see three species of highly-wary quail-dove all within a period of 90 minutes!

More than pleased with ourselves, we walked deeper into the reserve. Soon we were seeing one of the endemic species we were all particularly keen to see – the diminutive Cuban Tody. There cannot be many more stunning little birds in the global avifauna. Adding to its charm was the 'blown raspberry' sound made by the wings of displaying males. Other species seen during the remainder of the walk were Great Lizard Cuckoo, Cuban Trogon, Black-throated Green and Prairie Warblers.

Eventually, we returned to the road and took a track that led past Orlando's home. We had not actually reached the house before a male Bee Hummingbird was spotted sitting on a telegraph wire. The bird was heard singing and clearly there was a prospective nesting site nearby. The bird could not have been more obliging, its colours flashing in the bright sunlight. The photographers in the group had a field day. A little later, a female put in an appearance and for a brief while three birds were seen together – two males were disputing which of them deserved the female. In the same vicinity we saw our first Broad-winged Hawk.

Soon it was time to take our leave of Orlando and to head back towards Playa Larga. Early on, we spotted a Cuban Kestrel. A brief stop was made at the Cuevade Los Peces where we saw our ninth endemic of the morning – Cuban Green Woodpecker. Also there we saw a Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and a Northern Parula.

We arrived back at the hotel at 11.45 am and 30 minutes later met for lunch out on the terrace. The sea breeze was most reviving and therapeutic. Our feeding and watering finished just 1 pm, thus allowing us nearly two hours of leisure time. How many, I wondered, converted that R and R into a siesta?

At 3 pm we drove to the relatively near Soplillar reserve – another largely wooded area, but damper and more thickly wooded than the Bermeja reserve. We opened the afternoon's birding with two endemics – Cuban Vireo and Yellow-headed Warbler. Unfortunately, not everyone managed to get onto the former. There was one memorable flurry of warblers as a mixed feeding party hastened through the woods. It contained Hooded, Worm-eating and Black-and-white Warblers. Later we added Black-throated Green and Magnolia Warblers, together with Ovenbird and Louisiana Waterthrush. Cuban Todys seemed more inclined to pose than those seen in the morning. We had a memorable sighting of a Cuban Screech-owl looking out of its nesting hole. Late in the afternoon, we came across another Grey-headed Quail-Dove out in relatively open country. We also enjoyed good views of the other endemic owl, the Cuban Pygmy-Owl. On that high, we decided to call it a day – it had been a truly memorable day with no less than 13 of Cuba's endemics sighted during the day.

We gathered in the bar shortly after 7 pm and eventually drifted through into the restaurant for another meal. Later we retreated to the calm and quiet of the bar to do the checklist and then onward to our chalets.

Friday, 24 February

Our day started with another early breakfast and we were on the road by just after 6.30 am. Our destination this morning was the track leading to La Turba way out in the Zapata Swamp. We set out with three target birds in focus – three more endemics namely Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow and Red-shouldered Blackbird. The best that can be said about the first of these is that we heard at least three Zapata Wrens singing, but none could be persuaded by our tape to move nearer and actually show themselves. The Zapata Sparrow was altogether more obliging and we had good views of a pair. All that we could claim with respect to the Red-shouldered Blackbird is that a few of the party heard the species and saw two briefly in profile before heading off into the sun.

The Swamp was a delightful place to visit – tranquil and devoid of humans bar ourselves, gradually the lingering early morning mist was burnt off revealing vast expanses of reed-beds. During our time there, we added some new species to the tour list. These included Black-crowned Night-Heron, American Purple Gallinule, Snail Kite, Killdeer, Tree Swallow, Cuban Martin and Northern Waterthrush.

On the way back to the hotel, we made a brief stop at the La Boca crocodile farm – very definitely a tourist honeypot. However, despite all the people and commotion, we enjoyed renewing acquaintance with a good number of wood warblers. Cape May Warbler, however, was the only new one. A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was closely watched because not everyone had seen the bird recorded two days ago.

We arrived back at the hotel with a little time in hand before lunch out on the terrace. The sea breeze was more than welcome given the mounting heat of the day. After the meal, there was plenty of time for a siesta before venturing out at 3 pm for another visit to a different part of the Palpite area from that was visited three days ago. We had hoped to find Cuban Vireo, but we were out of luck. The afternoon was a very hot one and no doubt was largely responsible for the subdued birdlife. We came across a number of wood warblers, but only one was new for the day – the endemic Yellow-headed Warbler. Later, we decided to switch our attack in the direction of Red-shouldered Blackbirds. This involved patrolling the road along stretch of suitable habitat. Sadly, it was not our lucky day and we returned to hotel at 5.45 pm for some packing and a little time in the bar before dinner.

Saturday, 25 February

We enjoyed the luxury of a normal breakfast today and at 8am set off to cover the 450 km to our next base, at Camaguey. The journey broke down conveniently into three legs. The first took us to the vicinity of Satan Clara where stopped at an *autopista* service station. The coffee, whitened by condensed milk, was frankly disgusting. Dennis and Julian knew a thing or two and wisely opted for ice creams. The second leg took us close to Ciego de Avila and involved stopping at a roadside restaurant for lunch. The meal was an excellent one, especially the barbecued pork and, for once, ripe pineapple. During the break, led by Colin and Anne, a few bird sightings were made, namely of Cape May and Palm Warblers and a Cuban Grassquit. The third leg

brought us into the historic city of Camaguey, but the bus was unable to deliver us to the doors of our hotel for the next two nights – the road had recently been pedestrianised. This meant that our baggage had to be carried by a porter's truck over the 200 metres between the nearest point of vehicular access and the hotel entrance. Happily, the said baggage was quickly delivered to our rooms. By now the time was 4 pm which effectively meant that there was no time to do any birdwatching outside the town. We had a few sightings made from our speeding vehicle. One of them was of a possible Wood Stork, but Janet was the only person to see it.

We met on the open roof of the hotel at 7 pm for a drink and a chance to admire the bird's eye view of the town. In the restaurant, one floor down, we partook of a pleasant buffet-style evening meal. La Gran is certainly a good hotel – it was probably built at the turn of the 19th century.

Sunday, 26 February

We were served a full early breakfast at 6 am and left the hotel some 30 minutes later. Adrian drove us as quickly as possible in the direction of La Belen reserve some 48 km away. The quality of the road surface left much to be desired. On the way, we spotted our first Cuban endemic of the day – Cuban Meadowlark! Four were seen close to the roadside.

Gaining access to La Belen Reserve was not helped by the gatekeeper raising some suspicions about Adrian. He was obliged to submit his identity card for close scrutiny. Eventually, we reached the centre and met up with our guide for the morning, Camillo. We then retraced our steps a little and left the bus for a 2-km walk through some fine open dry forest. The breeze was most welcome. Soon we were enjoying views of two endemics – Cuban Palm Crow and Cuban Parakeet. The former is reckoned to be the scarcest of the endemics and happily we can report that later in the morning we saw a flock of some 20 birds. The latter is rather partial to nesting in holes initially excavated by West Indian Woodpeckers in dead Royal Palms. We were certainly impressed by the large number of these woodpeckers seen during the course of our walk. The fourth endemic on today's wish list proved more difficult to find, namely the Giant Kingbird. Eventually we found one and were able to check out the features that distinguish it from the Loggerhead – size, heavier bill, slightly notched tail, wings crossing over the base of the tail, etc. During the walk we saw our one and only Plain Pigeon, a Cuban Pygmy-Owl (looking remarkably gingery about the head), Cuban Green Woodpecker and Cuban Parrot.

We returned to the Centre around 11.30 am and enjoyed a most reviving welcome drink – made largely from lemons, I believe. We then set out into the field again, this time heading for a small lake. On the way there, we spotted a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and several wood warblers – Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green and Black-and-white. At the lake, we disturbed a flock of rather nervous Blue-winged Teal and came across two Black-necked Stilts and a Kildeer (well spotted, Julian). But stealing the show was a female Merlin which was so preoccupied with catching and devouring dragonflies that it was seemingly oblivious to our presence. Indeed, we were but a few metres from it at its closest perch. On the way back to the Centre, Michael spotted another Cuban Pygmy-Owl, but this one came with its nesting hole. Rosemary thought she had dropped a binocular eye-cup during part of this walk. Brian searched diligently for it and was later joined by the rest of us, but to no avail. Strange that the missing part should subsequently turn up in the bus!

Back at the Centre, the staff had prepared a wonderful buffet lunch of many dishes, but were we really expected to eat all that was on the serving table? The lamb was excellent; the chickens' legs were of immense proportions. And to add to our joy, cold beers reached their lowest price yet – 1 CUC! It was around 2 pm when we said farewell to Camillo, but not before sorting out the identity of a raptor perched on some very distant tree – a Northern Crested Caracara. Our return journey to the hotel contained little of birding interest. Perhaps it might be remembered for the fruitless search for a lake that lingered in my recollections from six years ago, and Adrian 'bailing out' a colleague driving a minibus that had run out of fuel – or should one say the vouchers needed to acquire some fuel.

On arriving back at the hotel, we were met by Susan and Philip who had opted to spend the day in town. The main news was that they had been able to buy some cigars to take home. After an hour or so of R and R we met on the rooftop for a pre-prandial drink or two. We then descended to Level 5 for another very palatable buffet dinner. Afterwards, we did a double-day checklist to record the few birds that we saw yesterday

during our transit from Playa Larga to Camaguey. The plans for tomorrow's onward transfer to Cayo Coco were outlined.

Monday, 27 February

We were all aboard the bus by 7.45 am and then started the four-hour drive to Cayo Coco. Adrian took us on an interesting cross-country route to as far as Moron where we had a pit stop before crossing the causeway that joins Cayo Coco to the mainland. On this first leg, we saw Crested Caracaras, American Kestrel and Merlin. Several saw a Cuban Meadowlark. On reaching Cayo Coco, we made one stop where we saw a gathering of egrets and herons – Great, Reddish, Snowy, Tricoloured and Little Blue – as well as Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Black-necked Stilts. Other birds seen during the crossing of the causeway were Royal Tern, Laughing Gull, American Wigeon, Red-breasted Merganser, Pied-billed Grebes and Ruddy Turnstone.

We arrived at our all-inclusive hotel on Cayo Coco just before midday. Check-in formalities were soon completed and we were banded with silver wrist tags. Because normal check-in time was 4 pm, it was clear that our rooms would not be ready for some time. We duly moved to the nearby bar and most of us consumed a cold beer. At 12.30 pm we went through to the restaurant for a most palatable buffet lunch – there were so many dishes from which to choose. More than replete, we rested afterwards in the foyer. At 2.30 pm we made the decision to go birding and to claim our rooms later. Paulino, our local guide, first took us to the north shore just east of the cluster of hotels. We had no sooner left the bush than we watched our first Yellow Warblers. The beach contained banks of old seaweed, a habitat preference of the main species we sought here – Piping Plover. We soon spotted two of them feeding alongside their darker cousins, Semipalmated Plovers. Also seen here were Willet, Black-bellied Plover, Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderling. An Osprey flew over us; a Cuban Black Hawk passed behind us; Caspian Tern and Laughing Gull also passed by.

We then drove to the south coast of the Cayo and turned along a quiet road. Having left the vehicle, we made our way stealthily through some trees to an area of water where we found two West Indian Whistling-Ducks as well as a number of Blue-winged Teal and American Wigeon. American Coots were abundant. Back on the road, we heard the nearby call of a Gundlach's Hawk. Paulino tried to entice the bird out into the open with playback, but to no avail. We then focused our attention on three endemics. First, it was Zapata Sparrow – the race here is fairly distinct from the race we observed at La Turba. The second was Cuban Gnatcatcher – all were impressed by this very smart little. In contrast, the third – Oriente Warbler – failed to give everyone satisfactory views. Paulino promised us better views tomorrow.

Paulino then thought that we might like to take a look at an old nest of Gundlach's Hawk that was occupied three or four years ago. We observed the nest and then walked a little deeper into the damp forest. Paulino played the tape again, but no response. We were retracing our steps back to the road and passing the nest when he suddenly noticed a head pop up. A female Gundlach's Hawk was sitting deep in the nest and now and again raised its head to see what was going on. Its long tail could now be discerned protruding at one end of the nest. So, on the instalment plan, we had put together our last Cuban endemic!

More than pleased with our afternoon's haul of birds, we returned to the hotel, collected our room keys and then settled in. We agreed to meet up in the restaurant at 7.30 pm, but most were found in the bar beforehand. After the meal we retired to a quiet room in which to do the checklist and deal with the plans for tomorrow.

Tuesday, 28 February

We had a so-called picnic breakfast in the bar which was available at 6 am. Thirty minutes later we left but without Rosemary and Brian. Our route took us eastwards, first across the fine new bridge that joins Cayo Coco with Cayo Romano, and then across the more modest bridge connecting Romano with Paredon Grande. On the way, we saw Eurasian Collared Doves, Lesser Black-backed Gull (a Cuban rarity seen by Ornitholidays groups over the last six years or so), a posing Cuban Black-Hawk, Northern Crested Caracaras, American Kestrel, Roseate Spoonbill and White Ibis. We stopped near the impressive lighthouse built in the 1850s and walked along a track with the benefit of the sunlight behind us. Cuban Gnatcatchers were abundant, Oriente Warblers were no longer reluctant to show, whilst a few Thick-billed Vireos gave brief but good views.

Flushed with success, we boarded the bus and headed back towards Cayo Coco. We made a stop on the new bridge from which we saw two Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Laughing Gulls, Royal and Caspian Terns, and Double-crested Cormorants as well as Yellow-faced Grassquits. We also heard Clapper Rails, but playing the tape failed to lure them out of the mangrove fringe.

We then headed towards The Cave of the Wild Boar (earlier we had seen one crossing the road – a boar that is, not a cave). Despite the rising heat of the day, we saw two species of vireo – Yellow-throated and Cuban. We were pleased to find a male Red-legged Honeycreeper in full breeding plumage. At a couple of freshwater pools, we saw a pair of Zapata Sparrows, a number of Cuban Bullfinches and Red-legged Thrushes. A La Sagra's Flycatcher showed well.

We arrived back at the hotel just before midday. This allowed for some three hours of leisure for a drink in the bar, lunch and a little time writing the memoirs before joining up once again with Paulino for a final spell of birding in Cuba.

Our afternoon excursion took us westwards to Cayo Guillermo. No sooner had we emerged from the bus at our first stop and we were watching a pair of Bahamian Mockingbirds. For a while they fed on the fresh flowers of an Agave but then were pushed off by a small flock of Greater Antillean Grackles – considered to be among the jobs of the avian world. We then turned around and spent much of the remainder of the afternoon overlooking a lagoonal area. Besides a flock of Caribbean Flamingos, this held large numbers of waders – Western, Semipalmated, Least and Stilt Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Ruddy Turnstones and Willets. On the other side of the road, we watched at least two Clapper Rails. Our last bird of the afternoon, and possibly of the tour, was a lone Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. We said goodbye to Paulino at a petrol filling station and then hastened back to the hotel, reaching there around 6 pm and welcomed into the foyer by Philip and Susan who had remained at base for the afternoon.

The bar was our meeting point around 7 pm and a half an hour later we went through to the restaurant for our last evening meal together. After that, there was log call and the arrangements for tomorrow were run through.

Wednesday, 29 February

We all assembled for another picnic breakfast at 6 am. It was our intention to be under way by 6.30 am. However, a rather tardy collection of the baggage from outside our rooms delayed our departure by a precious 15 minutes – we had a long drive to Havana ahead of us. During the seven-hour drive we made three stops. The first – an emergency stop for Dennis's comfort – quickly matured into a pit stop for all the party. The second stop allowed a little time for the purchase of rum at service-station prices. The third stop was to meet the needs of Liban and Adrian. We arrived in the centre of Havana at 2 pm for a very welcome lunch in the fashionable El Patio restaurant. A nice gesture was the inclusion of a suitable beverage as part of the meal.

After the meal, we said goodbye to Philip and Susan who were staying the night in Havana before catching tomorrow's early morning flight back to Toronto. Although the rest of us arrived at the airport well over three hours before the Virgin Atlantic flight to London, checking in was well under way. Nonetheless all eight of us were able to secure a preferred seat. We then said goodbye to Michael and Janet who were returning to London on an Iberia flight via Madrid. The Virgin Atlantic flight was absolutely full, but even so it left slightly ahead of schedule.

Thursday, 01 March

Due to good tail winds, we arrived into Gatwick some 30 minutes ahead of schedule. However, the huge number of early morning arrivals at the UK Border Control meant the build up of a long and slow-moving queue. It also took some time for everyone to be reunited with their baggage. Eventually, the remnants of the party said their farewells and dispersed to all manner of corners in the kingdom, including even Hull!

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to Adrian for his careful and considerate driving and to Liban (Master of the Vouchers) for the smooth running of the tour. We are also greatly indebted to a number of local guides (Julius, Angel, Orlando, Camillo and Paulino) for showing us their birds. I would also like to thank you all for being such a cohesive group and for providing such good company and humour. Finally, thanks to Dennis, Susan and Julian for the images reproduced in this report. I hope you all enjoyed the Cuban experience and that we might meet up again on another Ornitholidays' tour.

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April 2012

Itinerary and Weather

Sunday, 19 February	Direct flight from London Gatwick > Havana > Viñales
Monday, 20 February	Viñales National Park and environs Some cloud but very warm 28°C
Tuesday, 21 February	am: Viñales > Havana > Playa Larga pm: Palpite Hot and sunny 30°C
Wednesday, 22 February	am: Rio Hatiguanico cruise pm: Sendero Salinas Hot and sunny 30°C
Thursday, 23 February	am: Bermeja reserve pm: Soplillar Hot and sunny 30°C
Friday, 24 February	am: La Turba & La Boca pm: Palpite and La Boca swamp Hot and sunny 36°C
Saturday, 25 February	Playa Larga > Camaguey Some cloud 30°C
Sunday, 26 February	La Belen Hot and sunny 32°C
Monday, 27 February	am: Camaguey > Cayo Coco pm: North and south shores Hot and sunny 30°C
Tuesday, 28 February	am: Cayo Romano and Cayo Parendon Grande pm: Cayo Guillermo Hot and sunny 30°C
Wednesday, 29 February	Cayo Coco > Havana > Some cloud 29 °C
Thursday, 01 March	Morning arrival at Gatwick

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

No of days recorded

1 2h means seen on 1 day & heard
on 2 other days.

Location

V = Vinales
P = Playa Larga
B = La Belen
C = Cayo Coco
> = to or from a location

Abundance Scale

(max for any one day)
1 = 1 – 4
2 = 5 – 9
3 = 10 – 99
4 = 100 – 999
5 = 1,000 +

Species	No of days recorded	Locations	Abundance Scale	Scientific Name
Least Grebe	1	>	1	<i>Tachybaptus dominicus</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	1	C	1	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>
American White Pelican	1	P	3	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>
Brown Pelican	3	P C	3	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>
Double-crested Cormorant	4	P C	3	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>
Neotropic Cormorant	3	P C	3	<i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>
Anhinga	2	V P	1	<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>
Magnificent Frigatebird	3	P C	3	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>
Great Blue Heron	6	P C	3	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Great Egret	7	P C	3	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Snowy Egret	6	V P C	3	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Little Blue Heron	7	V P C	3	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>
Tricoloured Heron	3	P C	2	<i>Egretta tricolour</i>
Reddish Egret	3	P C	3	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>
Cattle Egret	8	V P C	3	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Green Heron	1	P	2	<i>Butorides virescens</i>
Black-crowned Night-Heron	1	P	1	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	1	C	1	<i>Nycticorax violacea</i>
White Ibis	3	P C	3	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>
Roseate Spoonbill	2	P C	1	<i>Ajaia ajaja</i>
Turkey Vulture	9	V P B C	4	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
Caribbean Flamingo	3	P C	4	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
West Indian Whistling-Duck	1	C	1	<i>Dendrocygna arborea</i>
Blue-winged Teal	5	P C	4	<i>Anas discors</i>
Northern Shoveler	3	P C	3	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
American Wigeon	2	P C	4	<i>Anas americana</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	1	C	1	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Osprey	6	V P C	1	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Snail Kite	1	P	1	<i>Rostrhamus sociabilis</i>
Northern Harrier	1	>	1	<i>Circus americanus</i>
Gundlach's Hawk	1	C	1	<i>Accipiter gundlachi</i>
Cuban Black Hawk	4	P C	2	<i>Buteogallus anthracinus</i>
Broad-winged Hawk	1	P	1	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	2	> P	1	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Northern Crested Caracara	6	P B C	2	<i>Caracara plancus</i>
American Kestrel (Cuban subspecies)	8	V P B C	2	<i>Falco sparverius sparverioides</i>
Merlin	2	B C	1	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Helmeted Guineafowl	1	B	2	<i>Numida meleagris</i>
Clapper Rail	1	C	1	<i>Rallus longirostris</i>
American Purple Gallinule	1	P	1	<i>Porphyryla martinica</i>
Common Gallinule (Moorhen)	3	P	2	<i>Gallinula galeata (chloropus)</i>
American Coot	3	P B C	3	<i>Fulica americana</i>
Limpkin	3	P B	1	<i>Aramus guarauna</i>
Black-bellied Plover	3	P C	2	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Semipalmated Plover	3	P C	2	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>
Piping Plover	1	C	1	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>
Killdeer	4	P C	2	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
Black-necked Stilt	3	B C	3	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
Northern Jacana	7	P B	1	<i>Jacana spinosa</i>
Greater Yellowlegs	3	P C	3	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>
Lesser Yellowlegs	2	P C	2	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>
Willet	3	P C	2	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>
Hudsonian Whimbrel	1	C	1	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	2	C	3	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>

Red Knot	1		C	3	<i>Calidris canutus</i>
Sanderling	1		C	2	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Semipalmated Sandpiper	1		C	2	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>
Western Sandpiper	2		P C	1	<i>Calidris maura</i>
Least Sandpiper	1		C	2	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>
Stilt Sandpiper	1		C	3	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>
Short-billed Dowitcher	2		P C	2	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>
Laughing Gull	3		P C	3	<i>Larus atricilla</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	1		C	1	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Gull-billed Tern	1		P	1	<i>Sterna nilotica</i>
Caspian Tern	3		P C	4	<i>Sterna caspia</i>
Royal Tern	4		> P C	3	<i>Sterna maxima</i>
Black Skimmer	1		P	3	<i>Rynchops niger</i>
Scaly-naped Pigeon	1		V	1	<i>Columba squamosa</i>
Plain Pigeon	1		B	1	<i>Columba inornata</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	1		C	1	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Zenaida Dove	9		V P B C	2	<i>Zenaida aurita</i>
Mourning Dove	9		V P B C	3	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Common Ground Dove	8		V P B C	2	<i>Columbina passerina</i>
Gray-headed Quail-Dove	1		P	1	<i>Geotrygon chrysia</i>
Blue-headed Quail-Dove	1		P	1	<i>Geotrygon montana</i>
Cuban Parakeet	1		B	1	<i>Aratinga euops</i>
Cuban Parrot	4	lh	P B	3	<i>Amazona leucocephala</i>
Great Lizard-Cuckoo	3		P B	1	<i>Saurothera merlini</i>
Smooth-billed Ani	8		V P B C	3	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>
Bare-legged Owl	1		P	1	<i>Gymnoglaux lawrencii</i>
Cuban Pygmy-Owl	2		P B	1	<i>Glaucidium siju</i>
Antillean Palm Swift	3		V P	2	<i>Tachornis phoenicobia</i>
Cuban Emerald	8		V P B C	1	<i>Chlorostilbon ricordii</i>
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	1		V	1	<i>Archilochus colubris</i>
Bee Hummingbird	1		P	1	<i>Mellisuga helenae</i>
Cuba Trogon	2	lh	V P	2	<i>Priotelus temnurus</i>
Cuban Tody	4		P B C	1	<i>Todus multicolor</i>
Belted Kingfisher	4		P C	1	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>
West Indian Woodpecker	5		V P B	3	<i>Melanerpes superciliaris</i>
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	3		P B	1	<i>Sphyrapicus varius</i>
Cuban Green Woodpecker	6		V P B C	1	<i>Xiphidiopicus percussus</i>
Northern Flicker	1		P	1	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>
Fernandina's Flicker	1		P	1	<i>Colaptes ferdandinae</i>
Cuban Pewee	7		V P C	2	<i>Contopus caribaeus</i>
La Sagra's Flycatcher	3		P C	1	<i>Myiarchus sagrae</i>
Loggerhead Kingbird	9		V P B C	2	<i>Tyrannus caudifasciatus</i>
Giant Kingbird	1		B	1	<i>Tyrannus cubensis</i>
Thick-billed Vireo	1		C	1	<i>Vireo crassirostris</i>
Cuban Vireo	2		P C	1	<i>Vireo gundlachii</i>
Yellow-throated Vireo	4		P C	1	<i>Vireo flavifrons</i>
Red-eyed Vireo	-	lh	P	1	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>
Cuban Palm Crow	1		B	3	<i>Corvus minutus</i>
Cuban Crow	3		P B	3	<i>Corvus nasicus</i>
Cuban Martin	4		P B	3	<i>Progne cryptoleuca</i>
Tree Swallow	3		P C	2	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>
Zapata Wren	-	lh	P	1	<i>Ferminia cerverai</i>
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	3		P	2	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>
Cuban Gnatcatcher	2		C	2	<i>Polioptila lembeyi</i>
Cuban Solitaire	1		V	1	<i>Myadestes elisabeth</i>
Red-legged Thrush	6		V P C	2	<i>Turdus plumbeus</i>
Gray Catbird	3		P C	1	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>
Northern Mockingbird	9		V P B C	3	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
Bahama Mockingbird	1		C	1	<i>Mimus gundlachii</i>
Tennessee Warbler	1		C	1	<i>Vermivora peregrina</i>
Northern Parula	4		V P	1	<i>Parula americana</i>
Yellow Warbler	2		C	1	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>
Cape May Warbler	3		P C	1	<i>Dendroica tigrina</i>
Black-throated Blue Warbler	3		P B	2	<i>Dendroica caerulescens</i>
Black-throated Green Warbler	2		P B	1	<i>Dendroica virens</i>
Yellow-throated Warbler	2		P	2	<i>Dendroica dominica</i>
Olive-capped Warbler	1		V	2	<i>Dendroica pityophila</i>
Prairie Warbler	5		P B C	1	<i>Dendroica discolor</i>
Palm Warbler	8		V P C	2	<i>Dendroica palmarum</i>
Black-and-white Warbler	6		P B C	1	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>

American Redstart	7	V P C	2	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>
Ovenbird	4	P C	1	<i>Seiurus aurocapillus</i>
Northern Waterthrush	2	P C	1	<i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>
Louisiana Waterthrush	1	P	1	<i>Seiurus motacilla</i>
Common Yellowthroat	3	P C	1	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>
Yellow-headed Warbler	3	P	2	<i>Teretistris fernandinae</i>
Oriente Warbler	2	C	2	<i>Teretistris fornsi</i>
Red-legged Honeycreeper	1	C	1	<i>Cyanerpes cyaneus</i>
Western Spindalis	4	V P C	1	<i>Spindalis zena</i>
Cuban Bullfinch	3	P C	2	<i>Melopyrrha nigra</i>
Cuban Grassquit	2	V >	1	<i>Tiaris canora</i>
Yellow-faced Grassquit	3	V C	2	<i>Tiaris olivacea</i>
Zapata Sparrow	3	P C	1	<i>Torreornis inexpectata</i>
Red-shouldered Blackbird	1	P	1	<i>Agelaius assimilis</i>
Tawny-shouldered Blackbird	3	V P	3	<i>Agelaius humeralis</i>
Cuban Meadowlark	2	B >	1	<i>Sturnella</i>
Cuban Blackbird	4	> P B C	1	<i>Dives atrovioleacea</i>
Greater Antillean Grackle	9	V P B C	4	<i>Quiscalus niger</i>
Cuban Oriole	5	V P C	1	<i>Icterus melanopsis</i>
House Sparrow	5	> P C	2	<i>Passer domesticus</i>

Species in bold are widely recognised as endemic to Cuba

This list represents those birds as seen by party members of this tour.



Black-and-white Warbler



Blue-headed Quail-Dove



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron



Northern Mockingbird



Cuban Pygmy-Owl



Merlin



Bee Hummingbird



Cuban Black Hawk



Yellow Warbler



Zenaida Dove



Heron, egrets & waders



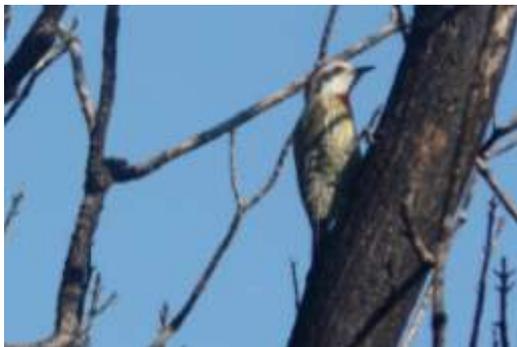
American White Pelicans



Caribbean Flamingos



Cuban Gnatcatcher



Cuban Green Woodpecker



Mogote at Vinales

Front Cover: Bare-legged Owl
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