

Cuba

24th October – 3rd November 2019

A trip to see the available Cuban endemics with the usual suspects Barry Reed and Mick Ilett as well as my son Tom, which was great. An enjoyable trip that was fairly easy-going (too hot to bird in the afternoon), though with a fair degree of driving crammed in to the ten days. It has some great looking birds, illustrated very well in the newly published Lynx Edicions *Birds of the West Indies* that I took with me.

Cuba isn't a spectacular country scenery-wise, very flat with lots of the original habitation replaced with sugarcane plantations and communal farmland; a travel-chessboard came in handy for myself and Tom during the long drives! It also suffers greatly from the US blockade with fuel shortages and very little food in shops. Most of the population away from Havana seem to get by as subsistence farmers and get around on horse and cart. They generally seem a happy and friendly lot, so who's to say they haven't got it right!?

The lowland swamps meant that Mosquitos were a near-continuous annoyance, possibly the worst I've known on any trip, with Tom suffering particularly. Accommodation was mixed, but improved greatly when we stayed with a very nice family in their house in Playa Larga.

Generally successful we saw most of the target birds fairly easily, though Cuban Gnatcatcher was a struggle and Gundlach's Hawk was only seen (poorly) by myself and Tom. Zapata Rail and Cuban Kite were obviously out of the equation as well as Cuban Macaw, even though, rather bizarrely, it is illustrated in the Helm guide!

Cuban Martin (a breeding endemic) wasn't seen but was also going to be difficult at this time of year as they have generally left for wherever it is they go in South America. We also failed to see the near-endemic Thick-billed Vireo and Bahama Mockingbird. The only two reliable sites we had for each of these on Caya Coco had been trashed and were in the process of being turned into hotel complexes.

We all pretty much came away with the same lists with the only birds missed by me being Yellow-billed Cuckoo (seen by everyone else more than once), and an American White Pelican seen only by Tom. This illustrates that the birding is reasonably easy with second chances to see anything found by others most of the time.

We probably had more time than was required at Playa Larga and could have cut it by a day, though myself and Tom enjoyed the extra time with an afternoon of swimming in the Caribbean and a few beers and Mojitos. We could maybe have done with an extra day at Caya Coco to look for the Vireo and Mockingbird, as well as Key West Quail Dove (also not seen in the Playa Largo area) that Tom needed.

Having seen all we were after in the La Guira/Soroa area, we spent the last half-day with a visit to Havana.

Itinerary

24th – Gatwick to Havana

25th – Drive to Najasa/Camaguey, staying at Finca la Belen

26th – Najasa/Camaguey

27th – Drive to Caya Coco, staying at Sitio la Guira

28th – Cayo Coco
29th – Drive to Playa Larga, staying at Hostal Oceania
30th – Playa Larga/Zapata
31st – Playa Larga/Zapata
1st – Playa Larga/Zapata
2nd – Drive to La Guira, staying in Mirador de San Diego
3rd – Havana and flight to Gatwick

Weather

Hot and humid with temperatures mostly over 30°C. Most days also had heavy thundery showers in the afternoon or early evening.

Birds

Helmeted Guineafowl – four on the track out of Finca la Belen

West Indian Whistling-duck – two on Caya Coco Lagoon and a single near Cueva del Jabali

Northern Shoveler

Blue-winged Teal

American Flamingo – surprisingly missed at Caya Coco but seen at the Las Salinas on the Bay of Pigs

Rock Dove

Eurasian Collared-dove

White-crowned Pigeon

Scaly-naped Pigeon

Plain Pigeon

Blue-headed Quail-dove – seven at the restaurant at Cueva de los Peces

Grey-headed Quail-dove – Soplillar and Zapata

Ruddy Quail-dove – Zapata

White-winged Dove – just one on Caya Coco

Zenaida Dove

Mourning Dove

Common Ground-dove

Nighthawk sp. – singles seen in Havana on the first night and at Caya Coco on 27th were either

Common or Antillean

Cuban Nightjar – one at our hotel in Caya Coco; seen well for a few minutes before we ran from the mosquitos!

Chimney Swift – two with Palm-swifts seen from the pool on our last evening

Antillean Palm-swift

Cuban Emerald

Bee Hummingbird – we may have struggled for this if it wasn't for the the Palpite Hummingbird Garden where they were obviously seen easily

Smooth-billed Ani

Mangrove Cuckoo

Cuban Lizard-cuckoo

Spotted Rail – heard and very nearly seen (movement) near Playa Larga crocodile farm

Sora – one near Playa Larga crocodile farm

Purple Gallinule – one at Playa Larga crocodile farm

Limpkin

White Ibis

Black-crowned Night-heron – one near Playa Larga crocodile farm

Green-backed Heron

Cattle Egret

Great Blue Heron – several, including a white-morph adult at Caya Coco

Great White Egret

Reddish Egret

Tricolored Heron

Little Blue Heron

Snowy Egret

Brown Pelican

American White Pelican

Magnificent Frigatebird

Double-crested Cormorant

Neotropical Cormorant

American Oystercatcher

American Avocet

Black-winged Stilt

Grey Plover

Killdeer

Piping Plover – four at Playa Colorado, Caya Coco

Northern Jacana

Ruddy Turnstone

Stilt Sandpiper

Sanderling

Short-billed Dowitcher

Solitary Sandpiper

Willet

Greater Yellowlegs

Laughing Gull

Caspian Tern

Sandwich Tern

Royal Tern

Common Barn-owl – two of the American group at Finca la Belen

Cuban Pygmy-owl

Stygian Owl – seen well in the grounds of the Playa Larga Hotel

Bare-legged Screech-owl – unlike most birders who see this poorly, poking out of a daytime roost, we obtained good views of a bird in the evening at Finca la Belen

Turkey Vulture

Osprey

Gundlach's Hawk – one at close range but briefly at La Guira

Cuban Black Hawk – fairly common in the right habitat

Broad-winged Hawk – single on last morning

Red-tailed Hawk

Cuban Trogan – fairly easy for a Trogan

Cuban Tody – fairly common in the right habitat

Belted Kingfisher

Fernandina's Flicker – a single bird at Finca la Belen

Yellow-shafted Flicker – sometimes split as Cuban Flicker, a single seen at Sopillar

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – one at Playa Larga Hotel

Cuban Green Woodpecker – fairly common

West Indian Woodpecker – fairly common

Crested Caracara

American Kestrel – both pale morphs and dark morphs of these endemic subspecies were seen, though only pale morphs were present east of Havana

Merlin

Peregrine Falcon

Cuban Amazon – just two sightings: Finca la Belen and Playa Larga Hotel

Cuban Parakeet – a single sighting of a flock at Finca la Belen saved the day

Loggerhead Kingbird

Giant Kingbird – fairly easy at Finca la Belen

La Sagra's Flycatcher – it took us a few days before we saw this but not too difficult to find

Eastern Wood-pewee

Cuban Pewee – similar to La Sagra's, it was a few days before seeing our first, but easy after that

Yellow-throated Vireo – single at Soplillar

White-eyed Vireo – single at Cueva del Jabali

Cuban Vireo – the commonest Vireo

Cuban Crow

Palm Crow

Cliff Swallow

Blue-grey Gnatcatcher

Cuban Gnatcatcher – struggled with this until a pair eventually showed very well at Cueva del Jabali

Zapata Wren – only one bird seen, but very well and without too much difficulty

Grey Catbird

Northern Mockingbird

Cuban Solitaire – a single bird found fairly easily at La Guira

Western Red-legged Thrush - common

Scaly-breasted Munia – a pair found nesting at Najasa

House Sparrow

Zapata Sparrow – both races seen

Yellow-headed Warbler

Oriente Warbler – common where present

Eastern Meadowlark – several sightings of this potential split

Cuban Oriole – fairly wary to find

Tawny-shouldered Blackbird – roadside near Playa Larga crocodile farm

Red-shouldered Blackbird – roadside near Playa Larga crocodile farm

Cuban Blackbird – common

Greater Antillean Grackle – common

Ovenbird – some incredible views of this and other enigmatic American Warblers

Worm-eating Warbler – two good sightings

Louisiana Waterthrush – the first Waterthrush seen on the first day birding, but the only sighting

Northern Waterthrush – common in places, particularly around Zapata

Black-and-white Warbler

Tennessee Warbler – a single sighting at Finca la Belen

Common Yellowthroat

Hooded Warbler – a single sighting at Soplillar

American Redstart

Cape May Warbler

Northern Parula

Magnolia Warbler – a single sighting at Soplillar

American Yellow Warbler

Black-throated Blue Warbler

Palm Warbler – the commonest of the Warblers

Olive-capped Warbler – easy in pines at La Guira

Yellow-throated Warbler - common

Prairie Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler

Western Spindalis – three birds together including a male at Sita la Guira

Indigo Bunting

Yellow-faced Grassquit

Cuban Bullfinch – seen on three days

Cuban Grassquit – easy at Las Terrazas Feeding Station

Checklist

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/b3tn79TiV4pkD5Ty7>

Photos

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/qA7pLPkEvYRzBw6E7>

Daily Lists

24th – Havana – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452617>

25th – Finca la Belen – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452613>

26th – Finca la Belen – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452612>

27th – Najasa – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452611>

27th – Caya Coco Causeway – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452610>

27th – Cueva del Jabali – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452616>

27th – Sita la Guira – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452615>

28th – Sita la Guira – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452605>

28th – Playa Colorado – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452604>

28th – Faro Paredón Grande – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452590>

28th – Caya Coco Lagoon – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452589>

29th – Cueva del Jabali – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452587>

29th – Palpite Hummingbird Garden – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452366>

30th – Zapata Swamp – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452603>

30th – Soplillar – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452602>

30th – Cueva de los Peces – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452365>

30th – Palpite Hummingbird Garden – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452364>

30th – Criadero de Cocodrilos – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452601>

30th – Playa Larga – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452363>

31st – Soplillar – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452600>

31st – Bay of Pigs Salinas – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452597>

31st – Playa Larga – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452598>

31st – Playa Larga – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452361>

1st – Zapata Swamp – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452596>

1st – Criadero de Cocodrilos – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452594>

2nd – Las Terrazas Feeding Station – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452593>

2nd – La Guira – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452592>

2nd – San Diego de Los Banos – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452591>

3rd – San Diego de Los Banos – <https://ebird.org/checklist/S61452588>