



dilabiobirding

Cuba Birding Tour February 24 to March 6, 2010

GENERAL INFORMATION

Cuba is located 150 kilometers off the southeast coast of the United States. It runs twelve hundred kilometers east to west and has a population of about eleven million people. Cubans are open and friendly, taking great pride in their country and its fascinating history. Ox-drawn ploughs in the fields are a common sight, and the towns and cities are postcard picturesque.

We will head west from Havana to the Cordillera de Guaniguanico (hill country in western Cuba), then south-east to the Zapata Peninsula (marsh, salt-water lagoons and dry forest), east to the Sierra Najasa (rolling forested terrain) and finally north to Cayo Coco (a coastal island). The route is structured to ensure a chance to see all the main endemics, but it also provides a scenic tour of the island, passing through a diverse mix of forest, wetland and rugged hills interspersed between small farms, large cattle ranches and vast fields of sugar cane. The pace of the tour is relaxed, with easy walks along well groomed trails. We will have a few early morning starts, particularly when searching for the Zapata Wren and two early evening outings for nocturnal species.

Tour Dates

Wednesday, February 24 to Saturday, March 6, 2010 (11 days)

Leader: Bruce Di Labio

Cost

From Havana, the tour fee is \$3,195.00 plus GST based on double occupancy. Should you wish single occupancy an additional \$500 applies, or if we are unable to find you a suitable roommate. The tour is all inclusive upon arrival in Havana on Day 1 to departure on Day 11. The tour includes all accommodations, transportation, meals (supper day 1 to breakfast day 11), guiding, park entry fees and 1 internal flight (Cayo Coco to Havana).

Tipping: tips for hotel staff, drivers and birding guides are included. However, for birding guides or drivers who provide you with a special service or who ``go out of their way`` to accommodate you, you may wish to tip them additionally.

Departure Tax – There is a \$25.00 CUCs departure tax payable at the airport when flying home. This is not included in the tour fee.

Not Included are the following: departure tax, alcoholic beverages and items of a personal nature (such as laundry and phone calls).

Payment

To reserve a spot on this trip, a \$300.00 CAD deposit is required, with final payment due 60 days prior to departure (December 11, 2009) Please make cheque payable to Bruce Di Labio.

Climate

Cuba's dry season runs November through April. Temperatures will range from 25 to 30 degrees Celsius, and sunny. Evening temperatures can be cool requiring a light jacket.

Accommodations

We will stay in a variety of accommodations - all inclusive beach resorts, fincas (rural estates) and urban hotels. They are clean and service is always friendly and efficient. (Please note accommodations are subject to change.)

Rice and beans with chicken, pork, lamb or fish is the foundation of Cuban cuisine. Sliced tomato and cucumber with oil and vinegar is the typical salad. The standard dessert is a small plate of thick mango or guava jam and thin slices of sharp cheese. More hearty meals are served at the fincas - roast lamb or pork with savory rice and beans, taro or potatoes, fresh-baked bread, and cucumber and tomato salad. Alcoholic beverages are available such as Bucanero beer, Chilean or Australian wine. Alcoholic beverages are not included in the tour price.

It is advisable to drink bottled water.

On the Ground

Travel will be either in a small bus or a van, depending on the size of the group. We will have a local guide.

Money

Cuba has a dual currency system: convertible pesos (CUCs or "kooks") and Cuban pesos. Tourists use CUCs, which are purchased at the airport upon arrival. More can be purchased through VISA cash withdrawals at local banks, and further conversion of Canadian currency at beach resort exchange desks. U.S. money cannot be exchanged. Be sure to bring Canadian money for exchange at the airport.

Flight Information

Once the tour is confirmed, I will contact clients to make flight arrangements. Air Canada flies out of Toronto to Havana on February 11 at 10:00 a.m. Due to our winter departure I recommend clients to overnight in Toronto February 10 to ensure you make the Toronto connection.

Documentation

To enter the country you will require a valid Canadian Passport. Upon entry you will be issued a "Tourist Visa."

PROPOSED ITINERARY

Please note that the itinerary is subject to change.

Day 1: Havana to San Diego

The first day will be taken up with our arriving flights and the transfer to our hotel near La Guira. If time permits, we will bird around the La Guira area. **Overnight at Mirador de San Diego Hotel.**

Day 2: La Guira

Located on the rolling hills of the western part of the island, La Guira contains some of the best pine forest for the Cuban Solitaire, Olive-capped Warbler and the Scaly-naped Pigeon. The thick undergrowth attracts many of the skulkier migrant species such as Worm-eating, Swainson's and Kentucky Warblers, and the mature forest is to the liking of the Cuban Green Woodpecker and Cuban Tody. In the afternoon, we will make our way towards Montemar National Park, home of the Zapata Swamp. **Overnight at Playa Giron Hotel**

Days 3-5: Zapata Area

The Zapata area has the highest concentration of Cuban endemics including Yellow-headed Warbler, Cuban Vireo, Cuban Screech Owl, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Cuban Emerald, Cuban Crow and the Red-shouldered Blackbird. We will spend several days exploring the various habitats that comprise the new national park. One day will be devoted to Cienaga de Zapata, searching for the small population of the endangered Zapata Wren and the western race of the Zapata Sparrow. Besides the wetlands, the park also encompasses many forest areas, including Soplillar where we will look for the Bee Hummingbird, Key West and Blue-headed Quail-Doves, and hopefully Gundlach's Hawk. The area surrounding Bermejas will be our best site for Gray-headed Quail-Dove and Fernandina's Flicker. Stygian Owl and Cuban Nightjar are the possible rewards of an evening outing. Nights at Playa Giron . **Overnights at Hotel Playa Giron**

Day 6: Zapata to Finca Belen

After some early morning birding, we will use this day to work our way through the rolling countryside of central Cuba towards Camaguey, our base for exploring nearby La Belen National Park. Camaguey is the third oldest city in Cuba. **Overnight at Finca Belen**

Day 7: Finca Belen Area

Early start to visit the 'Sierra de Najasa' and the protected reserve of La Belen where one finds an area of unspoiled lowland with a great diversity of plant life. The two main species to be found here are the Cuban Palm Crow and the endangered Giant Kingbird which is now endemic to Cuba. Other species to be seen in this area include Cuban Parakeet, Fernandina's Flicker, Cuban and Yellow-faced Grassquits, Gundlach's Hawk and wintering North American warblers as well as the West Indian Whistling Duck. **Overnight at Finca Belen.**

Day 8: Finca Belen to Cayo Coco

After breakfast, we will make our way to Cayo Coco for an early afternoon arrival. Cayo Coco is connected by a causeway, reminiscent of drive down to Key West. On the journey, we will be able to spot large numbers of waders, Snail Kites , gulls and terns.

After check-in we will have our first taste of new species including the Oriente Warbler, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Thick-billed Vireo, Bahama Mockingbird, and Piping Plover on the beach. Greater Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill and the Cuban Crab Hawk. **Overnight at Playa Coco.**

Day 9: Cayo Coco

The low-lying marshes and shrubby edge habitat in Cayo Coco are good areas for Thick-billed Vireos and Mangrove Cuckoos. We will also target Oriente Warbler, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Bahama Mockingbird and the eastern race of Zapata Sparrow. **Overnight at Playa Coco.**

Day 10: Cayo Coco/Havana

Morning birding Cayo Coco, afternoon flight to Havana. Tour of historical Havana in late afternoon. **Overnight in Havana: Hotel Presidente.**

Day 11: Havana

We will do some early morning birding around Havana. Afternoon flight home.

TARGET BIRDS

A "Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba" by Cuban ornithologists Orlando Garrido and Arturo Kirkconnell (2000) is the standard reference. Herbert Raffaele's "Birds of the West Indies" (2003) is another excellent field guide. This compact edition is light weight and has very good illustrations.

Cuba's avifauna features a rich array of species endemic and near endemic to the island. It is also one of the better places to see a variety of birds confined to the larger Caribbean.

The twenty-eight **Cuban Endemics** are Cuban Kite, Gundlach's Hawk, Cuban Crab-Hawk (AOU 2007), Zapata Rail, Gray-fronted Quail-Dove (Clements 6th), Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Cuban (Greater Antillean) Nightjar (Clements 6th), Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Screech Owl, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Fernandina's Flicker, Giant Kingbird, Cuban Martin, Zapata Wren, Cuban Solitaire, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Cuban Palm Crow, Cuban Vireo, Yellow-headed Warbler, Oriente Warbler, Cuban Grassquit, Zapata Sparrow, Red-shouldered Blackbird and Cuban Blackbird. The Cuban forms of Northern Flicker, West Indian Woodpecker and Eastern Meadowlark may someday attain full species status.

The eleven **Cuban Near Endemics** (birds confined to Cuba and one or more of the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, and Cayman Islands) are Cuban Parrot, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Cuban Emerald, West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Pewee, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Cuban Crow, Thick-billed Vireo, Olive-capped Warbler, Western Spindalis and Cuban Bullfinch.

The twelve **Caribbean Endemics** on Cuba are West Indian Whistling-Duck, Scaly-naped Pigeon, Plain Pigeon, Key West Quail-Dove, Antillean Nighthawk, Antillean Palm Swift, Loggerhead Kingbird, Bahama Mockingbird, Red-legged Thrush, Tawny-shouldered Blackbird, Greater Antillean Grackle and Greater Antillean Oriole.

BIRDING LOCATIONS

The **CORDILLERA DE GUANIGUANICO** (Pinar del Rio Province, western Cuba) is a low (600m) but impressive range of limestone hills running 150 kilometres from the eastern border of Pinar del Rio Province to near the western tip of the island. The target species here are Cuban Solitaire and Olive-capped Warbler. They can be found in the montane pine forest in La Guira National

Park. We may pick up a host of other Cuban specialties in the Cordillera including Cuban Green Woodpecker, Yellow-headed Warbler, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Cuban Tody, Cuban Trogon and Cuban Vireo

ZAPATA (Matanzas Province, south central Cuba) - This famous bird-watching area contains a mix of habitats; the vast marshland of the Zapata Swamp, the tidal rock flats and mangrove islets of La Salina, and the forests near the towns of Palpita, Soplillar and Bermejas. The key birds here are Gray-fronted Quail-Dove, Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Nightjar, Cuban Screech Owl, Bee Hummingbird, Fernandina's Flicker, Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow and Red-shouldered Blackbird. This is also the site of the failed U.S. Bay of Pigs invasion, an important turning point in Latin American history. The event is commemorated at an interesting museum in Playa Giron.

Our birding highlights should include Zapata Wren and Zapata Sparrow in the Zapata Swamp. Quail-Doves in the Bermejas Reserve, and along nearby country lanes, Bee Hummingbird (the world's smallest bird) and Gundlach's Hawk.

SIERRA DE NAJASA (Camaguey Province, east central Cuba) - Key birds in the Sierra are Plain Pigeon, Cuban Parakeet, Giant Kingbird, Cuban Palm Crow and Cuban Grassquit. To bird the area we will stay two nights at Rancho la Belen; very pleasant accommodations with excellent food, nice rooms and a swimming pool. Around the estate Plain Pigeon are common, and Cuban Crow and Cuban Parakeet abundant. Cuban Palm Crow, Giant Kingbird and West Indian Whistling Duck are other possibilities.

CAYO COCO (Ciego de Avila Province) is part of the Archipiélago de Camaguey, a string of islands stretching along Cuba's northeast coast. The target species here are the endemic Cuban Gnatcatcher and Oriente Warbler, the near endemic Thick-billed Vireo and the Caribbean endemic Bahama Mockingbird. It is also a good place for Caribbean Flamingo; hundreds are usually visible from the 26 kilometre causeway joining the island to the mainland. With the assistance of local guide Odey Martinez Hanes we had excellent looks at all the special species.

HAVANA - Before catching your flight home you will want to spend some time sightseeing in this famous and historic city. The seawall and harbour entrance are beautiful, and the architecture, much of it in various states of restoration, is stunning. A visit to Havana, even if for a morning's sight-seeing, is definitely worthwhile.

This will be a memorable tour in a unique part of the Caribbean.

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