



# Audubon Nature Odysseys Cuba

March 27 - April 8, 2012



On March 27 seventeen intrepid travelers ventured out on the National Audubon Society second bird watching tour of Cuba. The first trip had been in 2011 and had only touched on the birds of Havana and the Zapata Peninsula. Our group was intent on seeing as much of Cuba as we could, recording as many species of wildlife that our guides could show us, and learning about Cuban culture and conservation efforts. In 10 days we covered approximately 1,400 miles (almost 2 thirds of the country), saw between 130 to 150 species of birds (depending on whose list you look at), had 12 different sightings at nests, visited 4 UNESCO bio-reserves or cultural sites, 5 cities, 3 historic districts and swam in the Bay of Pigs and the Atlantic Ocean. What could be better! I have tried to record a small taste of our encounters on the island. The names have in no way been changed as no one was innocent in this great bird trek.

### **March 27: Miami**

Our valiant group assembled at Miami Sheraton where we had a short meeting to go over trip logistics and get to know each other. Some of our group, not content to just bird Cuba, had already been out logging common Floridian species like American Coot, Great Egret, and a rarity, the Spot-breasted Oriole. Our delegation to Cuba consisted of a good variety of expert birders, photographers, relatively new birders, and others with a more generalist interest in Cuba. In the end everyone contributed to our trip's success, helping each other get the most out of a jaunt to a country that was new to the majority of us.

### **March 28: Havana Here We Come**

We started the day early with our Holbrook representative, Cuqui Zuloago, guiding us through the paperwork needed to depart for Cuba. Then we were off with a short flight into Jose Marti International Airport in Havana. As we descended into Havana members of our group in window seats began to call off their first birds of the trip; Cattle Egret and Great Egret were definitively ided with a possible Snowy Egret to boot.

After clearing customs we were met by our Cuban tour guide, Alex, who shepherded everyone to the bus and the man who would make sure we got everywhere safely for the next ten days, Rene, our bus driver. Cuba has become such a popular destination these days that even the Pope decided to go there, unfortunately for us, right at the same time we arrived so some of the streets around our hotel were closed to traffic. In the end this worked to our advantage as we picked up new birds walking from the bus to the hotel including Antillean Palm-Swifts, Loggerhead Kingbirds, and Cuban Martins.

Old Havana, where we stayed, is experiencing a renaissance as the Cuban government invests tourist revenues in a very impressive historic preservation effort. Each hotel in this district has a theme highlighting its historic significance. Our hotel, the Ambos Mundos, is where Hemingway lived for a period during the 1950's so his room and the lobby are adorned with photos of him; a special treat for Hemingway historians like myself and Dave Guin. The hotel is where we met our Cuban trip leader, Dr. Hiram Gonzáles, a Cuban ornithologist with a specialty in endangered species and president of the Cuban Zoological Society. Hiram has a vast knowledge of Cuban avifauna and with his ability to walk and talk faster than anyone I have ever met before I was sure he was going to tell and show us every fact he knew about Cuban birds before the ten days were over.



Our Cuban hosts took us to a beautiful restaurant for our first lunch. Restaurants, like hotels, in Old Havana are all theme related and our restaurant was famous for its variety of Cuban cigars but our group was more interested in the Peacocks and other animals that pranced freely in the restaurant courtyard. Because of the

pope's visit our previously scheduled meetings for the afternoon had been canceled so instead we took a leisurely stroll through Old Havana learning about the restoration efforts, visiting several parks and plazas along the way, ending up along the famous waterfront Malecon (a delightful walk with views of the harbor, the old Spanish fort, and the open waters of Cuba). Along the way we picked up easy seaside species such as Brown Pelican, Royal Tern, and Laughing Gull, along with a fly by Peregrine Falcon, and then were treated to our first looks of the very common Red Legged Thrush and a several migrant Yellow Warblers. Day one in Cuba ended with a very nice dinner at a local restaurant where we were entertained with the first of many local musicians playing the music of both old and new Cuba.

### **March 29: Ecological Station of Canada del Infierno, Las Terrazas, Hacienda Cortina:**

The staff of Ambos Mundos accommodated our early departure with a light breakfast and then we were off to the Ecological Station of Las Terrazas in the Canada del Infierno. This UNESCO designated Biosphere Reserve, is supervised by Fidel Hernandez Figueroa, who gave us a short presentation on the work the forestry work his staff conducts on the Reserve and how they must integrate the communities that live within the boundaries of the Reserve into their conservation efforts. If you changed the species and town names you might have been talking with a Director of the Everglades or Adirondack Parks as they face the same global issues of poaching, illegal use of timber resources, invasive plant control etc. After his talk Fidel and one of his staff took us for a short walk at the Ecological Station where we got excellent looks at the first of many La Sagre Flycatchers, Cuban Emerald, Black Whiskered Vireos, and Yellow Faced Grassquits. Returning to the bus we drove a short distance and then took a hike to an area that is used for picnics by locals. During the hike we got our first looks at Yellow Headed Warblers, Cuban Orioles, Yellow Throated Warblers, and yes, the Cuban Tody. And it was not just one but a pair of Todys near their nest and putting on territorial displays that allowed us to study the birds behavior in detail. Some also got their first look at a Cuban Trogon, and one of their nest cavities, before the rain started. But no fear because Rene guided the bus down the path not made for buses and picked us up just before the downpour began.



La Sagre Flycatcher

On the way to lunch we stopped at a very picturesque spot in Las Terrazas, where local folks are benefiting from the development of local and foreign ecotourism. While we enjoyed a complimentary cocktail a young ensemble performed for us. I am quite positive a Cuban version of American Idol is soon to appear as half the country seems to play in a band of one sort or another. Our local guide, Cesar, took us to a lower deck overlooking a lake and explained the plan to maintain eco-friendly development in the area along with some of the history of the region. As a testament to the sustainable development philosophy we were treated to a marvelous lunch at a wonderful outdoor restaurant down the road, where we watched West Indian Woodpeckers, Red Legged Thrushes and other now common birds flutter mere feet from our dining room.

After lunch we took a short drive through the community of Las Terrazas which has been built to promote sustainable living in this highly ecologically sensitive area, dropped off our local guide who lives there, and then we were off to La Guira National Park, 54,000 acres of mountain wilderness, picturesque valleys, and hidden caves. Most of us decided to use the drive to catch up on a little sleep we had missed on the travel days but not Rob who woke me up just in time to see about seven Sand Hill Cranes flying by the bus; this is a resident population to the area so everyone else will be able to see them next time you visit Cuba! Hiram decided to try our luck at the Hacienda Cortina in the area of the remains of an old hotel. He had found Cuban Solitaire there before. Nothing but the bird calling but as a consolation many of us were able to get great looks at a Cuban Trogon that decided to visit right next to where the bus had parked. After good looks at Western Spindalis, and other common species we decided it was time to call it a day but on the way down the mountain we stopped to look at a resident Broad Winged Hawk and stumbled upon our first Olive Capped Warbler of the trip. Content with our first full day of birding, we arrived at the Hotel Mirador. The Mirador Islazul in San Diego de los Baños. The hotel is very pleasant and has a commanding view of the

town, wonderful balconies to enjoy the views from and a great pool and outdoor restaurant. Oh, and did I mention we had a band playing music for us during dinner.

### March 30: Cueva de Los Portales, Back to Havana, and on to Zapata Peninsula

After a hearty breakfast we hopped in the bus for a short ride to the Cueva de Los Portales just 11km west



of La Güira National Park, where Che Guevara was headquartered during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Local guide, Leonardo, of the group Flora and Fauna, gave us a good background on both the natural history of the Caves as well as Che's use of them, including his love of chess. These limestone caves, that were perfect for Che and his soldiers to hide from US spy planes now provide perfect nesting habitat for Cave Swallows while the surrounding habitat produced excellent sightings of more Cuban Trogon, Cuban Peewee, and the target species, the Cuban Solitaire. The bird was perched high and in the light so it was great to see and hear but no one got a picture they are

going to sell to Audubon Magazine on this one I think.

Cueva de Los Portales is quite a Cuban tourist spot and people can rent little cabins and take family vacations there. As we left we were greeted by several families doing that. After we left the Park we stopped at a wonderful place where we had our first look at a Fernandina Flicker nest. This property had been the home of a millionaire who had built lavish gardens and a pond which is now used by Least Grebes, Purple Gallinule, and other waders and waterfowl. It was here we also got great looks at an endemic Red Morph Kestrel. From there we headed back to the Mirador for a quick lunch with one stop for Yellow-faced and Cuban Grassquits. While most of us saw Yellow Faced Grassquits only Rusty and Jim could claim bragging rights to a definitive look at the Cuban Grassquit.



Least Grebe

just

At the hotel Mirador we had our customary choice of pork, chicken, fish or beef, along with a tomato and cucumber salad. This time, in addition to the music we



watched Palm Swifts weaving in and out of the thatched roof of the restaurant. Then it was back on the bus and onto Havana, to meet the young Pioneers who are volunteering with the Foundation for Patrimony, Community and Environment. We met at the Aula Ecologica of the Quinta de los Molinos which is a downtown park facility that is being refurbished with native plants, native fish in the pond, and a classroom and library that they hope to power with solar energy. Raul Acosta, the project leader for Aves de la Ciudad (Birds of the City) started off the presentation with a short background discussion of how they have been getting the kids involved in avian community service. We listened to three different age groups telling us about their

projects, beginning with the youngest who are engaged in simple bird identification skill building to the older kids who are not only keeping track of birds in their communities but also engaging community residents, asking them to not keep wild birds caged, informing them of the importance of birds and performing advance volunteer ornithological science projects.

Our meeting completed we jumped on the bus and headed for the next serious birding destination, the Zapata Peninsula. At a rest stop we watched the sun setting and stumbled upon one of the best preserved red Chevy's I have ever seen. Arriving at the Playa Larga hotel in the dark it took a little bit of detective work to decipher just which bungalow each of us was staying in but mission accomplished a couple of us even discovered a local owl hooting on the hotel grounds. Rob claims it was a Stygian Owl but I will leave it at unidentified owl on my list for now.

### **March 31: The Zapata Peninsula, Playa Larga - Savannah and Coast Line**

The Zapata Peninsula has always been a sparsely populated area of Cuba so it has been possible for the Cuban government to create the Zapata Peninsula National Park. The Park was declared a world biosphere preserve in 2000 and a Ramsar site in 2001. The Park covers an area of over 1,930 square miles and is the largest, best-preserved wetlands in the Caribbean islands. It is a national, regional and world natural preserve, with fragile ecosystems and important natural resources.

For the next two days we explored the scrub, mangrove swamp, and coastline of this beautiful area. We were lucky to have the Director of the Zapata Peninsula National Park, Frank Mendino as our local host and so, with the help of his staff, we got to see most of the species the area is famous for.

Our first morning started with an early drive along the coast where we encountered hundreds, if not thousands of crabs crossing from the Bay of Pigs to the drier scrub land presumably to mate. After passing the museum recognizing the defense of Cuba during the Bay of Pigs incident, we soon came to our first destination. Frank's staff had created a make shift blind for us and within



minutes we were treated to Ovenbirds, Catbirds and the real attractions of this stop, the Key West, Gray-fronted and Blue-headed Quail-doves. The birds seemed oblivious to our presence and the constant sound of camera clicks, making some territorial movements but interested in foraging more than anything else.

After everyone had gotten their fill of the brilliant blue head of the Blue Headed Quail-dove we moved on for a short hike through the wooded trails of this part of the National Park. Our target species was the Bare-Legged Owl, and Orlando, who is one of the forest managers of this part of the Park, knew of the nest cavities these small owls use in that area. Along the way we kept ticking off new birds such as the Cuban Vireo, which we found a family group of including a recent fledgling. After a couple unsuccessful tries we discovered a beautiful owl half snoozing, its head just poking out of the cavity hole of a dead Royal Palm. Continuing along the trail we had great looks at Cuban Trogons, Todys, and our first encounters with Cuban Parrots and Parakeets. Several of the Parrots posed long enough for everyone to really study them and take in their beautiful coloration.



all

When we left the forest we crossed over the road and right by the roadside another incredible lifer was waiting for us; a male Bee Hummingbird in full breeding plumage which seemed to own the telephone wire and field below as he stayed there for the whole time 15 or more minutes we stayed observing him. Knowing not everyone got great looks at the Cuban Parakeets our local guide took us to the home of a friend who always has them in her yard and we were able to watch a small flock interacting with each other and feeding on fruit.

Before lunch we stopped at another field where we saw a Fernandina Flicker and our guide showed us another Bare-legged Owl nest site. Unfortunately he taped a little hard on the tree and inadvertently flushed the owls but it did demonstrate exactly why these very capable day time hunters prefer the evening for foraging. One Owl, in between the size of a Screech and Barred Owl flew for no more than a minute when a local, White Morphed Kestrel came right after it chasing it into so scrub bush for shelter. These two predators share the same territory and presumably the same diet so, as anyone who has watched how ferociously a kestrel will defend its territory knows, the owl is much better off keeping its hunting times to evening and leaving the daytime for the kestrel. That said, the owl was as big, if not bigger than the kestrel so most likely only its ego was damaged in the encounter.



We ate lunch at a nice restaurant that had idyllic views of the Bay of Pigs and was famous for having the deepest swimming sinkhole in the area. On the restaurant grounds we had great looks at Black Whiskered and Red Eyed Vireo, along with Eastern Peewee, the ever present Red-Legged thrush and several types of Blackbirds. From there we stopped at one of the Park's Nature Centers and met Mileydis Blanco, a Center Naturalist, who gave us a brief presentation on the Peninsula. Hiram and Frank helped by filling in on some of the key bird conservation victories such as the successful work that has been done to stem the decline of the Zapata Sparrow and Wren and the results they are seeing as these birds begin to expand their territory.



At this point in the afternoon, some of our group was ready for a rest but others of us jumped at a chance to see more birds so we went on a "little" hike in one of the drier scrub areas of the Park. Mileydis and Frank guided us to some incredible finds, including multiple Warbler sightings, five minutes with a Great Lizard Cuckoo, and then an incredible find right at our feet no less. Sleeping in the leaf litter right in front of us was a Greater Antillean Nightjar. Frank pointed out pieces of the shell of a recent hatchling so it was near or right on its nest. Even just three feet away we would never have found this bird if our guides had not known about this nest and even then it took using a laser pointer to guide the eye and distinguish bird from matching leaves. .

But there was more to come. Betty spotted large anole, *Anolis equistris* lizard in a tree and, as we were discussing how big it was we entered a field and Frank located a pair of Cuban Pigmy-owls for us that must have been right near their nest as they stayed their ground and monitored us as we marveled over them for 10 or more minutes. Pretty much on avian overload, we headed back to the bus quite content.

That night we had a special treat as Hiram had arranged for us to visit a great paladar, where the owners were making an extra special dinner as they had befriended one of our group, Rob Norton, on his previous visit and they wanted to treat us to a very special meal. We dined in an upstairs, open air balcony on lobster, freshly caught fish, crocodile and several other courses, ending with a great mix of deserts. Finally we headed back to the hotel and straight to bed as the next day was daylight saving and we were losing one hour of precious sleep.



## April 1: The Zapata Peninsula. Marshes and Coast line

Since it was April Fool's Day we should not have been surprised that the hotel staff forgot to wake up an hour early to feed us! Luckily a woman from the hotel quickly got everyone up and with very little delay we ate and were on our way to one of the marshland areas of the Peninsula. This is the epicenter of Zapata Sparrow and Wren territory Hiram explained to us and we wasted no time in finding them. The Sparrows were very cooperative and, after a short walk, we had great looks at a pair in soft, but excellent light making all the photographers very happy.

The Zapata Wren was not as gracious a bird and although it sang its territorial calls to us for about 45 minutes it would not even pop up for a second. Hiram and Frank did just about everything short of wading across the marsh and grabbing the little critter but, as always with birding, this was going to be one



species we could be happy to know we had heard and knew it existed there but it would take another trip to see. Frank explained that the Wrens were already into their nesting season and, at this point, were apprehensive to display themselves and give any predators a hint of where their nests might be.

While in the marsh we had excellent looks at La Sagre Flycatchers, more Turkey Vultures, various swallows and my best looks at a Tody. We left this area and headed back for lunch at the hotel. Along the way we saw White Ibis, Killdeer and in the field next to the hotel I got great looks at a pair of White Morph Kestrels dining on a lizard. Birds eating lizards would become quite a theme throughout the trip.

After the heat of the day had subsided we headed out to the rocky coast line of the Peninsula. There we found wading birds such as Reddish Egret, in both red and white morph, Little Blue, Great Blue and Tri-colored

Hérons. We also saw White Pelicans, Spoonbills, and Flamingos. Shore birds that forage for crustaceans and small fish also use these rocky pools and so Black Necked Stilts, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Ruddy Turnstones were observed. Most waterfowl had left the area but raptors were in good numbers. We saw Cuban Black Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, and Osprey of course. We drove to the end of the Peninsula and met the team of Park staff who stay at a research station there splitting their time between research and patrolling the area to stop any poaching or other potential illegal activities. We left the area just as the skies opened up for a torrential downpour and decided to make a leisurely night of it, dining at the hotel and getting ready for a travel day.



## April 2: Visiting Historic Trinidad de Cuba and on to Sancti Spiritus

Departing at a reasonable hour for birders, we made a short stop in the city of Cienfeugos to refuel the bus and our wallets with Cuban currency. Refueled with diesel and cash we headed onto to the city of Trinidad.

Trinidad is an amazing city, that is preserving its colonial heritage. It is an UNESCO World Heritage Site. Nestled in the foothills of the Escambray Mountains, its quaint cobblestone streets have witnessed smugglers, the slave trade, and the arrival of French refugees from Haiti who founded small sugar mills in the surrounding valleys. Our guide Alex explained how, like in Old Havana, the government is pouring a significant amount of the revenue from tourism into historic preservation of the City and paying residents to fix their private homes as well. Its streets were created in zigs and zags to confuse privateers who might try to sack the city. It is filled with little shops one would expect in any tourist center, except most other places would not adorn just about every t-shirt with the face of Che Guevara.



Alex took us to a beautiful colonial-era house that had been converted into a restaurant for our lunch which included homemade ice cream. After lunch we took a short walking tour of the main plaza and learned a little of the history of the city. As we walked the streets it was easy to reflect on the work the young Pioneers who are volunteering with the Foundation for Patrimony, Community and Environment talked about doing in their communities around caged song birds. Everyone seemed to have a Western Spindalis or Mocking Bird in a cage in this city and the kids we met with are trying to convince people not to do this. Like all conservation work, it will not be easy to achieve but very necessary work all the same and great that they are addressing it right in their own communities.



Before leaving we made one more stop at the Bar La Canchanchara to sample the traditional drink of the area, a blend of honey, lemon juice, water and rum (if you wanted it). This Bar seemed to be a regular stop for tourists

as it had the drinks and the cigars ready even in the heat of mid-day. We even got to try our hands at a little Cuban percussion. It was a pleasant stop and then we were off to Sancti Spiritus to meet with the President of the Alberto Nuñez Jimenez Foundation, an important conservation organization in the area.

Sancti Spiritus is another colonial city but it is one that is caught in the middle of its history and a more modern commercial purpose. We started in the more historic part of the city stopping at the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation





for Nature and Humanity (FANJ), a non-governmental institution dedicated to research and promotion of programs for the protection of the environment as it relates to culture and society. The Foundation is the oldest environmental organization in Cuba. It is named after the late Dr. Antonio Núñez Jiménez, a noted academic (geographer and historian), author, traveler, diplomat, and pioneering environmentalist. Building on his legacy the Foundation operates in Havana and five other provinces throughout the country. We met with their Director of the Sancti Spiritus operations, Abel Hernandez, who is also the President of the Cuban Speleological Society who tried to explain to us the many facets of his organization that works to build environmental awareness throughout the country by giving people the tools to do it in their everyday lives. He was helped by one of his educators, Alejandro Romero, who discussed programs they are doing with children and with the whole province, putting an emphasis on local sustainable agriculture. This program is being done in six of the 15 Cuban provinces so far with the view to gradually expand it to the rest of the island.



Training is being provided to both state-run and private sectors in rural, sub-urban and urban areas. The subjects included in the program focus on developing skills to make the most of the soil and water, reuse waste as organic fertilizers, achieve self-sufficiency in seeds, among other elements, in a comprehensive manner and on environmental protection principles.

After coffee, learning a little more about local bat conservation and other topics we proceeded to the Hotel Los Laureles. The Los Laureles chef provided a great buffet for us and then, despite a very loud Sweet Sixteen Party going on next door, we had a great conversation with Hiram Gonzalez about the state of conservation and ornithology in Cuba. Hiram utilized two books he was involved in editing as visual guides to his discussion. The most important was the Red Book of Cuban Vertebrates which lists the status of the threatened and endangered species in Cuba. Unlike some of the international conservation books this Cuban produced volume identifies all the endemics as endangered as their range is limited to just Cuba so, even though their populations may be stable now, any changes in Cuba's environment will drastically affect them and conservationists must consider this. This is true of all island endemics and a topic of heated debate amongst conservationists throughout the world.

Hiram also showed us the book of Cuban Lepidoptera he had helped produced. Production of both this book and the Red Book was made possible by international private and governmental donors. The print run provides for free distribution to all Cuban libraries as well as academic and research institutions. Hiram graciously gave a copy of each to our delegation; Rob received the Red Book to help him with his on-going collaboration with Cuban ornithologists and I received the other on behalf of the National Audubon Society.

The group adjourned at about 10:00 pm and then some of us stayed up a little later to help the Guinns cheer their Kentucky men's basketball team onto a nail biter of a NCAA Championship win over Kansas. Luckily breakfast was going to be at a leisurely 7 am the next morning.

### **April 3: Touring Camaguey**

After a hearty breakfast we checked out of the Los Laureles, still wondering about the green color of their pool water, and we were off to the city of Camaguey. The province of Camaguey is the largest of Cuba's 15 provinces and the landscape is diverse and beautiful along the way and so the three hours passed with great views and great conversation.

We got to the city of Camaguey and checked in at the Hotel Plaza, the oldest working hotel in the city. It still maintains most of its original architecture, including an elevator the size of a matchbox. The hotel does boast quite a history though having welcomed the famous Chilean poet, Gabriela Mistral, as a guest and as having been the site of the first broadcast of a Cuban radio station outside of Havana. Camaguey was founded in 1515, among the first seven villages of Cuba, under the name of Santa María of the Prince's Port. Camaguey province is a center of agricultural production and the city serves as a hub for that. We would learn this intimately as the train station across from the hotel ferried produce to and from market at all hours of the night.



But on Tuesday afternoon we were not worried about trains, we were headed to Najasa, a semi-deciduous forest near La Belén National Park. The drive took about an hour and then we entered an old finca that is now a government cooperative. Once we found our local guide the birding immediately began to pick up. Here was where Warbler diversity really started to increase. Lifers like Cuban Parrots, that we gushed over a few days before, become trash birds, and new species hit the list like Limpkins and Cuban Crows.



We got great looks at a white morph Kestrel, Green Woodpeckers, Trogons and much more but needed to come back for several target species so we decided to head to Camaguey for dinner. Along the way back Rob, Hiram and I got another “bus bird,” a Barn Owl even though some do not want it counted on the official trip list it was a great momentary sighting.

#### April 4: Back to the Najasa



Our decision to take another hour drive back to the finca paid off both in bird diversity and sightings. We picked up our local guide, Camillo, and he took us down the road about three minutes and before everyone even was off the bus we had a Giant Kingbird perched right above us. We then moved on in search of other target species and we were rewarded with great looks at Palm and Cuban Crows, a decent look at the Plain Pigeon, and then fantastic interactions watching Ferdanina Flickers, Parrots and West Indian Woodpeckers entering and leaving their nest cavities.

Once again we had a great diversity of warblers, Cape May warbler being added for the first time here. We ended our stay with a traditional drink by the pool of the old mansion. It was a school holiday as children celebrated the anniversary of the birth of the young communist party so several school buses of kids were enjoying a day off by the pool as well. Cuban kids, like ours, take any holiday as a free pass and these kids were thoroughly enjoying their day off. We left them happily splashing away.

For lunch Hiram suggested a great private restaurant that he said was right around the corner. It was a little further which was fine as it allowed us to

see a regular Cuban city in action on a week day rather than the quaint tourist sites we had visited so far. Camaguey was bustling with regular shoppers and folks out getting everything from cloths to groceries. And, nestled in the middle of all this commotion we ate in a quiet restaurant with this great back yard patio that deadened the outside noise and had the greatest food. So good we all voted to return for dinner.

We decided to make the afternoon a time to either rest or explore on your own so some rode about the city while other napped. Before dinner several of us had a good discussion on how the many levels of Audubon, National, state and chapter offices, etc all interact and fund their work. We also talked about the new strategic plan Audubon is launching which, hopefully will improve our conservation work while addressing some of the problems we have faced. Then it was back to the patio restaurant for a great dinner.

### **April 5: Off to Cayo Coco & the Hotel Sol Cayo Coco**

An early morning departure for the northern coast this morning and Cayo Coco. Our hotel, the Sol Cayo Coco was located on a beach of fine white sand bordered by palm trees. But before we got there we drove along the road that was created to connect the main island of Cuba to these Cayos. The road is having a negative environmental impact as it is disturbing natural tidal flow in the marshes and mango swamps so we observed the retrofitting the Cuban government is doing along the road to create flow passages for tidal water to pass through. Unfortunately it was raining as we drove through this area as it offers great birding opportunities but we did see quite a few groups of Red Throated Mergansers and Reddish Egrets foraging.

When we arrived at the hotel they were not quite ready for us to check into our rooms so we dispersed to rest, get a drink or investigate the grounds. I asked our local guide to show me some spots right near the hotel we could find birds so those who were twitching to add more birds to their list could keep busy and he immediately set to the task. After a short walk around the grounds we were able to be certain we could show everyone the Oriente Warbler, a nesting Green Woodpecker, Cape May Warblers, and plenty more.



So after lunch, with everyone full from the all-you-can-eat buffet, we set out for a little afternoon birding and got everyone's spirits up with the local Oriente Warblers followed by amazing views of the local sub-species version of the Zapata Sparrow. In addition we got more looks at Black-whiskered Vireo, Gray and



Loggerhead Kingbirds, started adding more shorebirds like Least Sandpiper but the next great bird had to be the Clapper Rail that walked completely around a pond out in the open, clucking all the time. It was a great study of a bird that usually only gives you a quick glance as it darts from one hiding spot to another. We also add another lifer for many in the group, the Bahama Mockingbird which insisted on perching in the worst light possible for photography but such is birding. To compensate, on the way back several Cuban Black Hawks perched very close to the bus for everyone to view and photograph. We also had great looks at many in the wader family such as American Flamingo, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills and most herons and egrets.

Back at the hotel we dispersed again with some discovering the great pool the hotel had, others diving in the incredibly warm ocean water while others walked along the beach.

## April 6: Investigating the nearby Cayo Guillermo

This morning it was back to keeping birders' hours with an early breakfast. There was an interesting juxtapose in the bar area as we wolfed down coffee and a croissant while some European and Canadian tourists staggered in from an all-night party and asked for brandy with their coffee.

Once on the bus we headed off to Cayo Guillermo. Crossing several bridges we started picking up terns and seagulls. Stopping for a minute we had a great look at a Crested Caracara from the bus. Then we arrived at our first stop and almost immediately got both our target species; the Thick-billed Vireo and Cuban Gnatcatcher. Not only did we see these two, we also had great looks at Cuban Orioles, the ever present Palm Warbler, fly over White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, Osprey, and a new bird for the trip – a beautiful Merlin.

We continued further down to the end of the Cayo which has a military base and not much else but beautiful beach and then we jumped back in the bus



to head back. A quick stop on a bridge produced a Lesser Black Backed Gull which may have been the rarest migrant we had on the trip. This sighting was quickly topped when Hiram and the local guide suddenly told Rene to stop the bus. Sitting in a tree about 150 yards out was one of the few, and rarest, endemics that had eluded us so far, the Gundlach's Hawk. There was enough distance between us and the bird that he sat for about fifteen minutes allowing all of us time to see it in the scope and photograph it. Finally the road paving crew that had nicely stopped work to allow us to observe the bird had to start their work again and as soon as they started up their truck the bird flushed, but we were pretty content with our sighting.

On the way back to the hotel we stopped to see the endemic Northern Flicker subspecies which had built a nest in a Royal Palm right in a hotel driveway. We picked

up some more waterfowl as well as great looks at nesting Green woodpeckers. After lunch some folks decided to try water sports while a few of us ventured into the higher priced and very environmentally sensitive hotel next door. Hiram explained he had been involved in providing input on their environmental planning and this hotel had really done a great job in landscaping with native plants and maintaining the beach as naturally as possible. Their efforts paid off as we found many nesting and migrant birds there. The lobby hosted a Cuban Emerald's nest, Yellow faced grassquits nested along the walk, Red legged Thrush nested in a guest room balcony and tons of migrants used the grounds including several Cape May Warblers.

In an effort to get every bird possible on our list, several of us hiked their shoreline as well and added Piping Plover, Short billed Dowitcher and Sanderlings to our list.



## April 7: All Good Things Must End – It's Back to Miami

So Saturday morning we packed up, a few of us did a little last minute birding around the hotel to get one more look at a Cape May warbler or a Cuban Emerald. We forced a bleary eyed English tourist into taking our group shot and then jumped into the bus headed to Camaguey and then our flight to Miami. Along the way Rob added at least one more "bus bird" a Herring gull. I think we can give him that one as hopefully that is not a lifer for anyone. In Camaguey we stopped for lunch at everyone's favorite little bistro and Janet entertained us with a little rendition of the trip. After that it was off to the airport and a pretty uneventful flight back to Miami.



From there, some departed right away, others of us enjoyed one last meal together, and then, like migrating birds we parted company on flights to our regular nesting grounds.



It was a pleasure spending time with you all. I hope everyone enjoyed themselves, learned a little, laughed a lot, and took in all the rich culture, birds and beautiful landscapes that make up Cuba. And, as long as the State Department renews our license, I hope to see you all in 2013 on another Cuban adventure!

John