Birding Abroad – CUBA Trip Report – December 1st to 13th 2016

Cuba is the largest of the tropical Caribbean islands and boasts a relaxing and easy going atmosphere. It is friendly and safe, and possesses unspoiled and stunning landscapes. Hosting a diverse and abundant bird life it remains a rewarding island for the ornithologist to visit and our 12 night tour was especially designed to seek out the majority of the 26 endemic birds, as well as see a number of Caribbean specialities plus plenty of the over-wintering North American birds on offer. Our itinerary provided an easy paced schedule and included a visit to Havana at the end of the tour to witness Cuba’s capital city, a UNESCO heritage site, where beautiful ornate buildings adorn the old city.

The group comprised birders from Yorkshire and Dorset: Mark Andrews, Andrew Ashworth, Gary Featherstone, Alan Hayden and Leo Pyke, Martin Limbert, John McLoughlin, Jim Morgan, Ian and Jean Southworth, Bryan Wainwright with Lance and Nick as the Birding Abroad leaders.

1 December – Meeting at the south terminal, Gatwick on the morning of the flight, several group members had decided to stay overnight at the airport Hilton hotel to avoid any potential hiccups. Our scheduled Virgin Atlantic departure was an hour late in taking off, but we made up time mid-air to land in Havana just ten minutes late at 16:50 local time. Our hopes of a smooth transit through immigration were dashed as we discovered ‘Cuba time’, where officialdom seems to work in slow motion! Security and baggage retrieval took longer than anticipated but finally some two and a half hours after we’d touched down, we were out of the airport to meet Rei and Arturo, our guide and driver who would be with us throughout to oversee the tour. We travelled in a new 24 seater air conditioned mini bus which meant we could all spread out in comfort. Leaving the airport complex at 19:30 we headed westwards towards the Pinar del Rio province and our base for three nights, the Hotel Mirador in the small town of San Diego de los Banos. After a long day of travel, we arrived at the hotel at 21:15 proceeding straight to a large open-sided thatched restaurant. One of the few disappointments of the trip soon revealed itself as we were politely told that, as a mark of respect to Fidel Castro who had died a few days prior to our visit, alcohol was not to be sold and that the ban would last until the 3rd December, the end of official national mourning! However all was not lost, as our two Birding Abroad leaders, anticipating a potential problem, had bought some gin and brandy at Gatwick so we could partake of a tipple or two, as and when required. A variety of dishes were offered including a starter salad, and then a main course of either beef, chicken, pork, fish or shrimps, all accompanied by salad, French fries and rice and black beans. For dessert we were served a grapefruit conserve with a slice of cheese. This particular menu was fairly standard throughout rural Cuba, but it was nevertheless quite tasty.

2 December – We were up for a 07:00 breakfast, but some of the group had already enjoyed early morning birding from the terrace. In the half light, a group Cuban Blackbirds was the first endemic to fall, whilst overhead Antillean Palm Swifts were flashing passed. By the time we entered the restaurant, Great Lizard-cuckoo, Osprey,
many Turkey Vultures, a Great Egret, Northern Mockingbird, Mourning Doves and House Sparrows had all been logged. An hour later, accompanied by our guide Caesar, we moved to the nearby La Guira National Park, 54,000 acres of mountain wilderness in the Sierra de los Órganos Mountains. Entering through the ornate gates of the Hacienda Cortina, we drove for half an hour through splendid scenery where an American Kestrel on roadside wires was the first of many to be seen on the trip. Parking at the Cueva de los Portales, we spent the next couple of hours birding from the tracks, but only walking about 400 metres each way. This local tourist site is centred on a fantastic cave system nestled below a limestone escarpment, which became famous as Che Guevara’s headquarters during the Cuban missile crisis in the early sixties. Some of his personal belongings and his bed are still on display in a small cave here. Birds seen included four island endemics; Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Solitaire and Cuban Tody. Other birds showing well were Greater Antillean Grackle, West Indian Woodpecker, Loggerhead Kingbird, the stunning Red-legged Thrush, Scaly-naped and White-crowned Pigeons, La Sagra’s Flycatcher, Cuban Emerald and the lovely Western Spindalis. The cave system held colonies of Mexican Free-tailed Bats and Fruit-eating Bats which we saw at close quarters. En route back to the hotel we made a further and very productive roadside stop that yielded yet more endemics in the form of Cuban Vireo and three Yellow-headed Warblers, with other localised Caribbean specialities being Zenaida Dove, four Cuban Pewee, several Cuban Bullfinch and two Olive-capped Warblers.

Olive-capped Warbler – has a fragmented distribution in west and east Cuba and the northern Bahamas. Inhabits stands of pine in highlands

Lunch was taken back at the hotel at around 13:00. We then had some free time to rest or wander close to the hotel where the habitat was also very productive. An assortment of wood-warblers were seen with American Redstart, Northern Parula, Black-throated Green Warbler, Black and White Warbler, Palm Warbler and Louisiana Waterthrush all being recorded.
For our late afternoon session we explored more open country habitat which gave us our first Eastern Meadowlarks (here an island sub-species which may merit full species rank). The last half an hour was spent ‘scoping some roadside fish ponds where we enjoyed nice if rather distant views of up to ten Snail Kites, a very localised resident on Cuba. We arrived back at the Mirador at 18:15 where over dinner we did the log. It had been an excellent first day in the field with Double-crested Cormorant, Pied-billed Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night-heron, Green Heron, Red-tailed Hawk, Crested Caracara, Northern Harrier, Limpkin, Caspian Tern, Common Ground Dove, Belted Kingfisher and Tawny-shouldered Blackbird all adding to the variety.

3 December – Breakfast was again scheduled for 07:00 and an hour later, just as we were preparing to load the bus, a few of the group including our guide Caesar, saw a fine Gundlach’s Hawk glide over, the only one of the trip. We then revisited the nearby Hacienda Cortina, this time leaving the bus just inside the entrance gates and walking for a mile or so each way through the parkland. The day was already getting hot so we progressed very steadily, taking our time to look carefully at the commoner birds. Over the next four hours we enjoyed some very good bird watching, typically including small pockets of birds at regular intervals. Cuban Oriole was the first new endemic, whilst new for the trip were Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Yellow-throated Vireo, up to ten Tennessee Warblers, four Black-throated Blue Warbler, eight Yellow-throated Warbler, six Red-legged Honeycreeper, four Summer Tanager, Yellow-faced Grassquit and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. We also had the opportunity to get better and sometimes close-up looks at some of the previous day’s birds including Cuban Green and West Indian Woodpeckers, Cuban Emerald, Cuban Trogon, Red-legged Thrush, Olive-capped Warbler and Western Spindalis. On the way back to the hotel for lunch, we stopped at some roadside fields were a
group of grassquits had been spotted the previous day. Exploring further, Caesar led us through a narrow patch of woodland to the weedy border of a large field where we found a small flock of a dozen or so Cuban Grassquits, the second endemic of the morning.

It was hotting up and we were hungry, so at 12:30 we went straight back for lunch which comprised a variety of pizzas and sandwiches.

We left for the pretty town of Vinales immediately after lunch. It was a one hour drive and the route took us through town to the spectacular scenery of the Vinales Valley. The main features of this valley are the mogotes, huge karst formations that resemble gigantic sugar loaves. We parked at a viewpoint that overlooks the valley and sampled several pina coladas from the tourist bar, the rum part of the drink being free since the ban on the sale of alcohol was still in place!

Our next stop was at a tobacco farm where we were kindly shown the process for hand rolling cigars and a few of the group sampled a recently rolled cigar. We were then invited into the house for a small cup of strong coffee and a few cigars were purchased as souvenirs.
A brief stop at the fish ponds that we had visited the previous evening yielded similar species, though Peregrine and Tricolored Heron were added to the list. It was 18:30 when we arrived back at the hotel. Jean had not been feeling well and had stayed behind all day, so we were all relieved to see her feeling somewhat better when we arrived back. Dinner was again at 19:30 and at last we were offered beers, the period of mourning for President Castro had finally been declared over.

4 December – After breakfast, we had a couple of hours birding at the Hacienda Cortina, noting many of the same species as well as a fine adult male Summer Tanager, which was only the second occasion in 20 years bird watching that our guide Caesar had seen a male. By 11:30 we dragged ourselves away to begin the drive to Playa Larga. Our journey took us eastwards towards Havana then once on the outskirts of the city, we turned to the south-east. As we travelled our guide Rei, gave us a comprehensive talk about Cuba’s history and culture. An hour and a half had passed by the time we reached a large lake not far from Havana where there was also a cafe. We spent some time ‘scoping the lake, where species added to the trip list were 80 Pied-billed Grebe, a few Green-winged Teal, 150 Blue-winged Teal, a male Cinnamon Teal (a national rarity), 400 Ruddy Duck, 2,500 Lesser Scaup, 4,000 Ring-necked Duck and an overflying Magnificent Frigatebird. The reedy edges produced a fine American Bittern and three Least Bitterns. Rei had organised lunch at the Nina Bonito, the lakeside cafe. The choice was not extensive - either ham & cheese sandwiches or fried chicken and salad, but both were filling and quickly prepared. By 14:45 we continued the journey reaching Playa Larga by 17:15. Playa Larga, a fast developing tourist area, is located on the Bahia de Cochinos or Bay of Pigs, made famous by the failed CIA orchestrated invasion attempt in April 1961. We checked into the Casa Enrique, a family run pension for a four night stay, where many of the rooms had been recently built and were fully en suite with a really fresh feel about them. We soon collected at the rooftop bar were we enjoyed a cocktail or two in a picturesque setting as the sun went down. Our evening meal was a grand affair taken in the open with fantastic views extending out towards the Caribbean.
5 December – The Cienaga de Zapata National Park is renowned as Cuba’s premier birding location with a variety of habitats from swamp to open dry forest, from seawide to moist tropical forest. It has the biggest bird list of anywhere in the Caribbean, good reason we thought for an early start. Breakfast began at 05:15, and before we knew it, our local guide Manuel arrived and we were promptly onto the bus. Manuel knew of a stake-out for quail-doves, but it is best to there at dawn. After a drive of nearly an hour we arrived at a screened area in an area of dry secondary forest. It wasn’t long before a single Grey-fronted Quail-dove showed and then shortly afterwards, two stunning Blue-headed Quail-doves revealed their exquisite colours. We spent an hour or so admiring these special birds, also noting Ovenbird and close views of Zenaida Dove, both new for the trip.

The exquisite colours of the Blue-headed Quail-dove

Once back on the road we drove a short distance to an area good for both Cuban Parrot and Cuban Parakeet, and managed good views of three and 11 respectively of these terrific species. We had been joined at this point by Orlando who specialises in the birds of this area. He knew of a roost site for Red-shouldered Blackbird, another Cuban endemic which is often quite difficult to find, so we hurried there and luckily were just in time to see them dispersing, the only ones seen on the trip. A fine dainty Cuban Pygmy Owl then showed rather well, another endemic for the day! New birds for the trip included Common Yellowthroat, Tree Swallow and Purple Gallinule. Another short ten minutes drive took us to a stake-out for Fernandino’s Flicker. A walk into a marshy area of scrub, mainly spiky acacia bushes, produced this fine bird, the largest woodpecker in Cuba. Our final stop of a rather whistle stop morning was back in the dry forest to search for a roosting Bare-legged Screech-owl. We walked through the forest in single file with both guides checking suitable holes in the tree trunks. At the seventh attempt we were finally successful when an owl
popped out, froze for a split second before it flew off, not the best of views but a lifer for most nonetheless!

By mid-morning we drove back to Playa Larga, arriving at the hotel at 11:10. A Laughing Gull was spotted en route as was another Magnificent Frigatebird. Rei had contacted the hotel to order an early lunch so we assembled on the terrace where it was pleasantly warm in a light breeze. Afterwards a rest break was called for, so we relaxed over a beer before resuming at 14:30, heading for Las Salinas. Once through the entrance gate here, we drove for thirty minutes through dense mangroves before reaching open water on either side of the road. A notable twenty-two species were added to the trip list, including Cuban Black-hawk, you guessed it, yet another endemic! Other species seen well here were American Flamingo, Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant, 30 American White Pelican, Brown Pelican, 25 Roseate Spoonbill, Osprey, ten White Ibis, three Reddish Egret, many American Wigeon, Clapper Rail, Willet, over 200 Short-billed Dowitcher, Dunlin, Red Knot, Lesser Yellowlegs, Turnstone, both Royal and Caspian Tern, Belted Kingfisher, Northern Waterthrush and Yellow Warbler. The sun was setting as we set off back at 17:40 eventually arriving at the Casa Enrique at 18:30. We were soon in the bar shortly afterwards enjoying beers and then dinner, the whole place being quite atmospheric with twinkling lights and Cuban piped music.

6 December – Today breakfast was at 06:15 for a 07:00 start. The first stop came before we had even left Playa Larga - for a party of Cuban Crows - and then onwards to Sopillar where we enjoyed an excellent couple of hours general birding. The track was straight, flat and open with wet areas on one side and deciduous trees and bushes on the other side. After the previous days birding ‘targeted’ at endemics, this was a gentle stroll for anything that appeared. There seemed to be birds
everywhere! We logged almost forty species, five of which were new for the trip - Northern Jacana, Wilson’s Snipe, Northern Flicker, Prairie Warbler and Magnolia Warbler. The supporting cast included White-crowned Pigeon, Cuban Pygmy-owl, Red-legged Thrush, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Emerald, Yellow-throated Vireo and La Sagra’s Flycatcher plus a further six species of wood-warbler.

Around 10:00 we returned to the bus and after no more than ten minutes drive we were back into the dry forest. Manuel explained that it was a one kilometre walk to a flowering tree favoured by Bee Hummingbird, the world’s smallest bird and one of the major targets of the trip. The trudge through the woodland (with just a few irritating mosquitoes), was well worth it because we had brilliant views of two Bee Hummingbirds. The photographers had a field day as several birds perched out in the open but, given the size of the subject, getting the definitive shot wasn’t that easy! Whilst there, we had a fly over Wood Stork, the only one of the trip, and also Cuban Oriole. The decision was then made to try a dead tree further on for Bare-legged Screech-owl because Alan had missed it on the previous day. The trail was hard going with deep ruts and it became increasingly muddy before we searched for a point to cross a shallow stream. The effort was all worthwhile because the screech-owl was looking out of the hole watching us as we approached but only its head was visible. We then retraced our steps, all the group getting good views of a Swainson’s Warbler in the understory on the way back.

We had all enjoyed an excellent morning, so with temperatures rising we headed back to a small harbour side restaurant in Playa Larga, where lunch of pizza and sandwiches, was enjoyed overlooking a scenic bay and very tranquil it was too.

At 14:00 we drove to the Criadero de Cocodrilos, a crocodile breeding farm, the largest in Cuba with some 4000 animals. It is open to tourists and benefits from on
site gift shops and a couple of restaurants. The conservation project was initiated more than fifty years ago by Fidel Castro to safeguard the endangered Cuban Crocodile. We spent the next couple of hours there. The park has good open habitat where we had a reasonable selection of wood-warblers including our first Cape May Warbler together with American Redstart, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Northern Waterthrush and Yellow-throated Warbler plus Osprey, Purple Gallinule and Loggerhead Kingbird. At 16:00 we set off back to the hotel, arriving there a few minutes later where we called it a day, some of the group taking a stroll along the beach, others enjoying an early beer.

After dinner most of the group walked into town to a seaside bar in the hope of seeing a Stygian Owl. Manuel had seen the bird the previous evening but despite staking out its favourite tree, the bird failed to show on this occasion.

7 December – After a quick coffee we were away shortly after 05:00 taking our packed breakfasts with us. We took the straight road through the dry forest to Santo Tomas, a remote village in the centre of the Zapata National Park. It took about an hour to get there and on arrival and still in darkness, we left the bus to walk a short distance down a village track to look for Cuban Nightjar, another target endemic. Our guide Manuel played the call and straight away a Cuban Pygmy-owl responded! As light began to penetrate the forest trees, we became aware that it was actually quite misty and in the half-light, visibility was poor. Eventually a Cuban Nightjar did appear, giving two brief fly-bys and also perched briefly on a short stem, but the views were not great. At 07:00 we ate our packed breakfast back at the bus, and a short while later assembled at an old rickety jetty where three or four punts, all of which had seen better days, were moored. The group squeezed into a couple of these, and although safe with the water four or five inches from the top, it looked a little precarious. In the true spirit of British bird watchers, we set off down a narrow channel through the reed beds expertly steered by our Cuban punters.
Several Zapata Sparrows appeared very quickly and we noted ten of these birds during our boat ride. Zapata Wren was the second target bird but to get the best chances of actually seeing one, we had to leave the boats and walk a few yards along a makeshift boardwalk to a custom built viewing platform. We spent over half an hour there with Manuel occasionally playing the call but sadly the bird didn’t show. We heard it singing back quite loudly so the bird was close, but after a while we decided to cease playing the tape because we didn’t want to potentially upset such a rare breeding bird. Plenty of good birds were logged during the session however, such as Limpkin, Green Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, White-crowned Pigeon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Emerald, Gray Catbird, Cuban Vireo, Yellow-headed Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat and Cuban Bullfinch. We also saw a large Desmarest’s Hutia (or or Cuban Hutia) another Cuban endemic, though this time a mammal. At 11:30 we arrived back at the jetty where everyone managed to negotiate their way off the punts with surprisingly few wet feet. We were soon boarding the bus to head back for lunch, arriving an hour later.

**Zapata Sparrow an endemic genus and species!**

Lunch was a very pleasant experience, again being served on the open shaded terrace with the Bay of Pigs stretching out in the background. As we ate we saw Cuban Black-hawk and Magnificent Frigatebird flying over the bay, before some free time was called for, the group reconvening at 15:30.

Information gleaned over the previous days lead us to a small house in a backstreet of the rural village of Palpite. We walked into the back yard, not really knowing what to expect, to see the owner had erected a series of feeders for hummingbirds. Almost immediately a Bee Hummingbird was spotted on a sugar water feeder almost within touching distance. We stayed there for over an hour with at least two Bee Hummingbirds putting on a quite amazing show. Also seen were Cuban Pygmy-owl, Cuban Emerald, Red-legged Thrush, Ovenbird and Black-throated Blue Warbler.
As dusk approached, we headed back towards the hotel. After a short rest we decided to try again for better views of Cuban Nightjar, so at 18:20 when it was dark, we drove a short distance to a forested area to try again for the nightjar for those that had missed it earlier. After a few minutes a Cuban Nighthjar showed well but briefly in the torchlight. We then moved on to the Playa Larga Hotel where a Stygian Owl had been regularly seen by Manuel, our guide. We watched a huge tree for some time without any luck, so returned for dinner and drinks.

After dinner and the evening log, the lure of the owl proved too strong for seven group members, so off they went walking back through town to the Playa Larga Hotel for another attempt at Stygian Owl. After three-quarters of an hour wait, three of the group gave up and returned but the others valiantly stayed on and the owl duly appeared; just reward their tenacity.

8 December – We had something of a lie-in today with breakfast at 07:30. After loading the bus we were away for 09:00 en route to Trinidad for a one night stay. We made stops in Playa Larga for water and at a bank to exchange some more currency, before hitting the road in earnest. However we hadn’t gone far when we decided to stop at the Cueva de Los Peces, or Cave of the Fishes. Here there was a small grassy beach clothed with palm umbrellas, sunbathers and groups of divers. Opposite and adjacent to the car park were extensive wooded grounds with a restaurant next to a large rocky salt water pool which is a favourite with snorkelers as it is connected underground to the sea and therefore holds many marine fish which are easy to see in the calm waters. The woodland was full of birds and we chalked up quite a list though it was the three or four Blue-headed Quail-doves which stole the show, pleasing the photographers with their close approach.

Time was pressing so at 11:30 we continued our journey following the coast initially to Playa Giron, before the road swept inland and through the flat hinterland. We
were travelling through a major rice growing area and at regular intervals we found one side of the main carriageway covered in rice grains, the road being used for drying the rice under the bright midday sun. Further inland we started to climb towards a spectacular mountain range, the Sierra de Escambray, in the distance.

Sugarcane became the dominant crop in this area with many fields looking ready for harvest. We stopped for lunch at the Ranchon Guajimico, where dishes on offer were more extensive than usual and included chicken, beef, calamari, lobster and a mixed seafood plate, all available with good old chips! Leaving the restaurant for the final forty kilometres to Trinidad at 14:45, we bypassed town and three-quarters of an hour later stopped by some roadside ponds where a variety of water birds were showing. We spent a good hour there seeing frequent Semi-palmated Plovers, three Wilson’s Plovers and over 300 Least Sandpiper. We also had Brown Pelican, Green Heron, Tricolored Heron, Black-bellied Plover, Killdeer, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Short-billed Dowitcher, Royal Tern and Belted Kingfisher.

At 17:00 we pulled up outside the splendid Iberostar Hotel, located in the old part of Trinidad, conveniently located for a walk through the cobbled streets of this historic colonial town. The hotel was grand affair. The foyer boasted a huge circular fountain in the middle with turtles living in the water. There were crystal chandeliers with plush seating all around plus lots of plants and statues. The rooms were very large and smart with huge beds, a dressing room and a massive bathroom and most exited to an outdoor veranda offering stunning and calm views over the town. Prior to dinner, which was booked for 20:00, Rei took us for a walk around Trinidad’s historic centre. The whole place was full of life, with almost every bar playing Cuban music. The streets were cobbledstoned and most of the main square built by wealthy landowners during the Spanish colonial era and all apparently still inhabited by
descendants of old local families. At one point there were hundreds of people on tiered steps that led to a music academy where a live band was playing. We enjoyed some free time here and most of the group managed to find a bar or two to enjoy the local Cuba Libres. A cathedral dominated the main square and we went into an old colonial house, the owner kindly taking us into the courtyard to show us the original shower and porcelain loo. Back in the square we spent a few minutes soaking up the atmosphere before heading back to the hotel. We had time for a beer in the bar where a pianist accompanied by a violinist provided the background music. Dinner was buffet style in a rather upmarket dining room, well known as the top eating spot for miles around. The array of food was unbelievable – this was a top quality place. After bird log, we retired to comfortable beds, well satisfied with our short time in Trinidad.

9 December – We were up for breakfast at 07:30 which was another feast including all the delicacies we could think off! With a departure time of 09:00 we didn’t have time for a walk, though some of the early risers in the group had retraced the previous night’s steps to photograph old Trinidad in the light of dawn.

Having got away on time we hadn’t gone far before we stopped at a tourist site, a monumental seven storey tower of the Manaca Iznaga estate which dates back to the slave era in the 19th century. The tower was built in 1830 and functioned as a lookout for supervising the 350 slaves that worked on the sugar cane plantations. The cobbled street leading up the tower was full of stalls selling a variety of handmade goods. By 10:00 we were back on the road. The scenery was very pleasant travelling through spectacular green clad mountains and rolling hills, the latter covered in dry grass and stunted palm trees. At noon after a brief comfort stop, we still had 150kms of the journey remaining, so onwards we went. By 13:20
we reached San Rafael from where a 27kms causeway links the mainland to the Jardines del Rey archipelago, which consists of some 400 small islands. Most of these are uninhabited but the archipelago includes several large islands which are home to all-inclusive beach resorts, one of which on Cayo Coco was our destination for a two nights stay. There was a control point at the start of the causeway where a toll had to be paid, and where Rei had to hand over passport details for the whole group. While crossing the causeway we added American Herring Gull to the trip list, also seeing were Lesser Scaup, Royal Tern, Laughing Gull, Double-crested Cormorant and Crested Caracara. We were warmly greeted at the splendid Sol Hotel, the spacious reception concourse being open-sided with lots of seating, pot plants, an ornate waterfall, gift shops, a coffee shop and a bar. Prior to checking in, we headed to the dining room for lunch, where a bewildering array of food was on offer and with it being all-inclusive, we enjoyed a few drinks as well!

Cuban Black Hawk – you guessed it an endemic! Has browner plumage with increased pale feather tips and a shorter alarm call than Black Hawk

At 16:00 we all met up for a walk around the grounds of the hotel, which produced the first White-winged Dove of the trip, also a few wood-warblers including Cape May Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler and American Redstart plus West Indian Woodpecker, Northern Flicker and a perched Cuban Black Hawk. We then crossed the road to find a short jetty on a lake where we found our only bird of the day, a West Indian Whistling-duck, but three further trip ticks in the form of Red-breasted Merganser, Yellow-crowned Night-heron and Black-necked Stilt. A rather drab looking warbler had us slightly perplexed but it was eventually identified as an Orange-crowned Warbler – very scarce in Cuba. We were in the bar by 19:00 and had dinner shortly afterwards. Hotel entertainment initially came in the form of two guitarists until three couples started dancing the rumba, enticing others to join in until dancers were moving all through the dining area. We then moved to a larger table in the outside dining room to do the day’s log.
10 December — We met in the bar for fruit juice and coffee at 06:15, leaving a quarter hour later with our guide Jadier. Heading towards Cayo Paredon Grande we made a brief stop to try for Oriente Warbler, one of the morning’s main target species. Fortunately this proved not to be a problem and everyone had good views of several of these fine birds, and also of Cuban Tody, Cuban Bullfinch and Zapata Sparrow. Cave Swallow was also added to the trip list.

Cayo Paredon Grande at 6kms long is the third largest island in the Jardines. We departed the bus by 08:00 spending two hours walking along a wide track towards
the striking orange and black of the Diego Velazquez Lighthouse, built by Chinese immigrants in 1859 using metal plates made in Telford! Mangroves on either side of the track held two more highly sought after species; the scarce and localised Thick-billed Vireo and the endemic Cuban Gnatcatcher. The vireo proved quite difficult to see well, but details were gradually pieced together and four birds being seen in the end, whilst good views were had of at least five of the gnatcatchers.
We also had our first Yellow-rumped Warbler plus Osprey, more Cuban Green Woodpecker, Prairie Warbler, Cape May Warbler and Northern Parula. A Bananaquit was an unexpected trip tick. At the lighthouse we found an American Oystercatcher, a scarce winterer in these parts and unsurprisingly the only one of the trip. Feeling hungry our packed breakfasts were eaten on the bus before more birding along the track where we finally connected with the extremely difficult Bahama Mockingbird, another speciality species of the cays. Around 11:00 we began to drive slowly back stopping off at various lagoons to view the birds. American Flamingo, Blue-winged Teal, American Coot and Lesser Yellowlegs alongside Greater Yellowlegs were all appreciated. A couple of Piping Plovers were located on a sand spit but they quickly moved off ahead of an incoming tide before we could enjoy good views.

Back at the hotel we went straight in for lunch at 12:45, meeting back on the bus at 14:30 to try the Wild Boar Caves, a local hotspot for Key West Quail-dove. Here, a water drip in the forest attracted half a dozen of these birds, with Zenaida Dove, Ovenbird and Red-legged Thrush alongside. A female Painted Bunting was then found giving close but brief views. The caves are also used as an underground
restaurant and disco on certain evenings! On the way back to the hotel we stopped at a small lagoon where Jadier played the call of Clapper Rail and one promptly walked out of the reeds for all to see with a stunning male Yellow Warbler nearby. With evening approaching it was back to the hotel where we relaxed until it was time for drinks and the evening meal.

We enjoyed brilliant views of several Key West Quail-doves

11 December – Our last full day in Cuba was occupied by the long journey to Havana. This called for a leisurely start, though some of the group went for a last ditch search for Mangrove Cuckoo, but the bird failed to show. Birds around the hotel balcony included Turkey Vulture, Laughing Gull, Royal Tern, Collared Dove, the inevitable Palm Warbler and Greater Antillean Grackle. By 09:25 the porters had collected our bags and following a group photograph on the hotel steps we boarded the bus. The full journey to Havana took some eight hours, so it was 18:15 when we arrived at the Hotel Telegrapho in Havana. We made a couple of comfort stops on the way and had lunch at Parador El Randon around 14:00, but chances for bird watching were few and the most noteworthy species was probably Eastern Meadowlark, a few of which were seen intermittently on roadside fence posts.

The Telegrafo proved a good choice, located on a row of old colonial style buildings which looked very impressive lit up in the evening light. We checked in and went up to our rooms which were very spacious incorporating high ceilings to cool them from the city heat. A few beers in the bar were welcome before we headed to the dining room where a long table had been prepared for our group. Afterwards we walked outside where the whole of Havana seemed alive with people. Walking to the right we found the next building was the famous Inglaterra Hotel, which like our own hotel, was arcaded along the front with tables and chairs where red wine could be ordered whilst listening to the music of the hotel band.
Some went in search of Ernest Hemingway’s favourite bars and found the El Floridita, this small bar being packed with holiday makers enjoying daiquiris and mojitas, Hemmingway’s two favourite drinks. The atmosphere was quite amazing and tucked into one corner a female band was playing traditional Cuban music, the girls dressed in skin tight black mini dresses and the singer gyrating to the music whilst shaking her maracas – quite a sight indeed. The Birding Abroad leaders ordered daiquiris all round! The Hemmingway version of this cocktail consists of white rum mixed in a blender with sugar, six drops of maraschino, lime juice and crushed ice. Late in the evening we eventually called it a day and retired to bed.

12 December – We were down for breakfast at 07:45. The day’s schedule included a morning guided sightseeing in Havana with a late lunch at 14:30 before leaving for the airport at 16:00. Rei, our ever trusty and amiable guide, took most of the group for a walking tour of old Havana, though Alan opted to find a shady spot to do some sketching. Our route took us past El Floridita which is on the edge of the old city. There were lots of souvenir shops, many of which sold Che Guevara and Fidel Castro themed goods. By mid-morning the whole place was alive with people. Music was belting out from the many bars, and we soon lost Jim, a music enthusiast, to one of them. It was very hot but the shady streets, some tree lined, offered some respite. We stopped for soft drinks at a cafe where the barman fed sugarcane stems into a press to extract the juice, a surprisingly refreshing drink! Our next stop was the cathedral, a splendid eighteenth century building, which we looked around taking the opportunity to sit for a while in the cool. With so much to see, we went our separate ways agreeing to meet back at the cathedral, before proceeding to the La Calesa Real restaurant for lunch. The first course was a very tasty soup, with a main course of fish, prawns, lobster and rice followed by a dessert of crème caramel with chopped
fruit, all very nice indeed with the accompaniment of a singer and two guitarists and our final Cuba Libres of the trip.

As we walked back to the hotel we passed a few amazing ‘living statues’. These included a man dressed entirely in silver who was motionless apart from his eyes, a girl dressed as a fairy and the best of all a pirate on a plinth. The latter’s make-up was very clever with every bit of him painted bronze with touches of verdigris.

Back at the hotel we loaded the bus and set off for the airport on time shortly after 16:00, arriving there an hour later. Here we thanked Rei and Arturo who had been very trusty and indispensable throughout the tour, thereafter making our way into the airport. Everything moved smoothly through both check-in and security with our direct Virgin flight taking off just a few minutes late at 20:30.
13 December – Some of the group managed to slumber like babies, whilst others stayed awake chatting or watching films on the overnight flight back to Gatwick, which landed on time at 09:50. We cleared immigration and collected our luggage and said our farewells, some of the group having a minibus journey back ‘up north’, others a slightly shorter drive back to Dorset.

The trip had been a great success accomplishing the majority of its objectives in Cuba. We had enjoyed some great birding, experienced a varied selection of locations and learned a lot about the fascinating culture, all of which combined with some good bonhomie and fun to make each day of the tour very enjoyable.

Lance and Nick would like to thank Alan Hayden, Jean Southworth and Andrew Ashworth for their photos used in this trip report and on the website, and to Ian Southworth for co-authoring this account based on his extremely useful and detailed daily diary.

Lance Degnan and Nick Whitehouse

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