

Cuban Trip

March 27, 2012 – April 7, 2012

Introduction:

We were delighted and excited to have a chance to visit Cuba. Our friends the Englemans alerted us to an email they had received about the trip, and we quickly signed up. We have longed to visit this nearby country which our benighted government policy has placed off limits.

Before this trip, we consulted **Birds of Cuba** (cite) and **Natural Cuba** (cite) as well as **Cuba, What Everybody Needs to Know** (cite). We also watched the **Nature** episode, **Cuba, The Accidental Eden**, for the second time.

March 27, 2012: San Francisco to Miami

Got up way before dawn, about 3:00, dressed, fed Chipper and the cats, threw the bags in the car and drove to San Francisco. We parked in an off airport lot that we wouldn't have found without help from Honey, our faithful GPS guide. Got to the airport in plenty of time, even managed to fit in a breakfast before boarding. Five hours later found us at the Miami International Airport, and another 30 minutes or so got us to the airport hotel.

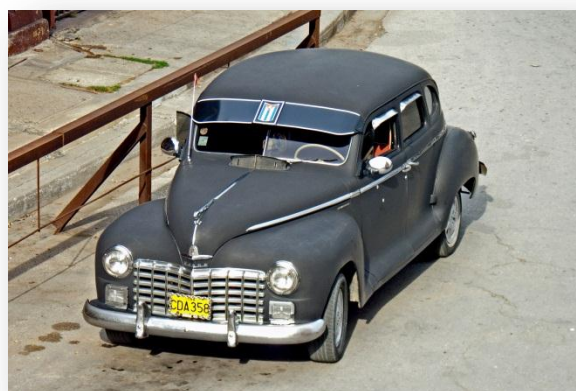
Another birder on the trip, Rosemary, suggested we spend a few hours birding near the airport. We agreed and the three of us set off with a poor map that nevertheless managed to guide our taxi to the area we wanted. We walked around for about two hours, logging many Starlings and the like, but also some Monk Parakeets near a nest and two delightful Spot-breasted Orioles, a new bird for North America. The only other time we had seen one was in Tapachula, Mexico, in 1997.

Then, it was back to the hotel for a meet-and-greet with the other tour participants, followed by dinner with Jenny and Terry Cloudman and an early bedtime.

March 28, 2012: Miami to Havana

Bird of the day: Red-Legged Thrush

Up early yet again, we had a box breakfast in the lobby of the hotel before taking the 5:30 shuttle to the airport. After an hour of formalities, we proceeded upstairs where we endured another TSA screening. By 7:30, we were cleared and had time to supplement our meager breakkie and almost complete the Wednesday Times Crossword before embarking on the short flight to Cuba. We arrived a couple of minutes ahead of schedule, which meant that we got to take on another bureaucracy to get into Cuba. One major annoyance: we were unable to take our phones, or anything else with GPS capabilities, into Cuba. That meant we couldn't rely on the phone to wake us up, so we had to dredge up our ancient travel alarm clock.



We had expected to see the collection of cars from the 1950s that Cuba is famous for, but our first sight of the parking lot revealed a number of shiny new models from VW, Kia, Hyundai, and Honda. US manufacturers were noticeably

absent. Turns out those cars were rentals. The taxis were the expected 57 Cheby's and the like in another lot. The car pictured is an old Dodge (1949?) in Camaguey, later in the trip.

Our vehicle for the trip is a large bus made in China, which has A/C but not a W/C. Quite comfortable except for a low lintel over the door, which I hit more than once. The huge windows on either side of the bus provided excellent visibility for birding on the go, though we found ourselves on the wrong side of the bus more than once.

By 11:00 (12:00 Miami time) we were on the bus and headed for the hotel *Ambos Mundos*. (We've tried to come up with a translation for that. We think it means something like *two worlds*.) Ernest Hemmingway lived in the hotel in the 1950s.

We went down the street to a nearby restaurant for lunch, which, allowing for Cuban time, took longer than expected. It was after 3:00 when we set off on a walking tour of *Old Havana*, a nicely restored part of town with buildings dating back to the 1830s and remnants of the old aqueducts from the 17th century. Our local guide, Alejandro (aka Alex), led us on the tour, demonstrating the patience and colloquial English that we appreciated throughout the trip.

We did some birding in a small park before walking down to the *malecon*, the harbor area. We saw several Cuban endemics and near-endemics during the day, 21 species in all, with 7 lifers. That brought my world total to a surprising 4100. All the birds we saw today were easy to find. Some of the endemics will require more work. We also saw three Wood Warbler species, Yellow, Yellow-throated, and Palm Warblers who have spent the winter in Cuba and are almost ready to migrate back to the states. We expect to see several more of these.

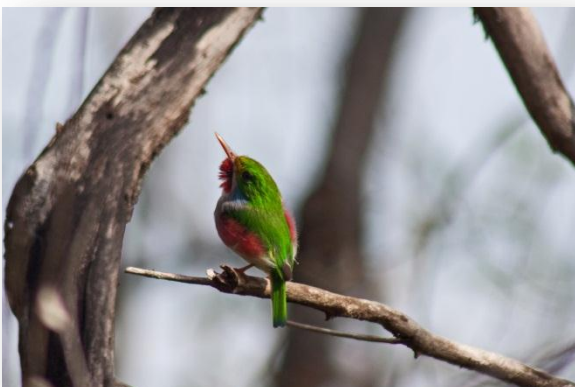
Best bird of the day was the **Red-legged Thrush**, a beautiful species, and one we saw almost every day of the trip. We gushed over a pair in a park near the *malecon*, but soon it was "just a thrush." Similar to our Robin, the race we saw has a reddish belly, a chunky body, and a striking face pattern. The pair we saw was in full breeding plumage and very striking.

After dinner at another nearby restaurant, we retired early. Tomorrow we get up early for the third day in a row so we can blast out of town at 6:00.

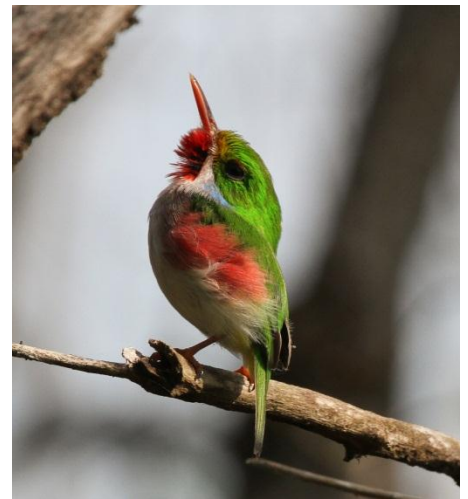
March 29, 2012: Havana to Sierra del Rosario, Las Terrazas, Hacienda Cortina, and on to Hotel Mirador Islazul:

Bird of the Day: Cuban Tody, with Cuban Trogon close behind

Up early again. Grabbed a quick breakfast of coffee with ham and cheese sandwiches before hitting the road for a day of serious birding. Our first stop was the preserve of Sierra del Rosario, which was established, sort of, in 1978, when our guide Hiram started working there. He is now President of the Cuban Zoological Society as well as an Ornithologist with more than 30 years experience. After a short talk about the area, we set off in search of the **Cuban Tody**, an endemic on everyone's *must see* list.



We found the bird near its nest, where it scolded us and put on a territorial display. A stunning bird — the picture in the field guide is wholly inadequate —



it mixes bright green and red into spectacular plumage. Zipping around, it managed to pose long enough for everyone to get a good look. As this was **Linda's New Favorite Bird™**, I've included a close up taken by John Hannan.

After birding, during which we saw the Cuban Trogon (another highly desired species), we went to the village of *Las Terrazas*, which means The Terraces. We had a drink and live music featured at almost every place we've been. Then we moved to "the map" for a talk about the village. While it is certainly true that not everyone had benefitted from the Cuban Revolution, it is equally true that some people are doing incomparably better now. The villagers of Las Terrazas are in the latter group. Former peasants living in abject poverty, virtual serfdom, they now run hotels and restaurants at an important ecotourist location.

We had a wonderful lunch at a restaurant in the area looking out over superb grounds with many birds working in the trees. Then we set off on a long haul up a laughable excuse for a road to the abandoned Hacienda Cortina. We were

informed that it used to be a hotel and restaurant, but burned down in 1993. We spent several hours in a mostly fruitless search for the Cuban Solitaire. We heard several of them, but only one member of the group, Janet, managed to see one. We plan to try again tomorrow.



As dusk approached, we adjourned to our hotel, where we ate, photographed a large frog that we thought was a Cuban Tree Frog but was an introduced pest instead, compiled the list for the day, and went to bed. Tomorrow, we get to sleep in. Breakfast is not until 6:30.

March 30, 2012: Cave where Che Stayed During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Presentation in Havana, on to Zapata Peninsula

Bird of the Day: Cuban Solitaire

After breakfast today, we drove a short distance to *Cueva de Los Portales*, where Che had his headquarters during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Linda and I remember that time well. We were freshmen at Rice and wondered what was going to happen. One of the books we read in preparation for the trip called it, "The most dangerous 13 days in the history of the world."

The cave is an amazing historical site, with furnishings that either date from Che's occupation, or have been carefully selected to duplicate the originals. He had sleeping quarters, kitchen, meeting areas, all sequestered in limestone caves invisible to US surveillance. Better yet, we had some good bird sightings there.

First, we located a **Cuban Solitaire**, which had eluded us yesterday, and everyone got a good look. The bird sang from an exposed, but unfortunately backlit location. Poor photographs, good enough for a record will have to do. Of course, the *real* photographers with their long lenses got better shots that I did. The bird's song is, as with other Solitaires, lengthy and melodic, a real treat.

We had some excellent look at Cuban Trogons. Indeed, we have found them easy to see, unlike their cousins in the rest of the world. Partly, this is because they are quite common, but also because they don't seem concerned about staying hidden. While everyone was looking at a pair of them, I summoned Linda to a view of Black-whiskered Vireo, which was

becoming a jinx bird for her. She was about the only member of the group who hadn't gotten a good look at one, and I didn't want to waste the opportunity.

After that, we went to a corn field where we saw many Yellow-faced Grassquits. Rusty and I managed to see the Cuban Grassquit, an endemic, but it eluded the rest of the group. I was in the right place at the right time, near the leader, and had a brief but satisfactory view.

After a quick lunch, we drove back into Havana, where we were given a presentation by the *Pioneers*, the Cuban equivalent of Boy/Girl Scouts. These were engaged in some ornithological projects centered on a census of the common birds of the city. I found this not worth the time involved, but Linda was enchanted with the young people giving the talks. They described how they kept track of the birds and tried to convince the citizenry not to keep captive birds in their homes unless they kept Rock Pigeons. The final presentation used a PowerPoint slide on a Dell Laptop. I was curious how they had managed to procure the Dell in spite of the embargo, but since I disapprove of the embargo, I decided not to question further. The young girls showed some courage knocking on doors and confronting the caged birds owners.

We finished the talks about 4:30, then spent half an hour in a futile search for an open bank where we could exchange dollars for Convertible Pesos, known by the acronym CUCs, the only currency we are allowed to spend. Of course, by that time on a Friday afternoon, no banks were open. We have begun to realize that we don't have nearly enough spendable money. We were told that we could convert at "any hotel," but so far we haven't found any willing to oblige. Linda wanted to know the reason for the dual currency. We have come up with several possible explanations, but all explain the difference in political rather than economic terms. CUCs are worth more than the regular pesos and seem to be reserved for foreign tourists and those lucky enough to have something to sell to the tourists. Gresham's Law is operating, and most transactions among the populace take place in regular pesos. The CUCs are saved for special occasions.

As a result of all this, we didn't arrive at our hotel in Playa Larga on the Bay of Pigs (yes, that Bay of Pigs) until almost 8pm. We had a late dinner and fell into bed. Tomorrow begins at 5:00.

March 31, 2012: Around the Zapata Peninsula, and another Presentation

Birds of the Day: Blue-headed Quail-dove in the morning, Greater Antillean Nightjar in the afternoon



Today, we arose at our usual time of 5:00 for an early breakfast before adjourning to the forest area of the Zapata Peninsula. We spent the morning hiking along wooded trails in one of the many reserves that make up part of the National Park. I think this was mostly second growth, but the trees were still impressively tall.

We started by walking a short distance to a blind set up to view Quail-doves, shy forest dwellers. First, we saw the Key West Quail-dove and a brief look at a Gray-fronted Quail-dove. However, the star of the show was the **Blue-headed Quail-dove**, a lovely and rare bird that came close enough for good photos. In fact, I'll bet that we have better

photos than the one prominently displayed in the dining room of our hotel, especially from some of the serious photographers in attendance. The bird displayed a territorial move, bowing and raising its tail in the air, several times, but it didn't seem to impress any of the other birds in the area.

After that, we wandered down one trail after another, collecting lifers as we went. The highlight of the morning, though, even better than the Blue-headed Quail-dove, was the tiny Bee Hummingbird, the smallest bird in the world. A male in full breeding plumage treated us to long looks as he perched on a wire near a corral. When the sun hit his gorget just right, it lit up into magnificent red or gold. Everyone wanted to see this bird, the smallest in the world. We had come to the corral to see Cuban Parakeets and just lucked into a fabulous look.

We ate lunch at a restaurant near a swimming spot in a sinkhole and had another presentation about the area at a tiny, nearly airless museum, before swinging past the hotel. There we disgorged the people who opted for a rest rather than a quest for the Stygian Owl and Greater Antillean Nightjar. Terry decided to work on his photos, but Linda, Jenny, and I joined the group of gung-ho birders. We were glad we did.

We didn't see the Stygian Owl, but no matter. The consolation prize was fabulous sightings of the Cuban Pigmy-owl, a pair of them, scolding us near their nest. We had seen the Bare-legged Owl, another Cuban specialty, earlier in the day as two left their nest hole when our guide scratched the tree. A double-owl day is always a good one.



The best was yet to come, however. Somehow, our guides managed to find the **Greater Antillean Nightjar** as it sat on a nest. The bird is a master of camouflage, blending perfectly with the leaf litter. Some people in the group couldn't find the bird until one of the guides put a laser pointer on its back. The bird was sleeping and didn't react at all. We took some great close up photos that we can use for a "Can you find the bird here?" show. [Jim's favorite bird of the trip.]

On our way back to the bus, Betty spotted a lizard in a tree. It was so big, I thought it was some species of iguana, but Hiram identified it as a large anole, *Anolis equistris*. We think the specific name reflects the brown saddle shape in the back.



That evening we finally had a first class meal at a small restaurant in a home near our hotel. These private restaurants are called *paladars*, which translates as *palaces*. Compared to the usual fare, it was palatial indeed. Normally, we have a choice between chicken, fish, beef, or pork. These are prepared in a pedestrian manner and served with some kind of soup, a salad of tomatoes and cucumbers, rice and potatoes. Tonight's meal by contrast started with a wonderful seafood chowder with interesting seasoning. Then we passed by a buffet table loaded with numerous salad choices together with entrees of crocodile, lobster, shrimp, and several kinds of fish. We ate on an outdoor patio blessed with breezes from the

nearby sea. I told my story of The Incident at Cooper Bay despite objections from the Cloudmans and Linda. Everyone else seemed to enjoy the performance.

It was easily the best meal, and the nicest evening, of the trip despite having to climb up — and down — a narrow spiral staircase to the second floor patio.

April 1, 2012: Another Day at the Zapata Peninsula. Daylight Savings Time begins in Cuba

Bird of the Day: Zapata Sparrow

We got up at the regular hour of 5:00, even though during the night we switched to Daylight Savings Time. Mysteriously, our phone rang once at exactly 2:00/3:00. I suspect that was due to a bug in the automated wakeup call system, which doesn't seem to work anyway. It rang again about 45 minutes later. In both cases, there was only a dial tone when I answered, and I managed to go back to sleep.

Naturally, a large part of the staff didn't get the memo about the time change, so we arrived for breakfast to find the dining room locked and dark. After a while some people trickled in and we got coffee and the standard fare of eggs with optional ham and cheese. Then we were off to the Zapata Swamp in search of some of the localized birds of the area. The Zapata Rail has acquired mythic status, and we didn't even attempt to find one. They are mostly heard when they are found, never seen.

We did get superb looks at the **Zapata Sparrow**, a rare endemic. A pair sang for us near their nest in full sunlight: A lovely, cooperative bird, much prettier than most sparrows.

The Zapata Wren was another story. Despite hearing its call repeatedly during the morning in response to a recording played by our guide, the closest we came to an actual view was reeds moving. The heat of the morning was enervating, and we were glad to get back to the hotel for the usual boring lunch. Hiram explained how he had saved the Zapata Wren from extinction by working to preserve some habitat for the bird. He heard the bird's call and recognized that it had to be the Wren as he knew all the other bird vocalizations in the area. We could tell that he was disappointed he was unable to coax one out of hiding. He certainly tried repeatedly.



Linda swam in the Bay of Pigs while I sipped coffee in the shade. Then after a siesta, we drove to another part of the swamp where we saw many wading birds, including American Flamingos, and the Cuban Black Hawk that was on the target bird list. Tomorrow we get to sleep the hour we lost this morning as the day will involve traveling, not birding.

April 2, 2012: Culture Day: Trinidad de Cuba, Sancti Spiritus: Presentation

Bird of the Day: *Anolis allisoni*

The plan for today entails travel to the town of Sancti Spiritus for yet another presentation by one of the local conservation people in the area. These presentations are part of the deal with the Treasury Department to get permission to visit Cuba. I would rather spend the time birding as the discussion often repeats themes we have heard already. Linda, however, appreciated the people-to-people aspect of the tour.

We slept in until 6:00 before packing and heading down to breakkie. Then we were off to Trinidad de Cuba, said to be the most beautiful colonial era town on the island. First, though, we stopped at a commercial center of Cienfeugos, where our bus received needed service, and we had a chance to change money. The latter was essential, as most of our crew had depleted their first batch of CUCs. The *cola* at the bank was *muy larga*, but appeared to be managed by the take-a-number system. Alas, the system worked better in theory than practice. I noticed several locals jumping ahead of the queue, chatting up the teller, and getting service. It took longer to change money than to service the bus, so when we returned to the assigned meeting spot, the driver was waiting for us.

Trinidad proved to be interesting. We ate lunch in a delightful colonial-era building with a lovely shady courtyard and dining room with high ceilings. The food was the standard fare we have become accustomed to, but well done for a change. Linda and I opted for shrimp rather than fish, which proved to be a good choice, though I would have cleaned them more thoroughly.

During a comfort stop, we had our first look at a beautiful Anole, *Anolis allisoni*, a lizard with an azure head extending onto the body, blending into green for the back half. Hiram told us that sometimes they are all green. They proved to be quite easy to photograph. He also told us that Cuba has the highest diversity of anoles in the world, which is easy to believe. We saw many different kinds during the trip, but none so striking as this one.



After lunch, we took a walking tour of the city that proved to be quite uncomfortable. Sticking to the shady side of the street was essential. Of course, the big attraction, the main plaza, was completely devoid of shade. The buildings around the plaza have been restored nicely, painted in something like the original colors. After a while, we stopped at *Bar La Canchanchara* to sample the traditional drink of the area, a blend of honey, lemon juice, water and rum. Refreshed, we returned to the bus and continued to *Sancti Spiritus*.

Before going to the hotel, we had a presentation by the head of the Alberto Nuñez Jimenez Foundation, an important conservation organization in the area. As our presenter droned on, talking directly to John as the translator rather than to the audience, several heads began to nod. It was cool and quiet in the planetarium where we met, a situation conducive to slumber. Finally, the talking ended. I asked a question about bats, which had been missing from the discussion despite the references to caves. That set off another round of talk, but one I found interesting. I later admitted that I asked the question because I was fairly certain bats hadn't come up, but I was far from sure, having dozed a bit myself.

We had tiny cups of coffee and visited the *baño*. Then, Linda asked about owls, which led to more discussion. I wandered around the museum and noticed a placard on a collection of stuffed birds. It identified the Royal Tern as *Gaviota Real*. That explained why the logo of our bus, provided by *Transgaviota*, looked something like a tern. With all the chit-chat, we arrived fairly late at our hotel and barely had time for a quick wash up and drink before dinner.

We were surprised and delighted to find dinner a cut above the standard. We had a buffet with a choice of salads, and either pork or fish (or both) to go with the rice and beans. A nice, spicy seafood soup was available as a first course, and a selection of cookies and cake for dessert. The hotel was obviously a top-notch place. It even had toilet seats, something we have come to regard as nonessential, since they are not usually available.

After dinner, Hiram, our local guide, discussed his work as President of the Cuban Zoological Society. He had prepared an outline of the items he wanted to cover, which delayed until the end the production of the *Red Book of Cuban Vertebrates*, something I found interesting. The book listed the status of the threatened and endangered species in Cuba, a category covering virtually all of the endemics and some migrants. He also showed us the book of Cuban *Lepidoptera* he had produced, a beautiful book, not intended for wide distribution, probably due to lack of funds. All the copies are allocated for libraries and research institutions. John Hannan accepted one on behalf of the National Audubon Society, so everyone was able to examine it on the bus the next day.

About 10:00 pm those of us who had stayed for the talk instead of watching the Kentucky-Kansas basketball final on TV staggered off to bed. Tomorrow, we get to sleep late: Breakfast at 7:00 followed by departure at 8:30.

April 3, 2012: On to Camaguey.

Birds of the Day: Eight different migrant Wood Warblers in one tree.

Breakfast proved to be as good as dinner, with made-to-order omelets and most of the cookies from last night to augment the standard toast and coffee. Jenny even got to have tea rather than coffee this morning. Then it was time to mount up for the drive to Camaguey, three hours away.

Slow vehicles, horse-drawn carts with rubber tires, not to mention bicycles, complicated travel. Our driver, René, had to slow down for each one before passing them and returning to his normal 80-100kph.

I amused myself during the drive by studying the billboards scattered sporadically along the route. Instead of advertising businesses or products as typical in the USA, they contain motivational slogans about the revolution. "The global movement begins with your family," one proclaimed, with a picture of Fidel. Curiously, there are far more images of Che than of Fidel, which I attribute to the virtue of early martyrdom. I am curious whether the most common image of Che's face, which adorns countless T-shirts, is in the public domain, or if some descendant is collecting royalties. I wonder if Cuba has the concept of royalties and copyright, as I have seen the same image on T-shirts for sale in the USA. [I asked our guide Alex about this and learned that for the most part copyrights are incompatible with *Socialismo*.]

We pulled into Camaguey, a quaint agricultural town of narrow streets, just in time for lunch. The setting was nice, and the band not as loud as usual. We have had live music with almost every meal. Most is pretty good, and we have invested in two CDs that we hope will not be seized by customs in the USA. Each band either offers to sell us the CD for 10CUCs or passes around a dish for tips. This time, we went the tip route.

The hotel was nearby, though requiring a virtuoso performance by our driver to negotiate the narrow streets and park in front of the century old Plaza Hotel. We had an hour to cool off before finally heading out for birding.

We drove over an hour to reach a *finca* formerly owned by a millionaire on the island. Now, it is a government cooperative. As far as the birding is concerned, this is a definite improvement. A small hotel was located on the property, but it didn't have enough rooms to accommodate a party our size, hence the long drive to get to the birding spot. Once there, we searched for the Palm Crow and Plain Pigeon. We saw the latter as it flew off, and heard a Palm Crow call amidst the myriad Cuban Crows in the area. We will try for better looks tomorrow.

We were surprised to see a Limpkin foraging in the area. This was an unexpected lifer for many in the group.

As we were walking out, we came upon a flock of warblers in a tree. Amazingly, we saw seven different species of warblers in that one tree. We added Palm Warbler (common at most sites we have visited) later for 8 total warbler species. For the record, here is the list:

1. Black-and-white Warbler
2. American Redstart
3. Northern Parula
4. Black-throated Blue Warbler
5. Palm Warbler
6. Yellow-throated Warbler
7. Prairie Warbler
8. Black-throated Green Warbler

It was quite late when we returned to the hotel. We rushed into dinner before they quit serving then retired for the evening. We found **Midnight in Paris** playing on the TV and watched the last 20 minutes or so before calling it a day.

April 4, 2012: Back to the Finca. Great restaurant for lunch and supper. Afternoon off.

Bird of the Day: Fernandina's Flicker



Today, we returned to the same *finca* as yesterday to try to improve our luck on the two target birds: Palm Crow and Plain Pigeon. We walked to a different area from yesterday in hopes that Grundlach's Hawk, a critically endangered, endemic accipiter might be seen. The hawk did not show up, but we did have excellent luck with the Palm Crows, getting several sights of the birds flying over calling their distinctive nasal caw. We had *many* of the more common Cuban Crows calling repeatedly in a variety of different vocalizations.

We finally had a look at a Plain Pigeon, which matches its name perfectly, sitting on a branch in a bare tree. Tick!

The flock of warblers we saw yesterday was absent, but we did have a few, including a wonderful close up view of a Black-throated Blue Warbler, a species that we seldom see as it is confined mostly to the east coast.

The best sighting of the morning, rating 5-stars, was of a pair of **Fernandina's Flickers** swapping places on a nest. Even I was able to get good photos of the male as he waited for the female to exit. I had to sneak up on the birds using a

hedge of Bougainvillea as a screen to get close enough, but the bird was very cooperative. Linda commented, "Only that bird can wear three different patterns of black and gold without looking ridiculous."

We returned to Camaguey for lunch at a private restaurant, not sure whether it is called a *Paladar*, a wonderful meal sitting on a patio screened from the sun by a pergola of vines. The food was superb, and when the group was asked if we'd like to return for supper, the vote was unanimous.

We had the afternoon free, giving me time to catch up on this report. Then we spent an hour in the bar talking about Audubon Society politics with John Hannan before walking the four blocks from our hotel back to the *paladar*. The evening meal, featuring fish and shrimp rather than chicken and pork, was even better than lunch, and the group was in a good mood as we made our way back to the century old Plaza Hotel for our last night in Camaguey.

The hotel features a tortuous stairway to get to the rooms on the second floor. This proved to be big obstacle the next morning taking the bags down to the bus. We were happy to surrender them to the bellhops who loaded them into a tiny, decrepit looking elevator and delivered them to the lobby while we took the stairs.

April 5, 2012: Drive to Caye Coco: Picking up specialties of the Caye

Bird of the Day: Oriente Warbler

The drive to Caye Coco on the north shore of the island was another trial by horse cart. Fortunately, Rene, our driver showed superb skill negotiating the obstacles.

We left the main road early and headed north on two-laners over some gentle hills leading into a large flat plane. This was devoted to agriculture on a big scale. Before the Revolution, a few landowners reaped huge profits from sugar cane production. Today, most of the farms are cooperatives run by *Brigadas*. We saw many signs extolling the virtues of the *brigadas* and proclaiming them the salvation of the *agricultura*.

We arrived at Caye Coco, an all-inclusive resort frequented by Europeans and South Americans, before they were ready to assign us to rooms. We were allowed to check in and receive the yellow bracelets that showed we were officially guests and eligible to eat and (especially) drink on the premises. We wandered around the grounds for a while, but gave up quickly and retreated to the shade of a beach-side restaurant. The food was better than the usual fare, but I characterized as “looking better than it tastes.” In general, the food away from the *paladars* is very bland and mostly serves only as caloric intake. I was disappointed, as Cuban food in the USA is highly regarded. I have to regard this as one of the tragedies of the Revolution and the accompanying embargo. State-owned hotels and restaurants, and the egalitarian ethic of the Revolution, as well as lack of some ingredients, probably all contributed.

After lunch, we set out in the heat of the day to find some of the special birds of the area. We began by locating the beautiful **Oriente Warbler**, a highly local species, within minutes. A territorial pair entertained us with repeated sightings, calling all the while. My photos, though, didn’t turn out well due to a combination of low light, fast bird, and several sticks to confuse the auto-focus. I’ll wait to see what the pros show up with.

Nearby, we saw the Caye Coco subspecies of the Zapata Sparrow. Then, we drove out along the causeway, padding the trip list with shorebirds, flamingos, and a great look at a Clapper Rail. Finally, we located the Bahama Mockingbird, not an endemic, but very local in Cuba. We returned to the hotel in time for a cleanup before a buffet dinner and bed. Tomorrow, we plan to beat the heat with an early breakfast and morning birding.

April 6, 2012: Birding Caye Guillermo: Gundlach’s Hawk!

Birds of the Day: Cuban Gnatcatcher and Gundlach’s Hawk

After a quick breakfast of coffee and sandwiches, we headed for the nearby Caye Guillermo in search of some missing special birds. Our luck held. Within minutes, we had located both the Thick-billed Vireo and **Cuban Gnatcatcher**. The first looks similar to a White-eyed Vireo we have back home, but with the announced thick bill (marginally larger) and black lores.



The Gnatcatcher is a cute relative of our Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. In fact, the females of the two species are virtually indistinguishable. The male Cuban Gnatcatcher has a black crescent, an auricular mark, behind the ear. Linda nominated it as the *second cutest bird of the trip*, bested only by



the Cuban Tody for the Grand Prize. We saw at least two and maybe three separate pairs in the area, all responded to pishing, something we always appreciate.

We had good looks at the endemic subspecies of our familiar Northern Flicker, yet another woodpecker peering out of a nest hole.

The best was still to come, though. Hiram spotted a hawk sitting out on a branch of a bare tree. “**Grundlach’s Hawk!**” he called excitedly. None of us had dared hope for a view of one of the rarest birds in Cuba, a notoriously hard one to *get*. We were able to put a scope on it so everyone had a great look. Only the distance prevented this from being Jim’s Bird of the Trip. It was much too far away for my camera. I’ve included a magnificent one from John Hannan.



With that, we headed back to the air conditioning. Linda snorkeled briefly from the beach, but reported that there wasn’t much to see. A dive boat takes scuba divers to a reef that is doubtless more productive, but we didn’t have time for that.

April 7, 2012: Drive to Camaguey for flight back to Miami

Birds of the Day: Linda’s list

So our trip came to an end. There is still much of the island left to explore, and should another trip open up with a longer itinerary, we may well consider a return. Most visitors to the Caye come for sun and fun, with no thought of the wildlife. An international airport in the area had flights twice a week from the UK nonstop, and the European presence in the hotel was obvious. One annoying oddity was the electrical outlets in the rooms. All took European-style 220v plugs, while most of the sockets we found took USA standard plugs. (The higher end hotels had both.) I was unable to recharge my laptop for two days, but fortunately, HPs ads proclaiming the longest battery life of any laptop are close to the truth.

I finally managed a full charge while waiting around in the airport at Camaguey for our late afternoon flight. We got back to Miami and returned to the Sheraton at the airport in time for a few drinks and conversation before a latish dinner and bed. We have an early flight back to SFO in the morning, Easter Sunday and one day before *our 46th anniversary*.

Overall, this was a fabulous trip, with 44 lifers for me and 43 for Linda. The Cuban Grassquit was an annoying *half bird*. All of our fellow travelers were pleasant and flexible, and John Hannan, the leader from National Audubon couldn’t have been more cheerful and enthusiastic, not to mention bilingual. Rob Norton, who assisted John and handled most of the tipping, had spent considerable time birding the West Indies, and was a great addition to the crew. Our Cuban contingent, Alex, Hiram, and Rene, as well as the local guides recruited separately for each location were helpful, friendly, and patient. We especially appreciated Hiram’s encyclopedic knowledge of the Zoology of Cuba.

Janet entertained us with her list of the “seldom seen birds of Cuba.” We especially liked the acronym for Birds at a Distance, known as BAAD birds. I was tempted to “borrow” her text for this report, but managed to restrain myself.

Over drinks in Miami, Linda presented her lengthy Bird of the Trip list. She had seldom been able to restrict herself to a single entry. Her “complete” list is below: (She warns that there were many more memorable birds.)

Category	Bird
Grand Prize	Cuban Tody
Fanciest Tail	Cuban Trogon, National Bird of Cuba
Second Cutest Bird	Cuban Gnatcatcher
Most Elegant Flyer	Royal Tern, Antillean Palm-swift (Tie)
Most Unexpected Birds	Gundlach’s Hawk, Merlin (Tie)
Best Warbler	Oriente Warbler
Best World Record Holder	Bee Hummingbird
Most Identifiable Call	West Indian Woodpecker
Cutest Nesting Bird	3-way tie: Fernandina Flicker, Cuban Emerald in the hotel lobby, with tail sticking out one edge and the beak the other, Male Northern Flicker (Cuban subspecies) with Fu-Manchu moustache
Best Hawk Up Close and Personal	Crested Caracara, with black tracing on the back of its neck
Best Camouflage	Greater Antillean Nightjar! Sleeping on the ground
Best Ground Bird	Blue-headed Quail-dove and Key West Quail-dove (tie)
Best Tall Pink Bird	American Flamingo
Best View of a Shorebird	Clapper Rail, squawked loudly all the time he walked along the shore
Best Florida Bird	Spot-breasted Oriole
Best Sound	Cuban Crow
Best Local Bird	Zapata Sparrow
Favorite “P” Bird	Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Parrot (tie)

Trip Participants

- Terry Cloudman
- Jenny Cloudman
- Genevieve “Gen” Fraiman
- Maury Guin
- Margaret Guin
- John Hannan
- Jim Hargrove
- Linda Hargrove
- Elliott Rusty Harold
- Patricia Keim-Strayer
- John Michel
- Joanne Naughton
- Rob Norton
- Betty Plum
- Rosemary Spreha
- Janet Starwood
- Carolyn L. Whittle