



Sunrise Birding LLC  
**CUBA BIRD  
 SURVEY**  
 April 2 - 12, 2017  
**TRIP REPORT**

Report by Gina Nichol. Photos by Gina Nichol & Steve Bird.



Photos: Bare-legged Owl, Cuban Trogon, Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Bee Hummingbird, Group with Orlando Garrido.



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Cuba is a tropical paradise and with 28 IBAs, more than 370 bird species recorded on the island, and 27 endemics and it also a birder's paradise. Its large land area and geographical position within the Caribbean also makes it a very important country for Neotropical migratory birds, both birds passing through on their way south (75 species) and those spending the winter on the island (86 species). Sunrise Birding's inaugural trip to Cuba was part of the Cuba Bird Survey program operated by the Caribbean Conservation Trust and was, by all accounts, a terrific success. It offered fantastic opportunities to see many of Cuba's endemic species and subspecies, as well as many Neotropical migrant species that move south to Cuba in the fall.

## ***Endemic species and subspecies seen on this tour included:***

Bare-legged Owl, Cuban Oriole, Bee Hummingbird, Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Gray-fronted Quail-Dove, Cuban Black Hawk, Cuban Blackbird, Cuban Bullfinch, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Cuban Grassquit, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Pewee, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Solitaire, Cuban Tody, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Vireo, Fernandina's Flicker, Giant Kingbird, Gundlach's Hawk, Eastern Meadowlark, Cuban Nightjar, Red-shouldered Blackbird, Tawny-shouldered Blackbird, Oriente Warbler, Yellow-headed Warbler, Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow, Cuban Crow, Palm Crow, Cuban Emerald, Bahama Mockingbird, Thick-billed Vireo, & Western Spindalis.



## ***Other interesting species seen included:***

Great Lizard-Cuckoo, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Loggerhead Kingbird, Olive-capped Warbler, Key West Quail-Dove, Zenaida Dove, Stygian Owl, West Indian Whistling Duck, American Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, a great variety of wading birds and numerous other migratory and resident species.

Gina Nichol and Steve Bird led this tour with a team of Cuban birders including Dr. Giraldo Alayon, Curator of the National Museum of Natural History of Cuba and local guides in the birding regions. Alberto, our fantastic local guide, handled all of the logistics and Arturo provided professional driving as well as bird spotting. Our group was fun and congenial adding to success of this trip and leaving us with many fond memories of this trip.



Photos: Red-legged Thrush, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Cuban Gnatcatcher.

## Top Sightings & Memories from Participants

Bee Hummingbird  
Cuban Tody  
Key West Quail-Dove  
Great Lizard Cuckoo  
Stygian Owl  
Fernandina's Flicker  
Cuban Trogon  
Cuban Grassquit  
Cuban Nightjar  
Cuban Solitaire  
Western Spindalis  
Blue-headed Quail-Dove  
Cuban Gnatcatcher  
Bare-legged Owl  
Cuban Parrot  
Oriente Warbler  
Giant Kingbird  
Thick-billed Vireo

- Afternoon with Orlando Garrido
- The Quail-Dove morning
- Cuban Black Hawk Flying over the harbor
- The bush full of Red-legged Honeycreepers
- Accommodation at Playa Larga
- The Flamingos and Black-Necked Stilts at the pond in Cayo Coco
- Good photos of 21 Endemics
- Being at the Bay of Pigs
- A fun, congenial group!

Fernandina's Flicker  
Photo by Steve Bird.



## Day 1 ~ Sunday April 2, 2017

By dinner tonight all had arrived in Miami, Florida. We met in the evening for a quick orientation and a lovely dinner at a local restaurant.

## Day 2 ~ April 3, 2017

This morning we flew from Miami to Havana, Cuba. Here we were greeted by our local guide Alberto and driver Arturo and we were off. Our first stop was a visit to the home and private ornithological collection of Orlando Garrido, Cuba's most prolific living naturalist and senior author of the *Field Guide To the Birds of Cuba*. Sr. Garrido is a retired and respected former Curator of Birds at the National Museum of Natural History in Havana. We enjoyed his stories and tips about what birds we should see and this was one of the highlights of the trip.



Later on, we checked into our hotel and did some birding in the garden. Highlights included a pair of Killdeer with two young chicks, our first views of the beautiful Red-legged Thrush and Cuban Emerald hummingbird.

## Day 3 ~ April 4, 2017

This morning we moved toward Cuba's Western Mountains stopping at Las Terrazas for our morning birding session in the Sierra de los Rosario Biosphere Reserve. Our first Cuban Trogon was a thrill and a bush full of Red-legged Honeycreepers entertained us for a while. Here we had our first Yellow-headed Warbler and witnessed a pair Cuban Green Woodpeckers copulating. Trina spotted a Cuban Pygmy Owl that sat on its perch over our heads for quite a while as we admired it.

We made our way back to Cafetal Buena Vista for lunch. This restored 19<sup>th</sup> century coffee plantation, with sweeping views of the mountains, plains and coast offered more views of the Trogon as well as a delicious meal and entertainment by local musicians.

After lunch we went to a local farm that had numerous **Cuban Grassquits** (Photo: Steve Bird) coming to feed with Yellow-faced Grassquits.

Views of these rare birds were as good as you could hope for and when we had our fill we walked further into the farm on found Shiny Cowbird and American Kestrel. Back out toward the road we had a Fernandina's Flicker on top of a dead palm and a couple of Cuban Orioles. We continued on toward San Diego de los Banos in the Sierra de los Organos range and checked into Hotel Mirador for the night.



Later in the afternoon, we went to Hacienda Cortina, a former lavish estate nearby. As we pulled up on the bus, we saw a Great Lizard Cuckoo on the ground preying on a Cuban Tree Frog. A walk up one of the paths yielded a nest of the endemic **Giant Kingbird** (Photo: Steve Bird) and nice views of Cuban Tody. Back at the hotel, we enjoyed a nice dinner and review of the birds seen on our first full day in Cuba.



#### **Day 4 ~ April 5, 2017**

After breakfast we boarded the bus and departed to the La Guira National Park. As we entered the park we had our first views of the karstic landscape of mogotes, the towering, lushly vegetated, flat-top limestone monoliths that dominate the Organos Mountains. As we arrived a Cuban Solitaire was singing and the song filled the valley below the cliffs. We scoped the bird but got much better views later. We walked a trail to Cueva de Portales, a cave carved by the San Diego River. The cave was Che Guevara's military headquarters during the missile crisis of 1962. Highlights here included great views of **Cuban Solitaire** (Photo: Steve Bird), Cuban Tody, Cuban Trogon, and Cave Swallows on nests in the cave. As we emerged from the cave, Cuban Pygmy Owl was well seen perched on some open branches. On the way out we stopped along the road for Olive-capped Warbler which we all saw very well.

We left the area and moved to the Zapata Peninsula, one of the largest wetland complexes in the West Indies and Cuba's most prolific birding region. A quick stop at a reservoir area offered Brown Pelicans and Caspian Tern.

We settled into our accommodation in Playa Larga on the historic Bay of Pigs. This would be our base for the next two days to explore the diverse wetland region of the Zapata Peninsula, a Ramsar Convention (international conservation treaty) designated site which covers more than 2800 square miles with easily accessible, everglades-like ecology and



habitat. Framed by the pristine Caribbean coastal environment of the Bay of Pigs, the varied habitats of the peninsula included vast open swamp land, low coastal forests, white sand beaches, and natural limestone pools called cenotes. We met to review our checklist on the deck overlooking the beach, enjoyed a lovely dinner and later in the evening, some took the opportunity to dance with the locals.

#### Day 5 ~ April 6, 2017

This morning we had an early breakfast with a plan for 6 AM departure for Zapata National Park and its environs. Our departure was delayed by not one but two Stygian Owls in the trees around our accommodation. We scoped one bird on a tree top and then boarded the bus to head toward a nature preserve adjacent to the small village of Bermejás. Local guides joined us and we made our first stop at dawn to an area where Quail-Doves were coming in to feed. The **Gray-fronted Quail-Dove** (Photo: Steve Bird) was already present when we arrived as were several Zenaida Doves. A Key West Quail-Dove appeared down the



track and eventually made its way toward us. We were about to leave and got called back for two Blue-headed Quail-Doves that had appeared right in front of the hide and proceeded to give a show for the next half hour.



Pleased with our Quail-Dove fiesta, we moved on to an area to look for Bee Hummingbird. A male was present but perched atop a tree in bad light made for poor views. Down the road we stopped at a private garden to see some **Cuban Parakeets** (Photo: Steve Bird) at close range and then walked a track to see a Bare-legged Owl in a nest hole. We made our way to Caleta Buena, a beautiful limestone rimmed inlet on the coast. Here we enjoyed a cold drink and photographed some Cave Swallows under the roof and a couple of Curly-tailed Lizards nearby. Here we had lunch and then headed back to our accommodation for some rest. In the afternoon, we walked a forest trail at Soplillar and found a roosting Cuban Nightjar and yet another Cuban Pygmy Owl.

#### Day 6 ~ April 7, 2017

After a very early breakfast we drove to the village of Santo Tomas to board boats into the swamp to a site for the endangered Zapata Wren. We arrived at the dock only to find another group had usurped our boats and we were left with two small vessels not quite large enough for our group. After much consternation about the lack of a third vessel, we had two choices – try to get to the Wren on the boats available or forget it. The adventurous group boarded the boats which were propelled by punters and headed up a narrow canal. One boat had a small leak which seemed to get worst with time and



since bailing out the water was not keeping up with the flood, we decided to abandon ship before it completely filled up with water. We quickly disembarked and walked a trail up to a dock. In the meantime the usurpers were heading back downstream and (would be pirate) Steve “convinced” them to give up their seaworthy vessel for the leaky one. We continued up the canal and reached a spot where we got out and in a few short steps we were looking at a **Zapata Wren**

(Photo: John Kricer). We watched the bird for a while and then headed back down the canal picking up Zapata Sparrow on the way. We had fortunately survived this adventure and had two good species to show for it.



We survived the Zapata Wren! Photo by Gina Nichol.

We had lunch at a restaurant in town and then headed to a local home to see if there were any Bee Hummingbirds in their back garden. The show was going on as we arrived with Bee Hummingbirds visiting a flowering tree along with Cuban Emeralds, Cuban Oriole, and Black-throated Blue Warblers feeding from a sugar feeder. The owner of the home was proud of her



birds and demonstrated how they come to hand held flowers. A little later a male Bee Hummingbird approached Frank as if to ask for a flower and Frank obliged making for a very special moment!

Later in the afternoon, we visited Las Salinas Wildlife Refuge and found Reddish Egrets, Flamingos and the endemic Cuban Black-Hawk. There were many Little Blue Herons, Western Willet, and a Clapper Rail that eventually came out of hiding. It was a spectacular day, filled with adventure and great memorable moments.

### Day 7~ April 8, 2017

Some of us were out early this morning to check for Antillean Nighthawk. The bird was heard calling but the sound got further away and we had to record this as a heard only bird. Our consolation was good views of Cuban Parrot in the early morning sun. After breakfast, we checked out and headed north west to Cayo Coco on Cuba's Atlantic shore. As we crossed the 18 kilometer causeway, our first American Flamingos were seen. We arrived and checked into our seaside hotel and then proceeded across the street to see several West Indian Whistling Ducks. We checked the beach and found lots of tourists with Royal Terns and Brown Pelicans flying above them.

Cayo Coco and Cuba's Atlantic Archipelago were previously uninhabited and relatively unexplored offshore islands until they were connected to the mainland by an 18+ mile causeway completed in 1989. This archipelago was the setting for Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream*. We looked forward to further exploration of the area and its special birds the next day.

### Day 8 ~ April 9, 2017

We had an early breakfast this morning as our local guide Paulino arrived. As the sun was



rising, we headed west toward Cayo Guillermo to look for birds in the mangrove flats, low coastal scrub, and white sand shoreline. Despite the strong northeast winds, our toughest target, the **Bahama Mockingbird** (Photo: Gina Nichol) was well seen by everyone after a bit of searching. We also had great views of Cuban Gnatcatcher, Cuban Bullfinch, and Yellow-throated, Prairie, Magnolia Warbler, Northern Parula as well as the usual Gray and Loggerhead Kingbirds.

We moved to another spot and looked at a lovely display of colorful water birds from close range. Highlights included American Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, West Indian Whistling Duck, Black-necked Stilt and an assortment of shorebirds including Red Knot, Short-billed Dowitcher, Western Willet, and Stilt Sandpiper.

Next stop was for Thick-billed Vireo which was easily seen despite its incredibly restricted range. Oriente Warbler was next and across the road we had great views of Cuban/Zapata Sparrow.

In the afternoon we traveled to Cayo Paredon Grande, the northeastern-most key in the Cayo Coco archipelago. We checked a beach area for shorebirds and found Piping Plover, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstones, Black-bellied Plovers, and Short-billed Dowitchers. Then we went to the very unique Jabali Disco where at least 30 **Key West Quail Doves** (Photo: Gina Nichol) coming to water and feed.



Here we had great views of Zenaida Dove, Morning Dove, White-winged Dove, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Cuban Bullfinch, Painted Bunting, Western Spindalis, Oriente Warbler, Cape May Warbler, and a bonus Painting Bunting. In the evening after dinner we walked out with Paulino and sound a Barn Owl not far from the hotel.

#### **Day 9 ~ April 10, 2017**

We had done so well with our targets yesterday that we had some time this morning to spend looking for Gundlach's Hawk in the vicinity of an old nest site. We heard the bird call at least two times from a distance but never got views of it. In the meantime, we kept ourselves entertained with Cuban Vireos and Oriente Warblers along the road. We moved on to a sewage pond where we had more views of Black-necked Stilt, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Little Grebe. Steve spotted a distant raptor and scope views revealed it to be a Gundlach's Hawk. Back to the hotel we checked out and had lunch and started the journey to Sancti Spiritus. Along the way, we stopped at a fish farm where there were Cormorants, Brown Pelicans, Snail Kite and a few Glossy Ibis (first spotted by Martha).

By late in the day, we arrived in Sancti Spiritus for accommodation and dinner. During happy hour a number of Neotropical warblers were seen from the open verandah of the hotel bar.

#### **Day 10 ~ April 11, 2017**

We met outside the rooms this morning at sunrise to check the grounds. A Limpkin flew by as the light was coming up. It was quiet otherwise until we found a Bottlebrush tree that was playing host to several Cape May Warblers and Yellow-faced Grassquits. Male and female Red-legged Honeycreepers added some color and a Cuban Pewee was seen. After breakfast we began our journey back to Havana. Just outside of the city, Martha spotted a Swallow-tailed Kite flying and this made for an exciting last bird sighting of the tour. At the hotel, we said goodbye to Giraldo and later on we met to finalize our list and recap the trip. We said goodbye to John and Martha and the rest of us stayed on for an extension tour of Havana, the Caribbean's most historic colonial city.





Photos: Watching Quail-Doves, Cuban Nightjar, Barn Owl, Great Lizard Cuckoo, Black-whiskered Vireo, Cuban Emerald.