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Seeing Cuba's endemic birds and other specialities

Christopher Sharpe

For reasons political and cultural as well as avifaunal, Cuba is as enticing a destination as the Caribbean (indeed, arguably the whole Neotropics) has to offer. Here a former Neotropical Birding editor offers insights into the best places to see its endemic birds and other specialities.

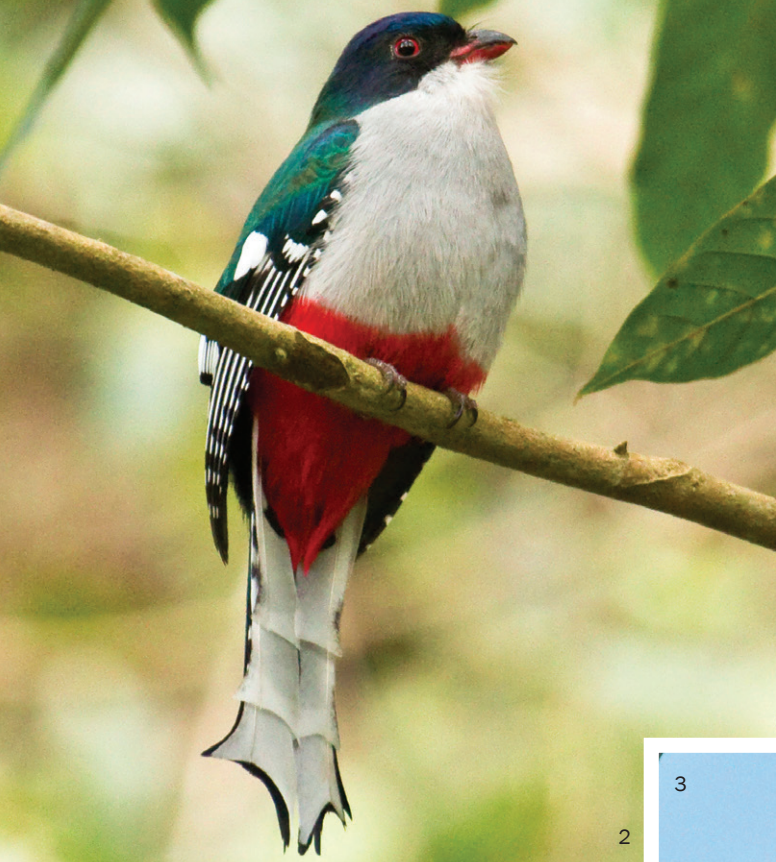
My first visits to Cuba were in 1995, to work with a team of Cuban scientists on the national Biodiversity Country Study. This was during the *período especial*, the 'Special Period' of adverse economic conditions triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Even though everything from toilet paper to fuel, and beef to coffee, had disappeared from daily life, and despite our conservation work being frustrated by

the US embargo on the country, I found Cubans remarkably hospitable, sharing their limited resources unselfishly and even finding a vehicle to take me birding. At that time, few foreign birders visited Cuba, the majority of them Canadians or Europeans. The embargo was a disincentive to US tourism, but some birders and ornithologists from that country nevertheless succeeded in visiting the island.



1 Cuban Grassquit *Tiaris canorus*, La Güira, Pinar del Río, Cuba, March 2008 (William Price; pbase.com/tereksandpiper).

>> BIRDING SITES CUBA'S ENDEMIC BIRDS



2



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2 Cuba's national bird, the common and widespread Cuban Trogon *Priotelus temnurus*, Parque Nacional La Güira, Pinar del Río, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com). **3** Cuban Green Woodpecker *Xiphidiopicus percussus*, La Turba, Zapata Peninsula, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com). This odd-looking woodpecker is a relict, the only member of a genus that appears to have split from *Melanerpes* several million years ago (after the divergence of the sapsuckers *Sphyrapicus*). **4** Cuban Tody *Todus multicolor*, Topes de Collantes, Sancti Spiritus, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com). The most colourful of the five species in this Caribbean endemic genus whose closest relations are some motmots.



3

Since then, and particularly since 2014, tourism has flourished as US-imposed restrictions have been relaxed, a welcome policy that culminated in the restoration of direct flights in 2016. Although there has been a reversal of political rhetoric of late, such easy international transport continues (at the time of writing...), and large numbers of US citizens visit freely.

Cuba is popular with general tourists and eco-travellers for a number of reasons. Culturally and politically it is unique. It has the most diverse environment of any Caribbean island and in the 1970s had the foresight to create an exceptional network of protected areas conserving representative ecosystems across the country. A complex of 211 conservation units (comprising various designations) protects more than 12% of the total land surface. Several of these are internationally recognised: six Ramsar sites, six UNESCO-MAB Biosphere Reserves and two UNESCO Natural World Heritage Sites.

Cuba's avifauna

More than 370 bird species have been recorded in Cuba, of which 290 occur regularly, and some 150 breed. The island's position at 20–23°N, oriented west–east across avian flyways, means that a large proportion of its species are migratory, mainly boreal migrants (c.150 species, two-thirds of which are primarily winter visitors, one-third being transients that winter further south). This means that visiting birders will encounter a much greater variety of birds during the Northern Hemisphere winter and spring, and this article is oriented towards a visit at this time. A dozen species are summer visitors, but if a visit is made in February, all but one of these can be seen.

Endemics and specialities

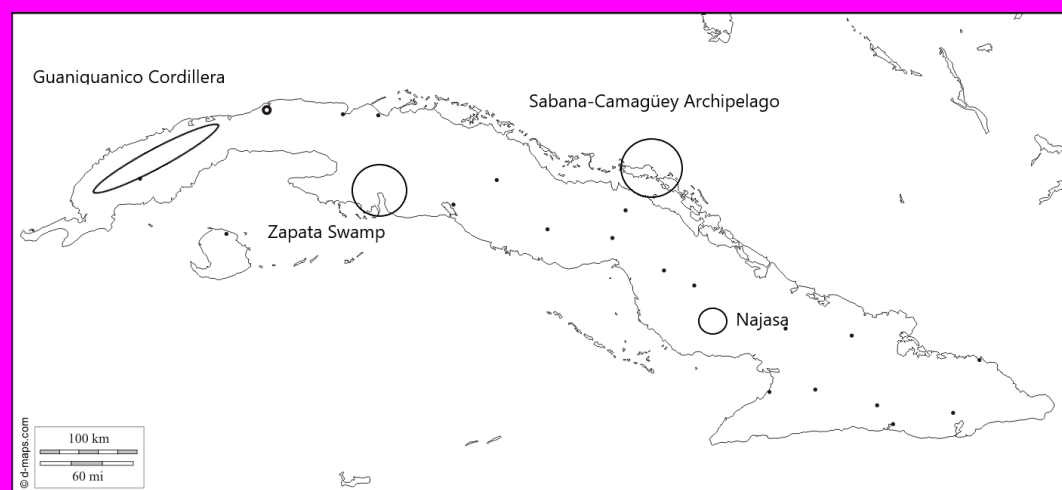
According to the taxonomy followed by Neotropical Bird Club (AOS 2017), 26 species are endemic to Cuba (although other taxonomies produce 27, 28 or more), and a further 25 species

found in Cuba are endemic to the West Indies (see Fig. 6). One species that would have been top of many birders' list, Cuban Macaw *Ara tricolor*, sadly became extinct 150 years ago, while 38 species are of global conservation concern: 18 threatened and 20 Near Threatened. Of these, neither Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis* nor Bachman's Warbler *Vermivora bachmanii* have been seen since at least the 1980s, and the latter is assessed as Possibly Extinct (BirdLife International 2017). Not seen since 2009, Cuban Kite *Chondrohierax (uncinatus) wilsonii* is considered a (Critically Endangered) species by BirdLife International (2017) but regarded as conspecific with Hook-billed Kite *C. uncinatus* by some authorities, including AOS (2017).

All extant endemics and other specialities can be seen in the western two-thirds of the country, without undertaking the arduous journey to what used to be called the *Oriente*. Even so, Zapata Rail *Cyanolimnas cerverai* (Critically Endangered) has been seen on fewer than a dozen occasions since it was first found in 1926, and its vocalisations remain unknown, so it is likewise not a bird to be expected by the casual visitor. Of the remaining species likely to be sought by visiting birders, all can be reasonably expected within a 9–10 day trip, with Gundlach's Hawk *Accipiter gundlachi* (Endangered) and Zapata Wren *Ferminia cerverai* (Endangered) being arguably the hardest to guarantee, though Red-shouldered Blackbird *Agelaius assimilis* can be stubborn too.

Birding sites

Here I suggest a number of established birding sites, located in four major regions that should,



>> BIRDING SITES CUBA'S ENDEMIC BIRDS

6 Nationally and regionally endemic birds of Cuba—and where to see them

Species (endemism; conservation status)	SC	ZS	GU	NJ	Key
West Indian Whistling Duck <i>Dendrocygna arborea</i> (R; VU)					1 Infrequently seen by bird tours at least, since it is present April–September, when tours tend not to run; wintering grounds unknown.
Plain Pigeon <i>Patagioenas inornata</i> (R; NT)					
Scaly-naped Pigeon <i>Patagioenas squamosa</i> (R)					2 Despite marked vocal differences between the endemic ‘Cuban Nightjar’ <i>A. (c.) cubanensis</i> and Hispaniolan Nightjar <i>A. (c.) ekmani</i> , AOS (2017) retains them within Greater Antillean Nightjar <i>Antrostomus cubanensis</i> . The voice of the Cuban Isle of Pines subspecies <i>A. c. insulaepinorum</i> is apparently unknown. Neotropical Bird Club follows AOS (2017) taxonomy.
Blue-headed Quail-Dove <i>Starnoenas cyanocephala</i> (E; EN)					
Grey-fronted Quail-Dove <i>Geotrygon caniceps</i> (E; VU)					3 Endemic Cuban Kite <i>C. (u.) wilsonii</i> treated as a subspecies of widespread Hook-billed Kite <i>C. uncinatus</i> by AOS (2017).
Key West Quail-Dove <i>Geotrygon chrysia</i> (R)					
Great Lizard Cuckoo <i>Coccyzus merlini</i> (R)					4 Treated as conspecific by AOS (2017), molecular data suggest that the endemic ‘Cuban’ Palm Crow <i>C. (p.) minutus</i> is a separate species from ‘Hispaniolan’ Palm Crow (Dickinson & Christidis 2014).
Antillean Nighthawk <i>Chordeiles gundlachi</i> ¹ (R)					
Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjar <i>Antrostomus (c.) cubanensis</i> ² (R)					5 Cuban breeding endemic, recorded as a vagrant in several other countries, Cuban Martin is thought to winter in South America. It arrives in Cuba at the end of January, leaving by the end of October.
Antillean Palm Swift <i>Tachornis phoenicobia</i> (R)					
Bee Hummingbird <i>Mellisuga helenae</i> (E; NT)					Endemism codes: E = endemic to Cuba; R = endemic to Caribbean region.
Cuban Emerald <i>Chlorostilbon ricardii</i> (R)					
Zapata Rail <i>Cyanolimnas cerverai</i> (E; CR)					Global status codes: NT = Near Threatened; VU = Vulnerable; EN = Endangered; CR = Critically Endangered; CR(PE) = Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct).
Hook-billed (Cuban) Kite <i>Chondrohierax (uncinatus) wilsonii</i> ³ (CR)					
Gundlach’s Hawk <i>Accipiter gundlachi</i> (E; EN)					Codes for frequency of observation: ■ = reliably observed on most visits; ■ = requires targeted effort or luck; ■ = historical or infrequently observed.
Cuban Black Hawk <i>Buteogallus gundlachii</i> (E; NT)					
Bare-legged Owl <i>Margarobyas lawrencii</i> (E)					
Cuban Pygmy Owl <i>Glaucidium siju</i> (E)					
Cuban Trogon <i>Priotelus temnurus</i> (E)					
Cuban Tody <i>Todus multicolor</i> (E)					
West Indian Woodpecker <i>Melanerpes superciliosus</i> (R)					
Cuban Green Woodpecker <i>Xiphidiopicus percussus</i> (E)					
Fernandina’s Flicker <i>Colaptes fernandinae</i> (E; VU)					
Cuban Parakeet <i>Psittacara euops</i> (E; VU)					
Cuban Parrot <i>Amazona leucocephala</i> (R; NT)					
Cuban Pewee <i>Contopus caribaeus</i> (R)					
La Sagra’s Flycatcher <i>Myiarchus sagrae</i> (R)					
Loggerhead Kingbird <i>Tyrannus caudifasciatus</i> (R)					
Giant Kingbird <i>Tyrannus cubensis</i> (E; EN)					
Thick-billed Vireo <i>Vireo crassirostris</i> (R)					
Cuban Vireo <i>Vireo gundlachii</i> (E)					
‘Cuban’ Palm Crow <i>Corvus (palmarum) minutus</i> ⁴ (R; NT)					
Cuban Crow <i>Corvus nasicus</i> (R)					
Cuban Martin <i>Progne cryptoleuca</i> ⁵ (E)					
Bahama Swallow <i>Tachycineta cyaneoviridis</i> (R; EN)					
Zapata Wren <i>Ferminia cerverai</i> (E; EN)					
Cuban Gnatcatcher <i>Poliophtila lembeyi</i> (E)					
Cuban Solitaire <i>Myadestes elisabeth</i> (E; NT)					
Red-legged Thrush <i>Turdus plumbeus</i> (R)					
Bahama Mockingbird <i>Mimus gundlachii</i> (R)					
Zapata Sparrow <i>Torreornis inexpectata</i> (E; EN)					
Western Spindalis <i>Spindalis zena</i> (R)					
Yellow-headed Warbler <i>Teretistris fernandinae</i> (E)					
Oriente Warbler <i>Teretistris fornsi</i> (E)					
Cuban Oriole <i>Icterus melanopsis</i> (E)					
Red-shouldered Blackbird <i>Agelaius assimilis</i> (E)					
Tawny-shouldered Blackbird <i>Agelaius humeralis</i> (R)					
Cuban Blackbird <i>Ptiloxena atroviolacea</i> (E)					
Greater Antillean Grackle <i>Quiscalus niger</i> (R)					
Olive-capped Warbler <i>Setophaga pityophila</i> (R)					
Cuban Grassquit <i>Tiaris canorus</i> (E)					
Cuban Bullfinch <i>Melopyrrha nigra</i> (R, NT)					

over the course of a 9–10 day trip, offer the chance for visiting birders to see all of the endemics and specialities currently ‘available’.

Sabana–Camagüey Archipelago

(1 full day)

With relatively inexpensive package tours, for many the opportunity to enjoy the birds of Cuba comes through a beach holiday. Varadero is Cuba’s best-known resort area, but beach-holidaying birders should prefer the **Sabana–Camagüey Archipelago**, which offers far better birding opportunities and the chance to see a handful of Cuban specialities. Although it stretches over 475 km along the north coast of Cuba and includes more than 2,500 islands, from the birder’s point of view the Sabana–Camagüey Archipelago comprises just four cays of note: Cayo Guillermo, Cayo Coco, Cayo Romano and Cayo Paredón Grande.

This area, known as **Jardines del Rey**, is a mosaic of sandy cays, mangrove forests, palmetto scrub, channels, and saltwater, brackish and even freshwater lagoons. It provides some wonderful coastal birding with impressive numbers of widespread waterbirds from American Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* to Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens* (Near Threatened) and a host of wintering duck and shorebirds. The white morph of Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*, known as ‘Great White Heron’, is frequent. The specialities of this region include two Cuban endemics – Cuban Gnatcatcher *Poliptila lembeyi* and Oriente Warbler *Teretistris fornsi* – and the west Caribbean endemic West Indian Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna arborea* (Vulnerable), Thick-billed Vireo *Vireo crassirostris* and Bahama Mockingbird *Mimus gundlachi*.

Visitors from the US are often surprised to learn that the widespread rumours of hostile Cuban immigration authorities, security problems for those who negotiate the way in, and difficulty re-entering the US from Cuba are quite simply fabricated – Cubans could not be more eager to show off their island to US tourists, they welcome individual visitors warmly, and it is hard to imagine a safer birding destination. Despite more than a century of ignominious history, Cubans often feel a special bond with the US through music, literature and baseball, and ties between family members who live on either side of the Florida Straits. None of the dozens of US citizens with whom I have travelled have ever experienced any kind of problem with US immigration authorities on re-entering the USA.

The attractively plumaged whistling duck is more widespread in Cuba, but most readily located on **Cayo Coco**, where flocks can be found at roost under hotel boardwalks and buildings. The attractive Oriente Warbler (not a ‘true’ warbler, but one of just two members of the Teretistridae, a family endemic to Cuba; the other species is Yellow-headed Warbler *Teretistris fernandinae*) is the easiest of the target birds to see and is fairly catholic in habitat. Thick-billed Vireo and Bahama Mockingbird retain only a toehold on Cuba, and are the most challenging. Both inhabit short palmetto scrub and, since the former (within Cuba) is known to breed only on Cayo Paredón Grande, this is the place to try for them. (Alternatively, the mockingbird shows well at the other end of the Jardines del Rey, on Cayo Guillermo.) Cuban Gnatcatcher is found in the same areas. For those not visiting Zapata Swamp, Cayo Coco and Cayo Romano provide

7 Prime habitat for Thick-billed Vireo *Vireo crassirostris*, Bahama Mockingbird *Mimus gundlachi* and other avian specialities of the cays at the lighthouse, Cayo Paredón Grande, Cuba, March 2016 (Christopher Sharpe/Rockjumper Birding Tours).





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8 Undeniably cute, the tail-twitching Cuban Gnatcatcher *Polioptila lembeyei*, Cayo Paredón Grande, Ciego de Ávila, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com).

an opportunity to see Zapata Sparrow *Torreornis inexpectata* (Endangered), specifically the richly coloured cays subspecies *varonai*.

The **Cueva del Jabalí** nightclub (22°32'41"N 78°24'20"W) is an unlikely sounding but rewarding spot on Cayo Coco, where bird baths and water drips attract hosts of migrant and resident birds, the latter including Key West Quail-Dove *Geotrygon chrysia*. Birders can easily while away a few hours here, especially in the heat of the day, and over 150 species have been recorded (eBird 2017). Some of the hotels on Cayo Guillermo and Cayo Coco have taken to feeding Cuban Black Hawks *Buteogallus gundlachi* (Near Threatened), thus improving photographic opportunities. The cays are a particularly good area for the elusive Mangrove Cuckoo *Coccyzus minor*: keep an ear out for its distinctive vocalisations.

Assuming that the visitor does not fly into the Jardines del Rey airport (which is not advisable due to frequent flight delays), the Sabana–Camagüey Archipelago must be reached by driving along the 34-km-long **Cayo Coco causeway**, half of which stretches over open water. It is worth taking this slowly and being prepared to stop on the ample margins, since several birds, such as Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* (sometimes by the hundred), (American) Herring Gull *Larus (argentatus) smithsonianus* and Sandwich (Cabot's) Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis acufavidus*, are more easily picked up here than anywhere else.



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9 Punting along the Gonzalo Cut at Santo Tomás in the Zapata Swamp, type locality of Zapata Rail *Cyanolimnas cerverai*, Cuba, February 2016 (Christopher Sharpe/Rockjumper Birding Tours).

Zapata Swamp (3–4 full days)

Located 150 km south-east of Havana and 5,000km² in area, Ciénaga de Zapata (Zapata Swamp) is home to the lion's share (four-fifths) of Cuba's endemics and offers some of the best birding on the island. Indeed, two species are Zapata Swamp endemics. Zapata Rail is not, for the moment at least, a realistic target for those who do not have several months to spend in the swamp. The chances of seeing Zapata Wren are much higher, but it can pose a challenge. The area also provides by far the best chance of seeing several other exciting species, notably Blue-headed Quail-Dove *Starnoenas cyanocephala* (Endangered), Grey-fronted Quail-Dove *Geotrygon caniceps* (Vulnerable), Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjar *Antrostomus (c.) cubanensis*, Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae* (Near Threatened), Bare-legged Owl *Margarobias lawrencii* and Red-shouldered Blackbird.

The entire region is a UNESCO–MAB Biosphere Reserve and Ramsar site, housing a cluster of nationally protected areas with the Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata at its core. The ideal base for exploring this area is the beach town of **Playa Larga**, at the north of the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs), which has a government-run cabin complex and plenty of private houses. From here there is access to a variety of birding sites within the wider Zapata Swamp, a heterogeneous conglomeration of productive birding localities that typically requires 3–4 days to explore. Principal among these are the two



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10 The little brown job that can make or break a Cuba trip: Zapata Wren *Ferminia cerverai*, La Turba, Zapata Peninsula, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com).

11 & 12 Zapata Sparrow *Torreornis inexpectata*, Zapata, Matanzas, Cuba, May 2013 (William Price; pbase.com/tereksandpiper).

13 Grey-fronted Quail-Dove *Geotrygon caniceps*, Zapata, Matanzas, April 2008 (William Price; pbase.com/tereksandpiper).

(main) entry points into the swamp proper – Santo Tomás and La Turba – but there are a host of peripheral sites such as Salinas de Brito, Soplillar and Bermejas.

Santo Tomás (22°24'23"N 81°26'43"W) is the type locality for Zapata Rail, Zapata Sparrow and Zapata Wren – and remains the best place to see the latter pair. It really is in the heart of the swamp, some 32 km westnorthwest of Playa Larga along a narrow unpaved track, which begins at a park-

entrance barrier (22°17'03"N 81°13'47"W). The town of Santo Tomás must be reached by dawn to permit an early-morning punt excursion north along the Santo Tomás cut (since birders must employ a guide in order to access the protected areas of Zapata Swamp, your guide will be able to arrange this). This gives the best chance of locating singing Zapata Wren and finding many other specialities. Over the past couple of years, local guides have created boardwalk viewing areas, which allow more comfortable views of the wren. The excursion itself can be enjoyed in its own right by those interested in experiencing the swamp.

After the boat trip, the semi-deciduous forests between the cut and the village can be very productive for endemics (Yellow-headed Warbler, Grey-fronted Quail-Dove and most of the widespread species) as well as boreal migrants. It is a particularly good spot for Worm-eating Warbler *Helminthos vermivorum* and Swainson's Warbler *Limothlypis swainsonii*, which are often on wintering territories in close proximity – search for vine-tangles with hanging dead leaves for the former, and deep leaf litter for the latter.



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Guides are particularly helpful in knowing stake-outs for several sought-after species. **14** Bare-legged Owl *Margarobyas lawrencii*, near Sopllillar, Matanzas, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com). **15** Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjar *Antrostomus (c.) cubanensis*, Sopllillar, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Christopher Sharpe/Rockjumper Birding Tours). Vocal differences between Cuban and Hispaniolan nightjars will almost certainly prove this to be a Cuban endemic. **16** Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae*, Zapata, Matanzas, Sopllillar, Cuba, April 2008 (William Price; pbase.com/tereksandpiper).

La Turba (22°26'24"N 81°10'32"W), located on the N edge of Zapata Swamp a few kilometres south of Jagüey Grande, allows easier access to the swamp. It is a good area for Zapata Wren and other specialities, but can be crowded with tour groups during peak birding season when large buses are driven in, which sometimes causes parking problems. The savanna areas are burned here, causing direct loss of habitat and, in the long term, affecting the prospects for seeing the half dozen pairs that currently nest here.

South of Playa Larga, within the Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata, the former commercial salt-pan development of **Salinas de Brito** offers some spectacular Caribbean coastal birding. Raised viewing platforms allow the enjoyment of flocks of American Flamingo and large numbers of herons, ducks and shorebirds. Clapper Rail *Rallus crepitans caribbeus* and

Yellow (also known as Golden or, confusingly, Mangrove, depending on taxonomy) Warbler *Setophaga petechia gundlachi* will be heard, if not seen. Cuban Black Hawk is one of the few Cuban speciality species of the wetland area, but that is not to diminish the experience: an afternoon birding here is unforgettable.

East of the Bay of Pigs, the town of **Sopllillar** (22°17'30"N 81°09'10"W) gives access to various tracks and trails east of the town that can be productively walked in search of birds of semi-deciduous forest and palm forests. Local guides are particularly advisable, since the trails are labyrinthine, and guides tend to know which hollow palm trunk harbours the most cooperative Bare-legged Owl, where the Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjars happen to be roosting, and where the Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae* (Vulnerable) pair is nesting. Stalking



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The world's smallest warm-blooded animal: Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae*. **17** Male, Pálpite, Zapata Peninsula, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com). **18** Male, Soplliar, Matanzas, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com).

19 Blue-headed Quail-Dove *Starnoenas cyanocephala*, Cueva de los Peces, Matanzas, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com). Remarkable recent research suggests that this species's nearest relatives are in Australia (see *Neotropical Birding* 20: 25)!

20 An exceptional daytime view of a Stygian Owl *Asio stygius*, Salinas de Brito, Zapata Peninsula, Matanzas, Cuba, July 2017 (David Southall/tropicalbirdphotos.com).

Grey-fronted Quail-Dove requires stealth and patience, as well as local knowledge.

Further east still, on the margins of Zapata Swamp, **Refugio de Fauna Bermejas** boasts a list

of 200 species. The western outskirts of the town of Bermejas provide reliable roosting sites for



21 Sierra de los Órganos in the Cordillera de Guaniguanico, Cuba, February 2016
(Chris Sharpe Rockjumper Birding Tours).

Cuban Parakeets *Psittacara euops* (Vulnerable), often in garden mango trees. A hide (blind) has been erected on the N side of the road (22°08'25"N 80°57'52"W) to provide improved views of doves. At first light here, with luck (and a judicious scattering of grain by local reserve wardens), one can observe all four species of quail-dove (the more widespread Ruddy *Geotrygon montana* being the least reliable) – more quail-doves than anywhere in the world – together with Zenaida Dove *Zenaida aurita*. Bee Hummingbirds are often to be found on flowers on the south side of the road leading to a house, the owner of which looks after the area and should be tipped. The best site for the species is a private house in Pálpite (22°19'34"N 81°11'01"W), where the owner (Señor Bernabé) likewise maintains a patch of vegetation and provides nectar and fruit feeders.

If Blue-headed Quail-Dove has proven elusive at any of the main birding areas, stop for refreshment at Cueva de los Peces roadside restaurant (22°10'00"N 81°08'15"W), where more than a dozen birds can be seen at a time thanks to feeding by staff. Finally, Stygian Owl *Asio stygius* is more readily seen in the suburbs and dry forests of this region than anywhere else I know. One easy place to look for it is right at the Hotel Playa

Larga, where it can often be found in large trees or near street lights in the early evening close to the main road.

Guaniguanico Cordillera (2 full days)

Cuban Solitaire *Myadestes elisabeth* (Near Threatened) and Olive-capped Warbler *Setophaga ptyophila* share a similar disjunct distribution in extreme west and east Cuba, although the latter is also found in the north Bahamas. In practical terms, the easiest place to encounter the birds is therefore in the Guaniguanico Cordillera, an hour or so west of Havana. The 160-km-long mountain chain runs roughly east–west through the provinces of Pinar del Río and Artemisa. It is split neatly in two – Sierra del Rosario in the east, and Sierra de los Órganos in the west – by the Río San Diego, on which the town of **San Diego de los Baños** (*baños* referring to hot springs) provides the closest base to Havana from which to see the speciality birds. The warbler is associated with Caribbean Pine *Pinus caribaea* stands, which are found at several well-known birding sites, while the solitaire prefers more humid broadleaved or mixed forests.

Parque La Güira (Hacienda Cortina by its pre-revolution name), a few kilometres west of San



22 Regulated harvesting of palm fruits for fodder at Área Protegida de Recursos Manejados Sierra del Chorrillo, Cuba – the haunt of Palm Crow *Corvus palmarum*, Plain Pigeon *Patagioenas inornata*, Cuban Parakeet *Psittacara euops* and Giant Kingbird *Tyrannus cubensis*. February 2016 (Christopher Sharpe/Rockjumper Birding Tours).

Diego within, is a nice place to spend an afternoon. Olive-capped Warbler can be found in the pines here (22°37'57"N 83°24'25"W), and Giant Kingbird *Tyrannus cubensis* (Endangered) can occasionally be found. Moreover, the property is home to a host of the more widespread Cuban endemics and plenty of boreal migrants amongst more than 150 species recorded.

Cuban Solitaire is most readily found at **Cueva de los Portales** (22°40'09"N 83°28'45"W), a national monument (commemorating the time that Ernest 'Che' Guevara lived in the cave during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis) half an hour westnorthwest of San Diego (driving through the entrance arch at 22°37'47"N 83°24'21"W). The area is best birded at dawn, when rival solitaires can be heard singing between the car park and the cave entrance.

On the drive to or from Havana, make time to visit Las Terrazas recreation area, within the **Reserva de Biosfera Sierra del Rosario**. This area was denuded of forest during the mid-20th century then replanted in 1968 with over 6 million trees; the name Las Terrazas refers to the 1,360 km of terraces constructed to facilitate the operation. The result is good habitat for Olive-capped Warbler and several other endemics. Fernandina's

23 Arguably the least dependable of the Cuban endemics: Gundlach's Hawk *Accipiter gundlachi* at the established stake-out, Sierra del Chorrillo, Najasa, Camagüey, Cuba, February 2016 (Dušan Brinkhuizen/Rockjumper Birding Tours & sapayoa.com).

Flicker and Gundlach's Hawk can be seen here, but the small farms within the reserve are best known as sites for the striking Cuban Grassquit *Tiaris canorus*.

One more obligatory stop on the road to Havana is **Niña Bonita reservoir**. A café and bathroom on the east shore make a good viewpoint for scanning the water for unusual ducks, terns and gulls, some of which will not be seen anywhere else. Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* is regular, Redhead *Aythya americana*, Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and Forster's Tern *S. forsteri* have occurred, and American Wigeon *Anas americana*, Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca* and Canvasback *Aythya valisineria* have been claimed.

Najasa (1 full day)

The main reason for visiting Najasa, some 600 km east of Havana, is to put the observer within the range of 'Cuban' Palm Crow *Corvus (palmarum) minutus* (Near Threatened), which is now largely restricted to Camagüey province. This is also a

TIPS FOR BIRDING CUBA

Cuba is an easy country for visitors. There are no venomous reptiles, very few biting insects, next-to-no personal-security issues, very little traffic – and Cuban people are sympathetic and helpful to the visitor. With all these advantages, it sounds like an ideal place for independent birders – and so it is. Nevertheless, for many reasons one should be prepared to work with a local guide in each region. The main reason is that local guides are highly trained (typically biologists actively involved in conservation projects) and usually know their home patch birds exhaustively – not just their visual characteristics, but their songs and calls, their habits and particularly where they are at that particular moment.

Perhaps more importantly, many of the sensitive protected areas *must* be accessed with a guide to ensure that the established protocols are followed; this applies especially to the complex of protected areas covering Zapata Swamp and to the cays. Finally, guide fees are an important source of income to the guides themselves, communities and a growing ecotourism industry. So see your local guides as friends and allies in both birding and conservation; a reputable guide is well worth the investment and will not disappoint. Since guides are virtually a requisite for visiting all these areas, little information is given by way of directions on how to reach birding sites on the assumption that your guide will get you there.

WHEN TO GO

Having hooked up with a guide for at least part of your trip, the second question is when to go. For those who wish to see wintering birds (and avoid hurricanes!), the answer must be during the Northern Hemisphere winter. However, Cuban Martins *Progne cryptoleuca* are not reliably seen until February, which is the reason that most trips are scheduled during February–April. Note, however, that Antillean Nighthawk *Chordeiles gundlachi* only arrives in any strength during the latter month when many boreal migrants have departed.

WHAT TO READ

Once the decision to visit Cuba has been taken, one must decide on a field guide. The classic is the *Field guide to the birds of Cuba* (Garrido & Kirkconnell 2000), which combines good text and maps with somewhat antiquated illustrations. Better plates can be found in two field guides to the birds of the West Indies (Raffaele *et al.* 2003 and Arlott 2010), and many birders carry just one of these. A North America field guide will come in handy for those unfamiliar with this avifauna or species' winter plumages. A forthcoming annotated checklist to the birds of Cuba (Kirkconnell *et al.* in prep.) will become a vital resource, providing exhaustive, up-to-date distributional and breeding data, together with insightful taxonomic notes.

stronghold of Plain Pigeon *Patagioenas inornata*, which has been eliminated (by hunting) from much of its former range and is now rarely seen elsewhere on popular birding circuits. It is also a reliable area for Giant Kingbird and Cuban Parakeet. Notwithstanding these specialities, it is a more widespread species that has put Najasa on the map in recent years: Gundlach's Hawk. This close relative, or perhaps subspecies, of Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* is declining and persecuted as a predator of domestic birds to the point at which it is far from guaranteed on a typical birding trip.

The area that birders tend to visit is the Área Protegida de Recursos Manejados Sierra del Chorrillo a few km southeast of Najasa. Indeed, there is an official bird walk (Sendero Interpretativo de las Aves, beginning at 21°00'50"N 77°43'38"W), which gives opportunities for seeing all target species. Focus your time on checking stands of Royal Palms *Roystonea regia* as these are favoured by Palm Crows, which can usually be seen alongside superficially similar Cuban Crows *Corvus nasiscus*. (The two species are readily separated by call, the Cuban name of *cau ronco* ['hoarse crow'] aptly describing Palm Crow's cawing, while Cuban Crow has a complex repertoire reminiscent of a parrot or even human speech.)

Cuban Parakeet nests in the palms here too. Giant Kingbird can be located by its characteristic call, or by scanning the Kapok *Ceiba pentandra* trees with which it invariably associates. A nest-monitoring programme for Gundlach's Hawk has led to the location of a number of nests, which, in turn, has put this area on the map as perhaps the place to get to grips with the bird. It is typically sought by spending an hour or two at a viewpoint mid-morning; however, this site is far from dependable, and the bird can absent itself for months on end. Finally, nearby **Arroyo Hondo Cemetery** (21°00'16"N 77°44'38"W) is an alternative place for Palm Crow and Giant Kingbird.

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