

Birding Abroad – Cuba endemics tour

14 to 26 January 2025

With the prospect of escaping the cold of a UK winter, our Birding Abroad group was excited to return to Cuba, the largest of the Caribbean islands. Our tour had been especially designed to seek out the majority of the island's 26 endemic bird species, and in addition, enjoy an equal number of regional specialties and with the added bonus of abundant over-wintering North American wood-warblers and waders. Our itinerary also ensured that we could also absorb some of the wonderful history and culture of the island which would accompany our main focus on the island's birdlife.

The group comprised Pauline Blair, Bob Brittain, David Clugston, Mark Cook, Sue Cook, Richard Evans, Rose-Ann Movsovic, Nev Nicholson, Gill Reid and Peter Wilkinson, with Lance and Nick as the Birding Abroad Leaders. We were accompanied throughout by a principal local tour guide, Mario and our driver Luis. Below we summarize the highlights of the tour with Cuban endemic birds shown in bold type upon their first sighting within the tour.

Tuesday 14 January: Rose-Ann and Bob had flown out to Cuba a few days beforehand to explore historic Old Havana, whilst the rest of the group met at Gatwick airport for the 10.00am Air Europa flight to Madrid, where we had time for lunch before an onward flight to Havana, arriving on-time at 7:50pm. Unfortunately, there followed an hour's delay going through Cuban immigration as Nick had to explain why he had brought a pair of very basic 'walky-talkies' in his luggage (to help coordinate group sightings in the field), but eventually we were allowed on our way complete with the radios. Our main guide for the tour, Mario, greeted us warmly and introduced us to our driver Luis, and we finally set off to a hotel in downtown Havana. It was 10:30pm by the time we checked-in, so the hotel provided a snack meal before we retired to bed after a long travelling day.

Wednesday 15 January: Breakfast was taken on the hotel roof terrace overlooking an impressive Havana skyline, albeit with somewhat cloudier and cooler than we had anticipated. The local Turkey Vultures were beginning to soar around, a sight that was to become an almost constant throughout the tour. By 8:15am with the coach suitably loaded we headed through the suburbs of Havana noting the distinctive shapes of several Mourning Doves at the roadside and a flyover Magnificent Frigatebird along the sea front. Gardens held our first **Cuban Blackbirds** as we continued westwards into the rural Cuban countryside. American Kestrels of both the local island colour morphs, white and reddish, were noted sitting on telegraph wires and poles.

Our first stop an hour or so later was at a small finca where we enjoyed an excellent woodpecker 'fest', with close views of up to four **Fernandina's Flickers** and two **Cuban Green Woodpeckers** as well as four West Indian Woodpeckers and one Yellow-shafted Flicker. An arable field held three Eastern Meadowlarks, the Cuban sub-species being a potential split from its North American relatives. Field margins were patrolled by at least ten Smooth-billed Ani and several Northern Mockingbirds, with both these species being noted regularly henceforth during the tour. Taking a gentle stroll around the finca gardens, our guide quickly located a **Cuban Pygmy-owl**, with a second owl found nearby. New birds came swiftly at this

early stage of the tour, with two Cuban Emeralds hovering at flower bedecked bushes, a flycatching **Cuban Pewee**, three **Cuban Bullfinch** and a few Western Red-legged Thrushes, the latter being real stunners and a firm favourite amongst many in the group. A search of weedy field margins in an overgrown garden yielded four **Cuban Grassquits** and a single Yellow-faced Grassquit. Small parties of Antillean Palm-swifts raced over the treetops, and there was a colourful array of over-wintering American wood-warblers on show, including two American Redstart, Cape May Warbler, Northern Parula and a handful of Palm Warblers.

Our lunch stop was nearby at Las Terrazas, where a walk near a small lake produced plenty of birds. Amongst the floating vegetation we picked out several Purple Gallinules, as well as a Common Gallinule and a few American Coot. A very obliging Limpkin sat out on the bank whilst two Louisiana Waterthrushes stalked a small weir at the lake overflow, giving great views and allowing the whole group to discern their distinguishing features. Amongst the bushes we found 15 Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds, three Zenaida Dove and our first **Cuban Trogon** of the tour; a very exotic endemic and a true 'wow' bird. Lunch was taken in the restaurant to the accompaniment of a local band.



A short way further west we stopped twice in short succession at a series of roadside fishponds. Here amongst a mixture of paddy-like pools and larger lakes, we encountered our first wildfowl of the trip; two female Ring-necked Duck accompanied by a male Lesser Scaup, as well as a Least Grebe and three Pied-billed Grebe. The waters proved to be an attractive food source for various bird families, allowing us to get our 'eye-in' early during the tour.

Here we watched 15 Snowy Egret, five Great White Egret, three Green-backed Heron, two Little Blue Heron, and a single Tricolored Heron. Pelicans too were exploiting the lakes with ten Brown and a nice flock of 17 American White circling overhead, whilst a couple of diving Neotropical Cormorant were very instructive. Four Caspian Terns flew by, and a Belted Kingfisher watched for fish from a perch with at least four Ospreys doing much the same from up on high. No less than six superb Snail Kites patrolled the area, and closer inspection revealed their strongly curved bills which are very fine towards the tip, an adaptation to assist in prising out large freshwater snails from their shells. A Red-tailed Hawk surveyed the surrounding farmland no doubt for quite different prey. Our first waders of the tour were perhaps unsurprising; four Killdeer and five Spotted Sandpipers, though a Cuban Martin was a definite surprise, an early returning bird most probably.

Late afternoon we continued west to Vinales, where we checked into very welcoming casa particular (homestay-style) accommodation. The weather had cleared through the day, and it was now lovely and warm as we relaxed in the early evening.

Thursday 16 January: Breakfast was at 6:30am and an hour later we were away into the heart of the scenic Vinales Valley, dominated by huge karst formations that resemble gigantic sugar loaves. For our first stop of the day, local guide Nils took us to the lush gardens at Rancho San Vicente where amongst attractive landscapes we scanned for Scaly-naped Pigeon. This proved more difficult than anticipated, and we had to be patient, though we began picking out other species in the meantime including a nice **Cuban Oriole**, both Cuban Green and West Indian Woodpeckers as well as an overwintering Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. A fine Yellow-throated Warbler fed in the sunny canopy of a palm tree accompanied by Northern Parula, Black-throated Blue-warbler and American Redstart. Resident species were showing well too including another Cuban Trogon, Cuban Pewee, Loggerhead Kingbird and several Red-legged Honeycreepers.

We moved a short distance to another picturesque valley where we took a track along the base of steeper wooded slopes and cliffs. Here we finally connected with Scaly-naped Pigeon, with at least five birds being seen both perched and in flight. As the sun climbed, its strong rays glanced the wooded ridge, nicely warming the morning air, and suddenly a **Cuban Solitaire** began singing; firstly just the one, then two and maybe three birds joining the chorus. It was several minutes before we were able to actually locate and observe one and then a second, as they sat motionless for periods before flitting momentarily in the dense cliff-side vegetation. A rather plain brown bird, with a distinctive downward pointing tail, the species is sometimes referred to as the 'Cuban Nightingale', its song being its best feature. A fine Cuban Lizard-cuckoo showed well, another super looking Caribbean specialty. A couple of La Sagra's Flycatchers were noted, and we enjoyed close views of American Kestrel and Green-backed Heron.

Moving on, we strolled along another hillside path with mixed deciduous woodland interspersed with scattered pines. Here we enjoyed great views of at least five Olive-capped Warblers, an endangered specialty found only on Cuba and the Bahamas. Another main quest was to find **Yellow-headed Warbler**, one of an endemic species pair (the other being Oriente Warbler) which until recently had been thought to be members of the New World wood-warblers. More recent DNA studies place them closer to the Wrenthrush of Central America – such is the pace of taxonomic progress these days! We managed to see three of these quite lovely birds feeding low down with other warblers including a Black-throated Green Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, three Northern Parula, four Palm Warblers and a few Red-legged Honeycreepers. Another splendid endemic in the form of **Cuban Vireo** was found along the path along with a pair of Western Spindalis, another ‘bobby-dazzler’ of a species, whilst another Yellow-bellied Sapsucker appeared on a thin dead trunk which was encircled with the drilled holes created by this species to encourage a seepage of sap to attract insects.

We returned to our accommodation for lunch, which included some very tasty lobster. After a brief rest we set off at 3:30pm to visit a nearby tobacco farm where the staff showed us the production process, from the plants growing in the fields to the harvesting, drying and then rolling of the cigars. A few cigars were bought as souvenirs and gifts for back home. We were informed that production has declined across the island in recent years for a variety of reasons, political and economic, a similar fate apparently also happening with sugar cane production. A nice tot or two of local rum was provided by the farmer’s family as we listened to their stories.



The warm late afternoon was ideal for us to visit the Mirador de Los Jazmines, a splendid look-out providing views for many miles over the beautiful Vinales Valley. Here too we had a cocktail or two from the terrace bar, Mojitos, Cuba Libre, Pina Colada, a pleasant end to a great day's birding.

Friday 17 January: Breakfast was again at 6:30am after which we packed and checked out, setting off one hour later for what would be mainly a travelling day to Playa Larga on the south coast. However, just a few miles up the road the coach broke down and we had an enforced stop of three hours whilst various solutions were worked through to get us back on the road. Finally, a new bus arrived. We used the waiting time productively and a roadside path into some scrub produced excellent birding. Here Nev found our first **Cuban Tody** of the trip, initially heard uttering its rather staccato and pulsing call, it finally perched out in the open. A second bird was located further along the road. For such a brightly coloured gem, Tody's can sometimes be difficult to see, and as ever patience pays off.



At least ten Common Ground-doves fed delicately and rather nervously along the path, whilst the bushes held several each of Cuban Emerald, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Cuban Pewee, Cuban Vireo, Yellow-headed Warbler, Olive-capped Warbler, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Cuban Bullfinch, both Cuban and Yellow-faced Grassquit and Grey Catbird.

Initially we retraced our route back towards Havana, stopping for a comfort break at the Fernadina's Flicker site again, where a pair was noted once again along with a selection of Northern Parula and Palm Warblers which were becoming regular at virtually every place we lifted our bins! A packed lunch had been provided, which we ate en-route whilst also conducting a sample count of Turkey Vultures every few miles to establish a day count. With extrapolation, this totaled 4,000, a surprise to some, but just showing how easy it is to underestimate birds. One wonders what so many birds find to scavenge. We arrived at Playa

Larga at 5:00pm and settled into a very pleasant family-run casa, nicely positioned to explore the Cienaga de Zapata National Park. This is the Caribbean's premier birding region with a variety of habitats from swamp to open dry forest, from seashore to moist tropical forest. **Saturday 18 January:** Today involved an earlier start with breakfast at 5:45am, before we set off towards the village of Bermajas, nearly one-hour southwards. Once there, we were taken into woodland by local guide Orlando to a viewing screen and feeding station where we enjoyed point-blank views of seven **Blue-headed Quail-doves** together with a single **Grey-fronted Quail-dove**. These birds are really quite stunning, and their confiding behaviour made the experience thoroughly enjoyable. A couple of Zenaida Dove fed quietly further down the trail, as did a nice Ovenbird.



It was warming quickly today, and the roadside vegetation produced another Fernandina's Flicker and a **Bee Hummingbird** briefly for some of the group, plus a selection of American wood-warblers including Black-and-white Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, Cape May Warbler, Northern Parula, Magnolia Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Palm Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler and Prairie Warbler. Our attention was only diverted away from these great birds when a flock of 30 noisy **Cuban Parakeet** flew in and began feeding amongst the palms. Some even sat out on wires in the full sun - a fabulous sight. At the same time a pair of Cuban Parrots (Rose-throated Parrot) flew over, another exotic but localized Caribbean specialty.

Back along the road, we explored an open area of cattail marsh, the habitat of another target endemic, **Red-shouldered Blackbird**. Clearly a close relative of the Red-winged Blackbird of North America, our guide located a small group of 13 of these birds which allowed nice views, enabling us to see the key distinguishing features.

Further along the road, a large area of agricultural fields with patches of flooded water proved attractive to four Lesser and six Greater Yellowlegs, enabling nice comparisons to be made between the two species. A ring-tail Northern Harrier plied the fields, ghosting up and down, another vagrant to Europe, and so useful for practicing key identification points. A more distant Crested Caracara flew over and several American Kestrels worked the fields where a single Eastern Meadowlark was noted. An accipiter circled but all too briefly, though our impression was of a medium sized bird – larger and more deliberate and graceful in flight than a Sharp-shinned Hawk and with a more rounded tail edge - one that got away as they say!

We made our way back to our casa for lunch, pausing at the coastal village of Playa Giron, which was the actual site of the failed April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion led by USA-backed militia aiming to topple Castro's revolution. Tanks and artillery remain on display and the roads were marked with ornate memorials to members of the Cuban Armed Forces killed whilst defending their homeland. Our guide Mario provided an informative discourse on the event and its context in Cuban and world history.

Lunch was taken on the sunny casa terrace, accompanied by three fly-past Magnificent Frigatebirds over the nearby shoreline and Royal Tern. A Yellow-throated Warbler searched for insects along the roof guttering and a Palm Warbler sat preening in the shade of a lamppost, its favourite spot it seemingly during the hottest part of the day.

Being up so early we had a post lunch rest and resumed at 4:00pm, driving to the nearby village of Sopillar, where we enjoyed a pleasant walk into the surrounding countryside with woods and mainly fallow fields. A Wood Stork flew over and a couple of Cuban Crow called and showed well as we became ever more familiar with the regular wintering American wood-warblers, as well as Western Red-legged Thrush, the regular woodpeckers and another two Cuban Parrots. At least four Cuban Pygmy-owls were spotted and as the sun began setting, we waited patiently for **Cuban Nightjar** which our guide predicted would emerge very soon. Right on cue, a nightjar began calling and then it or another flew in to settle on the path in front of us, its bright eyes gleaming in the light of the guide's torch. Just into the woods, our guide found a pair of **Bare-legged Owl**, which had also begun to call, and once again we could pick out the key features of this island endemic, noticeably different from members of the screech-owl family in which it had been placed taxonomically until recently.

It had been another great day, and we returned to our accommodation for a fine evening meal on the terrace.

Sunday 19 January: We were up early once again with a 5:30am breakfast and away an hour later, this time taking a rough track which led deep into the heart of the vast Zapata swamp, where we parked and embarked on a short walk to a spot where our guide signaled to us to remain still and quiet. A distinctive song was heard either side of the trail amongst the impenetrable swamp and soon a **Zapata Wren** emerged from the tangles of the mangrove thickets and began feeding on the ground at our very feet! Amazingly close views were enjoyed of this large, densely barred endemic wren, the sole member of its monotypical genus *Ferminia* which was only described for science as late as 1926! The species is confined entirely to the Zapata Peninsula. With one seen very well and two others singing on territory we had

done really well. Here too we located at least six **Zapata Sparrows**, this endemic having three subspecies on Cuba, with the Zapata birds being the nominate race *inexpectana*. A couple each of Cuban Tody, Cuban Vireo, Cuban Pewee and Yellow-headed Warbler were by now becoming familiar complimentary species. Two Northern Waterthrushes skulked in the shady tangled roots and a couple of Blue-grey Gnatcatchers flitted through the bushes, both species being new for the trip.



We returned for lunch followed by a rest in the heat of the day, before resuming at 3:00pm when we set off for a visit to the coastal salinas to the south-west of Playa Larga. A dirt track led us deep into the salinas where we stopped intermittently to scan the pools on each side. It was raptor interest which grabbed our attention first, with a close **Cuban Black Hawk** sitting inconspicuously in dense mangrove cover. A further two of these splendid birds were observed later in flight, revealing white patches at their primary bases and black and white banded tail. Wildfowl in the form of dabbling duck were plentiful, with over 1000 Blue-winged Teal, 750 American Wigeon and 50 Northern Shoveler as well as 200 American Coot, all being common winter visitors here. Four Northern Pintail were scarcer visitors whilst the same number of Hooded Mergansers were in fact rarities. The waters shimmered pink from the reflections of 250 American Flamingo and with careful scanning two Roseate Spoonbill were also located. Three Wood Stork flew over and 25 White Ibis sifted through the brackish waters. There was a good assortment of herons including 14 Great White Egret, nine Great Blue Heron, six Little Blue Heron, four each of Reddish Egret and Tricolored Heron, three Green-backed Heron and two each of Black-crowned Night-heron and Snowy Egret. A flock of 25 American White Pelican and 70 Neotropical Cormorant fished in the shallows and waders fed at the edges and on small islets. The latter included eight each of Grey Plover and Ruddy Turnstone, one Willet, seven Lesser and 15 Greater Yellowlegs. A Wilson's Phalarope was a

total surprise being regarded as a vagrant here mid-winter. A flock of Black Skimmer were initially settled but later had a fly around, with further tern interest coming in the form of 20 Caspian, eight Gull-billed and six Royal Terns. Our guide led us to a spot where a Clapper Rail regularly walked across the track and sure enough the bird crossed in front of us, back and forth a couple of times, rather comically. Several Belted Kingfishers were perched or flying over the salinas and both Yellow Warbler and Prairie Warbler were amongst the mangrove bushes. It had been a very productive session, and we returned to our accommodation for 6:30pm and another pleasant evening meal.

Monday 20 January: A more leisurely 8:00am breakfast was taken today with three Cuban Crows flying over before we set off an hour later to visit the Criadero de Crocodrilos. This conservation initiative was instigated some years ago by Fidel Castro himself with the aim of preserving the gene pool of the declining and critically endangered endemic Cuban Crocodile (*Crocodylus rhombifer*) which is under threat from habitat loss and generic cross breeding with its close relative, the American Crocodile. As we walked around, we could see the reptiles were in specially created water pens fenced off from surrounding swampland. These areas proved attractive to waterthrushes, with three each of Louisiana and Northern being noted feeding at the margins, where a Limpkin waded, and three Anhinga perched and swam in rather serpentine-like fashion. The grounds held the usual assortment of resident woodpeckers as well as two Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, and a nice mix of wintering wood-warblers including a fine male Magnolia Warbler. The visit was productive and relaxing, and returning for lunch at noon, everyone had enjoyed the welcome change from forest birding all around.

At 3:00pm we resumed and visited a local garden which the owner had turned over to birds. Sugar feeders and nectar from the abundant flowering shrubs in the garden attracted various species, though the star was of course Bee Hummingbird, the smallest bird in the world.



We estimated seven individuals came in to feed. These tiny birds, which have a fragmented range across Cuba, are quite remarkable, consuming up to half their body weight in food in a typical day, occasionally eating insects and spiders as well as nectar.

Because it was only a short walk back to our accommodation, we elected to take a stroll along the sea front, where a female, Red-breasted Merganser was spotted in the sun spangled waters of Playa Larga Bay as well as a couple of Magnificent Frigatebirds which circled like aerial pirates. A large group of *hirundines* seen earlier from afar were strangely absent, the birds most likely being Tree Swallows.

Our evening meal was taken on the terrace once again as we reflected on the great birding we had enjoyed around the Zapata area.

Tuesday 21 January: Breakfast was at 8:00am before we packed and checked out, pausing for another look at the agricultural fields near Bermajas, where we noted no less than four Northern Harriers quartering the fields, including a fine grey male. A group of 25 White-crowned Pigeons flew over whilst further east near Yaguaramas a flock of 25 Wood Stork were noted gliding down to what we thought may be some wetlands worth a look. So it proved and we had a one hour stroll around some old-fashioned fishponds, probably not exactly where the storks had descended, but nevertheless we found six Northern Jacana and a nice mix of waders including 15 Killdeer, 15 Greater Yellowlegs, 11 Least Sandpipers, ten Lesser Yellowlegs, five Black-necked Stilts and one Short-billed Dowitcher.

Arriving in Cienfuegos at 12:30pm we had lunch in a pretty seafront restaurant with a dozen or so Laughing Gulls and both Sandwich and Royal Tern drifting by or settling on the wooden quayside posts. Despite the city name translating literally as “one hundred fires”, it actually takes its name from Captain General of Cuba 1816-19, Jose Cienfuegos. Some of the buildings were rather grand, a throw-back to the 19th century when the area was settled by Spaniards, many who amassed fortunes in the sugar industry, later commissioning the emblematic colonial buildings of this small city, nicknamed “Pearl of the South”, which now enjoys UNESCO World Heritage status. These days the city is at the heart of the island’s energy industry with a vast power plant providing many jobs.

With the spectacular Sierra de Escambray Mountains stretching away to the left and the white sand and blue waters of the ocean to the right, we headed towards Trinidad further along the coast, where we arrived at our splendid hotel at 4:30pm. After checking in we met for a guided walk around the oldest parts of Trinidad, where cobbled streets and grand pastel-coloured houses with red terracotta tiled roofs bore witness to the astonishing wealth of former sugar plantation owners. A prime example was one of the grandest houses, the Palacio Brunet which looked truly exquisite, being very ornate with a balustraded marble floor and courtyard and a tall pale green painted bell tower. A Peregrine swooped over the town streets as we made our way to the adjacent Church of the Holy Trinity which occupies centre stage in the Plaza Mayor and dominates the old town. It was constructed between 1817 and 1892 on the site of an earlier church displaying a mix of Neoclassical and Gothic architectural styles. Our guide explained how the main local religion blended Roman Catholicism with beliefs brought by Africans enforced into slavery, with many other religious beliefs being tolerated.

Some of the group managed a cocktail in one of the many bars before we returned to the hotel for our evening meal.

Wednesday 22 January: We had breakfast at 7:00am and as we were loading our coach an hour later, we checked through a group of *hirundines* gliding around the tower of the Holy Trinity Church, managing to pick out four Cuban Martins and several Tree and Cave Swallows. Our first stop was at the nearby Manaca Iznaga estate, once a part of the vast sugar cane growing area and now a tourist site, with a monumental seven story tower dating back to the days of the slave era in the 19th century. The function of the tower is disputed. Some believe it was erected as a lookout to check on working slaves whilst others believe it to be a simple vanity folly on the part of the estate owner. The cobbled lanes leading into the estate had many stalls selling a variety of handmade goods, with some skillfully stitched linen shirts being particularly noteworthy. Even here we found new birds including four **Cuban Palm Crows**, which gave out their very distinctive calls, quite different to those of their close cousins the Cuban Crow.

We were soon on our way towards Cayo Coco on the north coast passing verdant rolling hills and fertile agricultural valleys, stopping briefly at the roadside for a freshly pressed sugar cane drink. By 1:00pm we reached the 27 km long causeway which links the mainland to the Jardines del Rey archipelago comprising several large coral based islands or cayos. We drove slowly over the causeway so we could see what birds were feeding in the shallow coastal waters, noting 50 Red-breasted Merganser, several Brown Pelican, Laughing Gulls, Double-crested Cormorants and even a couple of Crested Caracara as well as a variety of herons and 50 American Flamingos. Not able to stop, we continued to our very grand hotel on Cayo Coco where we went straight for lunch, a rather sumptuous buffet with a multitude of choices prepared for the international tourists staying there.

Before meeting again, the Birding Abroad leaders saw at Nashville Warbler in the bushes to the rear of their balcony, another rather scarce winter visitor to Cuba. We met again at 3:30pm and visited the Wild Boar Cave, a site known for Key West Quail-dove, but on this occasion the birds didn't show, although we enjoyed close views of White-crowned Pigeon, Common Ground-doves and a nice mix of American wood-warblers including three very confiding Ovenbirds which fed amongst the leaf litter.

The adage goes that all good bird trips involve a visit to a sewage works, and so it was that we called next at the local treatment plant, again an old-fashioned complex complete with sewage settling beds full of stagnant water. Here we noted 15 Blue-winged Teal, 12 Ruddy Duck, two American Wigeon, one Lesser Scaup, and an impressive eight Least Grebe. Six Lesser Yellowlegs, 13 Black-necked Stilts and six Spotted Sandpipers fed around the edges. It was soon time to return to our hotel which was adjacent to another large lagoon. Here an adult, Yellow-crowned Night-heron stood motionless and eight West Indian Whistling-ducks, a largely nocturnal species, were becoming active as the sun set on another fine day.

Thursday 23 January: We were off early this morning for a pre-breakfast second attempt at the Key West Quail-dove site, where sure enough with patience, a single bird appeared. A White-eyed Vireo in the bushes above the small feeding station was our only sighting of the

trip and a Zapata Sparrow of the Cayo Coco subspecies *varonai* showed nicely before a very confiding Mangrove Cuckoo was found as we returned to our coach. Returning for breakfast at 8:30am, we were off again by 9.30am to Cayo Paredon Grande to the east. Here we saw signs of the destruction caused by recent hurricanes with large areas of flattened and de-vegetated ground. Nature is resilient though and there were still many places suitable for the target endemics we were seeking. Our first stop produced a Bahama Mockingbird which sat out in full view singing its fluty song, a fine and very localized Caribbean specialty.



Next, we paused roadside, where the xeric shrubland growing over the coralline limestone provides a very distinct habitat. This hosted a single **Oriente Warbler** (the second of the species pair with Yellow-headed Warbler which we had seen in the west) and five **Cuban Gnatcatchers** showing unique black crescents around their ear coverts.

In similar vegetation at the very coastal fringes, our guide located a Thick-billed Vireo on territory, the bird putting in a very showy performance in full song. This species, like the Bahama Mockingbird, whilst not endemic, has a very restricted range within the northern Caribbean. A small area of brackish pools provided rich feeding for waders including 80 Black-necked Stilts, 25 Least Sandpipers and three Willet, all watched over by three Cuban Black Hawks which circled the marsh. A Clapper Rail called and showed briefly. A variety of herons were seen, though our interest was focused on three Great White Herons, once thought to be merely a white morph of the Great Blue Heron but now considered a full species in its own right. A group of 12 Magnificent Frigatebirds soaring in the blue skies was quite a sight.

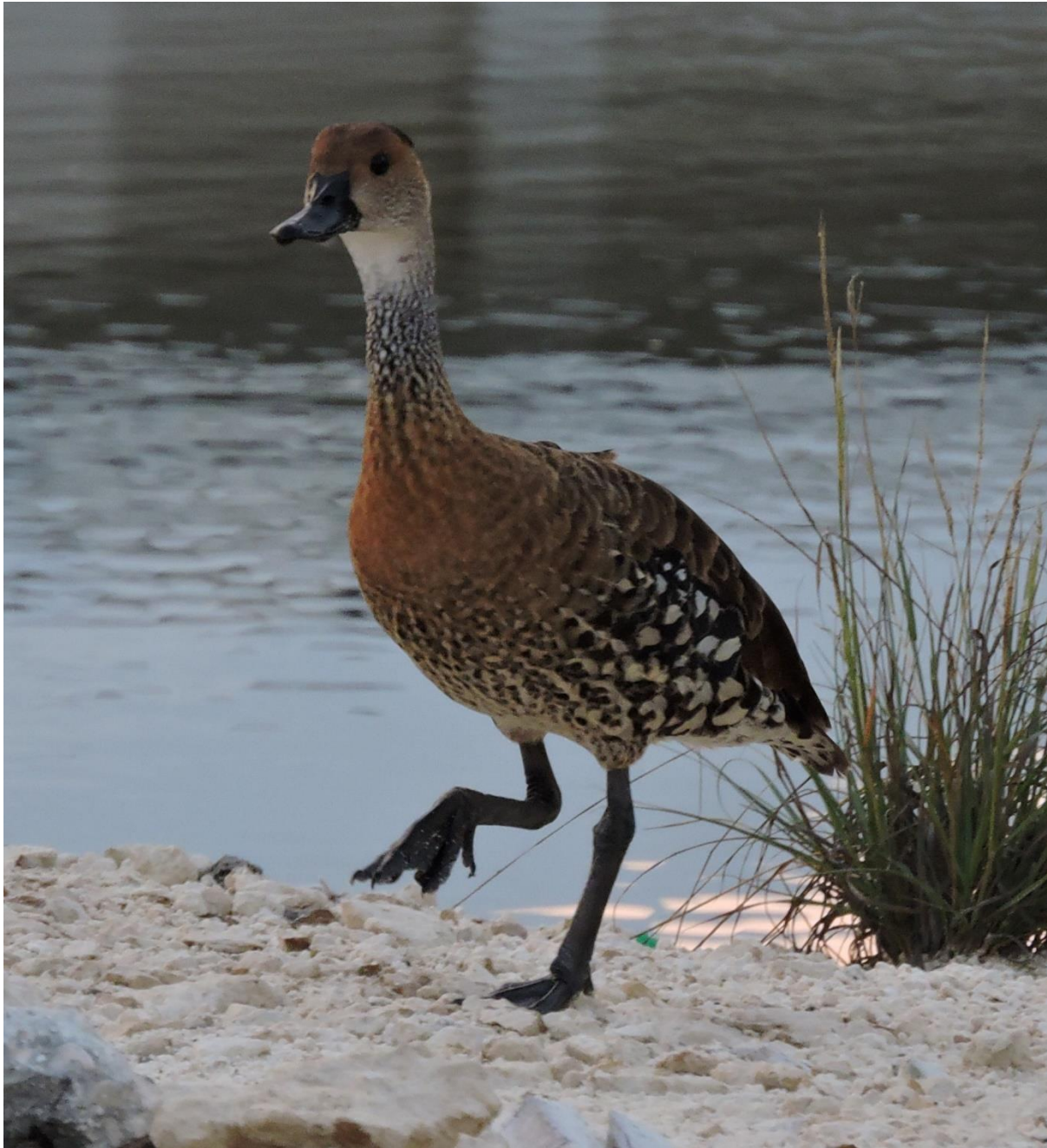
We ventured back towards our hotel stopping for another look at Oriente Warblers, three more of which showed at close range, accompanied by three Zapata Sparrow and two Cuban Oriole.

Lunch was taken back at the hotel at 12:30pm before we relaxed for a couple of hours. Mid-afternoon we reconvened heading to Cayo Guillermo, a smaller cayo, which promotes itself with a selection of international beach-side hotels. Once there, we scanned a large freshwater lake in wonderful light, being rewarded with fantastic views of Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler and best of all 12 West Indian Whistling-duck and 18 White-cheeked Pintail (the latter also known as Bahama Pintail, shown in the photo below).



Close views were had of a couple of inquisitive Clapper Rail which emerged from the waterside vegetation several times. Further along the road another coastal lagoon was covered in shorebirds, and we took our time to work through the feeding and roosting collections. Large groups of Short-billed Dowitcher were busy feeding, and amongst them we found 150 Red Knot, 35 Grey Plover and 18 Stilt Sandpipers. Also here were 30 Ruddy Turnstone, 30 Least Sandpipers, a few each of Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs and 15 Sanderling. Nearby, two Marbled Godwit were very much a surprise, the species being regarded as a vagrant to the island with only a handful of sight records. They remained huddled amongst a flock of ten Willet. On drier mud along the far bank, a group of five Piping Plover were feeding, with at least 80 Semipalmated Plover nearby for comparison.

Hérons were also conspicuous. Amongst the 40 White Ibis were a couple of Roseate Spoonbill and gulls included 20 Laughing Gulls and singles of both Ring-billed and Arctic (or American) Herring Gull. The lagoon was excellent, and we wished we had more time or another day to prolong our visit as it no doubt would have kept producing more and more species. It was time to return to our hotel where the adjacent lagoon held a handful of West Indian Whistling-duck shown below.



The evening meal was again a sumptuous buffet with an extensive choice of dishes.

Friday 24 January: We breakfast at 7:30am, setting off an hour later for the long drive back to Havana. As we checked out, three Cuban Martins were feeding over the hotel grounds. The day was cloudy and rather cool as we crossed the causeway, taking a final look at the usual mix of waterbirds before reaching the mainland and heading west.

Today was a travelling day with little birding, though another 'coach count' of American Kestrels reached 20 before we arrived in Havana at 6:00pm with dusk falling. During our lunch stop we visited the Che Guevara Museum and Mausoleum in Santa Clara. The museum was fascinating, holding many of his personal possessions both from his military days and from his profession as a dentist. There were many memorable photos of this iconic revolutionary leader, including ones alongside others including Fidel Castro.



Our evening meal was taken in the hotel lobby as the wind had picked up forcing the closure of the roof top terrace. We were all fairly tired and didn't venture out to check out Havana's night scene, preferring to get off to bed ready for our final day.

Saturday 25 January: Breakfast was at the very civil time of 8:15am after which we embarked on a city tour using both the coach and exploring on foot to visit the more famous tourist attractions. Home to the largest area of colonial architecture in Latin America, Old Havana receives support from UNESCO as a World Heritage Site for restoration and preservation work. We walked through the exquisite squares of the Plaza Vieja and the Plaza de la Catedral, as well as visiting domed El Capitolio building, which is modelled on the Capitol Building in Washington DC.

In the Plaza de la Revolution we saw the huge murals of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos. The latter was apparently the people's favourite amongst the leading revolutionary figures, someone who died mysteriously in a plane crash in the Straits of Florida in 1959, prompting many conspiracy theories. It was great to see the many coloured 1950's cars still being used as taxis for the tourists.



We crossed over the bay to the other side of Havana where we visited the Morro Castle, a fortress completed in 1589, and which for centuries guarded the entrance to Havana harbour. Close by was Che Guevara's Havana home, perched high near the fort, with splendid strategic views of the city. We had lunch in a restaurant nearby, with a few Laughing Gulls and both Sandwich and Royal Terns flying in and out of the channel into the natural harbour.



With a late check-out organized we spent three hours at a new hotel just around the corner due to a gas line problem, resting and eventually packing through the late afternoon. By dusk it was time to go to the airport, with the group giving due and hearty thanks to our principal guide Mario and our driver Luis for their good service throughout the tour. Our overnight flight took off on time at 10:00pm and we arrived in Madrid on Sunday 26th around midday, where, after a short transit we made the shorter flight back to London Gatwick arriving at 4.30pm.

It had been a truly terrific tour with our key aims all accomplished, great birding, an interesting cultural experience and convivial company throughout. Thanks go to all the group for helping to make the trip such a success and to Nev and Bob for providing photographs used in this report.

