

Cuba Birding & Nature | Trip Report

January 13 – 23, 2019 | Written by Dodie Logue



With local guides and Dodie Logue, and participants Gail, Maddy and Jeff, Jayne, Susan, Jan and Larry, Anne, Dottie, and Jim and Nancy.



Sun., January 13

We all met up at the American Airlines check-in area at the Miami Airport a bit before noon - no need to go into details - but we finally got checked in with luggage tagged and made it to our gate in plenty of time to grab a bite to eat or study the birds. We had an uneventful flight, arriving just after 4:00 p.m., and met our three Cuban companions - guide Alejandro, or "Alex", bird expert Ernesto, and driver Luis-Orlando. After exchanging money, we loaded up our luxury bus and were off to the center of Camaguey and our comfortable lodgings at a Casa Particular. We had a bit of time to relax and organize before a short walk through town to our dinner reservations, a restaurant called "1800", on a quiet Plaza. There was a lovely breeze and the night walk was nice. Dinner was a full buffet, starting with a classic Mojito. The walk back got us to our lodgings around 9 p.m., and we all went our separate ways to prepare for an early start the next morning.



Mon., January 14

Breakfast was at 6 a.m. for an early departure, heading to La Belén, a historic ranch turned into a national park of around 8000 acres. The ranch is now a horse breeding farm, where they breed three types of horse: the American Morgan, the Cubano de Paso, and Criollo de Trot.

We arrived at around 8:30 a.m. and met our local guide Camillo. We drove into the park, then got out for a much-needed bird walk. We had very good luck with endemics, seeing Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Trogon and Cuban Tody. We also saw some West Indian endemics, such as Palm Crow, Plain Pigeon, Giant Kingbird and a wonderfully active Great lizard-Cuckoo. We spent the morning walking on park roads of the area, surrounded by mature trees and Mango Orchards. There were numerous migrant warblers in the trees, including Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, and Yellow-throated. We were hot and tired when we loaded up the bus to head back around noon. We ate our bag lunches en route and made a brief stop for a Northern Jacana in a

small roadside pond.

We arrived back at our lodgings mid-afternoon and had an hour siesta break. At 4 p.m., we met up with Alex for a city walking/pedicab tour. We went to the main plazas, and looked at churches, architecture, and viewed the city lay-out on a wonderful architectural maquette of this world heritage city. We were able to visit a few artist studios along the way. Again, we were able to walk to our restaurant, Melange.

Tues., January 15

We left our lodgings at 8 a.m. and loaded up for the drive to Trinidad. The drive was very picturesque, and we saw many Kestrel and Turkey Vulture en route, as well as sugar cane fields, horse carts, and people out working in the fields. Once in Trinidad, we had lunch at Guitar Mia and then checked into our various "Casa Particular" lodgings.

Trinidad is a lively and lovely World Heritage Site, and during our visit it was particularly busy as the Cuban President, Miguel Diaz-Canel, was visiting the next day. In the afternoon we went birding out by the ocean on the Ancon Peninsula. This is a newer resort area by the Caribbean, with lots of wetlands and shrubs along the side of the road. Here we saw the endemic Cuban Vireo, various other warblers, Tri-colored Heron, Clapper Rail, Short-billed Dowitcher, among other water birds. It was a lovely evening and we all enjoyed the time. Back in the city, we regrouped and walked to the Vista Gourmet and did our checklist.

Wed., January 16

We all had breakfast at our various Casa Particulars, the we hopped into cabs that took us up the mountain to Topes de Collantes—the bus would have had a hard time! We had local guide Luis with us, as well as Ernesto. Our first stop was the Mirador about halfway up with a nice viewing tower and a view of the Caribbean Sea. Here we saw Western Spindalis, Yellow-faced Grassquit, and distant White-collared Swifts.

We continued our drive up, and stopped at a coffee cafe/museum where we had a bathroom stop and began our morning bird walk. Right at the beginning of the trail a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was roosting in a tall tree. We saw the first of many Red-legged Thrush, a Louisiana Waterthrush, who had us convinced it was a dipper, great looks at a Trogon, and once back by the cafe, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. We relaxed here and had a coffee, then visited the coffee farm of Los Colorado's. This is a family in the area who have been coffee farmers for generations; we got to ask questions, hear about how they make it work for them, taste their bananas and peanut candy, and buy some Cuban coffee and other homemade items. We all enjoyed this visit and wanted

to stay longer, but lunch was waiting. We stopped at a lovely restaurant just slightly down the mountain, that had a Tilapia-rearing pond. Here we were treated to delicious tilapia and other wonderful entrees, and had coffee liquor at the end of the meal—on the house. It was late afternoon by the time we were back down the road that Batista built, we finally made it to our rooms by 4 p.m. Around 4:30 p.m., we departed for a walking tour; we stopped to inspect a 3-D map of Trinidad, visited plazas, and climbed a tower with a great view. The president had just visited this afternoon—there were crowds, music, festivities, crafts, etc. We had a wonderful meal at Giroud, where some of us got pizza, and then walked home.

Thurs., January 17

We had breakfast at our prospective lodgings and loaded onto the bus by 8 a.m. First stop was at a luxury hotel



to change money, then we were off, headed to Playa Larga via Cienfuegos. We made a stop at a “Finca”, or farm, near the coast to try for Cuban Gnatcatcher, which we had great looks at a pair of them! Also, Cuban Tody and some warblers. Once we got to the city, we had a walking tour of Cienfuegos, where we went into a few general stores to see the products and prices that Cubans would be paying. A lovely town, we visited the main Plaza, then went off to our lunch spot, Finca Del Mar, by the bay. There were a few Laughing Gulls and a Spotted Sandpiper by our lunch spot. Next, we headed to Playa Giron and the Bay of Pigs museum, stopping along the way to try for Red-shouldered Blackbird, which we missed, but we saw many Limpkin, a Black-crowned Night-Heron, and other marsh birds.



The museum was quite interesting, and Alex gave us an overview of the days surrounding the attack. The next stop was a path in Sopillar, by Playa Larga, to try for Fernandinas Flicker—success! We had amazingly close looks of one foraging on the ground—also of Ernesto on his belly trying to get and up-close photo. Here there were also Cuban Parrots, and a Great Lizard-Cuckoo.

We checked into our lodging at Enriques, then went out shortly after dusk to try for Bare-legged Owl, with unfortunately no luck. We had a wonderful family-style dinner right at our lodgings—nice not to have to drive—and we did our checklist.

Fri., January 18

Today, we had a full day of birding planned, and started with an early breakfast at 7 a.m., so we could leave at 7:30 a.m. Our first stop was Sopillar forest, looking for Gray-fronted Quail-Dove. We heard, and finally a few of us saw one, but not great success. We did see the endemic Yellow-headed Warbler, and other warblers including our first Ovenbird and Black-and-white Warbler. Next, we went back to our Fernandina Flicker spot, to try for better looks at Cuban Parakeet, with no luck. Though we did get a decent look at a flying Crested Caracara, and our first Common Ground-Dove.

Next stop was Cuevo de los Pesces, where after much looking by Ernesto, we did get looks at the lovely Blue-headed Quail-Dove, across the pool on the far shore.

We had a real treat going to Los Hondones for lunch. This is the small village where Ernesto is building a home, and we had a lovely outdoor meal at a close neighbor of his. On our way we walked through some yards and had our first very brief glimpse of a Bee Hummingbird. After a fantastic lunch, with a Trogon and a Black-throated



Blue Warbler present, we got to see Ernesto's home and yard project—fantastic! After a full morning out, we went back to our lodgings for an hour break.

At 3:30 p.m., we were back on the bus, heading out this time to La Salinas, the mangrove swamp area. So much to see here! Greater Flamingo, the endemic Cuban Black Hawk, Reddish Egret, Wood Stork, and many egret and heron. We also saw a few Gull-billed Tern. Late afternoon, with sunset and gorgeous lighting and clouds, we made it back by 6:30 p.m., in time to get a drink and meet Frank Medina, who has worked managing Zapata Swamp for years. He gave us a great overview of the park and some of the conservation work that is going on. Then dinner, checklist, and bed.



Sat., January 19

The morning started with breakfast at 7 a.m., for an 8 a.m. departure. The first item on the agenda was to get better looks at the Bee Hummingbird—Zunzuncito. We stopped at a private residence, but it never showed. Then we went to a home with feeders, and were rewarded with wonderful looks of a male Bee, plus a Tawney-shouldered Blackbird, and a Cuban Oriole. It seems that some folks here are catching on to a new way to make some money that is a win-win situation. Next, we drove to La Turbo, in the middle of Zapata Swamp.

We drove down a narrow road until it seemed too rough to go any further, there we got out and walked. It was a lovely cool day, and we eventually had good looks at our target birds, Zapata Wren and Zapata Sparrow. Both of these endemic birds were singing as well. A nice touch to get the vocalization with the visual. We also saw Cuban Bullfinch, better looks at Yellow-headed Warbler, and Anhinga.

Once back on the main road, we stopped at the Crocodile breeding park, where we walked around for 20 minutes, seeing many large Cuban Crocodile, some turtles and iguana, and of course birds. Back on the road by 11:45 a.m., we headed to Havana.

After nearly a two-hour drive, we arrived at Hemingway's home by 1:30 p.m. This is now a museum, with a gorgeous home and great view looking over Havana. Hemingway had a special spot in the history of Cuba, for



sure. Then to our lunch spot, La Foresta, in the Miramar neighborhood of Havana. It was a great place, and lunch was topped off with key-lime pie for many of us. By 4:15 p.m., we were back on the bus heading to Soroa in the west, and our lodging for the next two nights. We checked into the government owned hotel, had a bit of time to get acclimated in our rooms, and met for dinner—no one was very hungry after the late lunch in Havana—and we were off to bed.

Sun., January 20

Breakfast was at 7:30 a.m., we left at 8 a.m. and headed west to Viñales, a two-hour drive. It was drizzling on the drive, not boding well for birding. Once in Viñales, we went to our first birding spot for the Cuban Solitaire, but the rain was too heavy. We were trying to figure out what to do and made the fortuitous decision to go a little further down the road to the “Prehistoric Mural”—really a modern mural, painted right on the face of a limestone Mogote, by a student of Diego Rivera, Vigildo Gonzales, which depicts a bit of evolution—snail, fish, human couple. There it stopped raining and Ernesto called in two solitaires! We all had amazing looks as the birds perched right up in a tall tree, sometimes sparring and calling.



Next, we headed to the Benito tobacco farm. We got a demonstration of rolling and an explanation of growing, had some coffee and rum, and a chance to buy cigars and coffee. It was an interesting stop. After, we visited a small botanical garden at a beautiful bed and breakfast in Viñales and did a short walking tour where we got to see some of the fruits and vegetables grown and displayed. Next was a lovely lunch at an organic farm/restaurant called El Cuajani. Great food, a few birds around, and an amazing setting. After lunch we made a quick stop at a Mirador. There was music, views, and dancing with the bronze sculpture-person.



On the way home, we made two roadside stops—the first for Olive capped Warbler, which we all had good looks of, and the second was right off the main highway at a fish farm, to see Snail Kite. We saw at least 10, among many other great birds we had already seen on the trip.



Once back at Soroa, we had a break, and met for dinner at 7 p.m. Afterwards, some of us met to try again for Bare-legged Owl; after some calling, Ernesto got one to fly right in and perch close for good looks!! Ernesto really did a great job this day.

Mon., January 21

After breakfast, we did a short bird walk, seeing Red-legged Honey Creeper, and White-crowned Pigeon. Then we walked down the hill to the Orchid Garden. Here we had a guide who knew everything about the place, and saw many wonderful orchids, native and non, blooming and non. There was a nice souvenir shop where many of us bought gifts, and at the house on top of the hill we had music with a view—our guide Alex even joined the musicians for a song or two, playing some drums.



Next stop was Las Terrazas, a planned community, where we made a school visit, and went into a pine forest and saw a high roosting Stygian Owl. We also visited a pig farm and saw many lovely Cuban Grassquit. Lunch was in Las Terrazas, at an old renovated coffee farm, called Buena Vista. There was a great band playing here, and we saw a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak. After lunch, we did a bit of a driving tour to Havana, where we saw Revolution Square, and parted with Ernesto. Next, we went to our lodgings, Villa Flora—a beautiful, old renovated home, lovely and roomy. Dinner

tonight was at Mediteraneo restaurant, a farm to table place with Italian flair—very nice.

Tues., January 22

We decided on a later start, leaving our place at 9 a.m., after a beautiful breakfast out on the patio. First, we did a bit of a driving tour, with Alex describing the various neighborhoods and prominent buildings and squares. Then we took a long walking tour. We made our way to four main historic plazas - Plaza De Armas, Plaza Vieja, Plaza de la Cathedral, and Plaza de San Francisco de Asis. It was fun walking around the cobbled streets, looking at the variety of architecture, stopping at art galleries, shops, an apothecary, etc. By 12:30 p.m., we were ready for a break and went to lunch by the Cathedral Plaza—it was topped by flan and coconut with the wonderful coffee we got so used to.

Next, we did a short tour in some classic vintage American cars, which dropped us off at the Nunez foundation. Here we looked at an art collection from the Americas, then had a lecture on the foundation and their work. After this, we headed back into the old part of town and visited a huge craft market, where we spent 45 minutes shopping for souvenirs, etc. Finally, we made it back to our serene lodgings at Villa Flora for an hour break

before dinner. We had a lovely last meal at Habanera, where a trio played for us, it was a nice ending to a great tour!

Wed., January 23

The final morning called for a welcomed leisurely breakfast on the patio, final checklist, going over the map of our travels in Cuba, and packing. We took a group photo in the grounds of our hotel.

Alejandro and Luis showed up around 10:15 a.m., we drove to Colon Cemetery and had a 45 minute walk with a guide there. She described some of the more elaborate monuments made of Carrara marble, including a very tall grand statue for the firefighters, who died trying to save a hardware store owned by a Spanish merchant who kept dynamite in the basement, and didn't tell anyone. The building exploded in the fire, and many young firefighters died. The monuments were grand and it was a lovely morning.

We then went to a local market—non-government owned, where we got to see the local fruits and vegetables and other produce that were for sale. Next, lunch at a casual place near the water, where we had snacks and such to tide us over until we reached Miami. Before departing we said our thanks to Alex and Luis, not wanting to be rushed at the airport. By 2 p.m., we were headed to the airport. We checked in, took some last photos with Alejandro, and did some shopping and such before embarking at 5 p.m. for our Miami flight.

It was a lovely tour, with a very congenial group. Much thanks to all who joined us, and to our new Cuban friends, Alejandro, Ernesto, and Luis-Orlando.

Photo Credits:

Cuban Calisto, Jim Springer (JS); Cuban Grassquit, Stygian Owl, Snail Kite, Black-necked Stilt group, Cuban Parrots, Jeff Hayward (JH); Classic Car, Vinales tour, Pedicabs, Vinales Lunch Spot, Colon Cemetery, Dodie Logue (DL); Flamingoes (3s a crowd), Great Lizard-Cuckoo, (JH); Bird watching, (DL); Group photo, The last supper, (DL).