

Cuba – 19-24 July 2019

Peter Wolter and I are considering taking Iowa State University students to Cuba in the future, so we decided a short scouting trip was appropriate. We worked with the Center for Cuban Studies on an itinerary that allowed us to visit Havana and some of the parks and natural areas within a few hour's drive. Our objective was to scout diverse natural areas, check out the accommodations and food, and see some birds and other wildlife. It was a successful trip!

19 July

This was our travel day to Cuba. We departed Ames at 3 a.m. On our first flight to Atlanta there was a medical emergency, so we arrived a half hour early at 8:30 a.m. After a nice layover we left for Havana at 11 a.m. In mid-flight, we were informed that the Havana airport was temporarily closing and we were being diverted to Miami, where we landed at 12:50 p.m. We had time for lunch, then re-boarded at 2 p.m. The flight went smoothly and we arrived in Havana at 3:30 p.m. On arrival in Customs, Peter was pulled aside because he was carrying a GPS unit, which is apparently prohibited in Cuba. After more than a half hour of paperwork (he had to leave the unit in Customs, and then retrieve it when we left the country) we exited to find our guides. It took more waiting and a phone call before we finally met Ernesto Reyes Mouriño (our guide) and Ruggerio (our driver) at 4:45 p.m. Then we loaded into a mini-van and departed Havana at 5 p.m. From here we took Highway 4 west and then Highway 241 north to Viñales, where we arrived at 7 p.m. Birds seen en route included Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Antillean Nighthawk, and La Sagra's Flycatcher. We checked into the Casa Oscar hotel and then walked to the main square to buy wine before dinner. Dinner was at 8 p.m. at the hotel and consisted of a local corn soup, a light salad, plantain chips, rice with black beans, grilled chicken, fried plantains, and a cinnamon-topped pudding for dessert. We called it a day at 10 p.m. [partly cloudy, temperature 80-91°F, wind light and variable, intermittent thunderstorms after 5 p.m.]

20 July

We met at 7 a.m. for breakfast (scrambled eggs, rice and red beans, bread with butter and mango jelly, fresh fruit, coffee) before heading out to bird. Our first stop at 7:45 a.m. was a roadside stop called Muralito. We birded here for half an hour and saw a dark morph American Kestrel, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Cuban Tody, West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Vireo, Cuban Solitaire, Red-legged Thrush, Cuban Bullfinch, and Cuban Blackbird. The cliffs nearby were impressive. From here we continued west and stopped at a trail in Viñales National Park, where we hiked from 9:30-10:45 a.m. We saw lots of birds including Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Pewee, Yellow-headed Warbler, an early migrant Louisiana Waterthrush, and Western Spindalis. For many species we were able to get good, close looks, often looking down on the birds. We also saw a couple of small anoles plus a single Speckled Anole along the stream, several cycads, and some great scenery. By now it was getting quite hot and the sun was intense, so we took a short drive and stopped at a local farmer known by Ernesto. He gave us a quick tour of his 10 ha farm and showed us the tobacco process; he even rolled us Cuban cigars! We had a quick tour of his house along with coffee and a shot of rum. We then headed to a small restaurant

outside Viñales with a great view of the mountains for lunch (grilled red snapper, rice, black beans and rice, fresh fruit, pineapple juice, orange soda). During lunch we enjoyed the hordes of Antillean Palm Swifts that were nesting under the eaves of the building. After lunch we returned to the hotel for a siesta from 1:30-3:30 p.m.

After the siesta we visited Ernesto's friend Nils Navarro in Viñales. We were at his house for an hour and a half, during which time a severe thunderstorm passed over town with lots of rain, loud thunder, and lightning. Afterwards we drove straight north out of town, crossed the mountains, and then headed west to stop in a different area of Viñales National Park. On a short hike from 5:45-6:30 p.m. we saw many migrating Antillean Nighthawks, Cuban Emerald, Cuban Vireo, Yellow-headed and Olive-capped warblers, Western Spindalis, and Red-legged Honeycreeper. We then returned to the hotel for wine, followed by dinner at 7:30 p.m. (grilled chicken, rice and black beans, chicken noodle soup, plantain chips, candied plantains, fresh fruit, flan for dessert). We then took a short break and drove west of town to a cave site to listen for owls. After a while we heard single Cuban Pygmy-Owl and Bare-legged Owl, but neither was cooperative for a look. We finally called it a night at 9:30 p.m. [partly to mostly cloudy, temp 74-91°F, wind SW 5-10 mph, scattered thunderstorms after 3 p.m.]

21 July

Today we met for breakfast (scrambled eggs, rice and black beans, bread with mango jam, sweet rolls, fresh fruit, mango juice) at 6 a.m. and then loaded the minivan for an early departure. We picked up Nils Navarro who needed a ride to Havana and then began the drive east. Our plan was to make a few stops en route to Havana to look for birds. Our first stop was right along the highway at the wetlands just east of Herradura, where in an hour we saw King Rail, Black-necked Stilt, Barn Swallow, and Tricolored Munia. We had no luck with Yellow-breasted Crake, which is a rare resident here. Further east we checked some aquaculture ponds and saw Pied-billed Grebe, many herons and egrets, and some impressive groups of Snail Kites. We then exited the highway and drive north to La Güira National Park to look for Giant Kingbird. We spent about an hour hiking the road along the stream, but failed to find the kingbird. Other birds seen included Crested Caracara, Cuban Trogon, Yellow-faced Grassquit, and Tawny-shouldered Blackbird. At 11:30 a.m. we made a short stop for lunch (grilled chicken with rice, fresh vegetables, soda) at a restaurant along the highway. At noon we continued east and into Havana to drop off Nils.

After dropping off Nils we toured along the Malecón in Havana, drove through the tunnel, and then headed southeast and returned to the highway. We made a quick stop for coffee and soda before continuing on to Playa Larga with no more birding stops. We quickly checked into the Kirenia Hotel and rested for a bit in the mid-day heat. In late afternoon we drove to a private site called Sopliar where we saw many birds including Bare-legged Owl, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Fernandina's Flicker, Cuban Crow, and Cuban Oriole. At 8 p.m. we returned to the hotel and met for dinner (vegetable soup, sautéed pork, rice, plantain chips, avocado, squash, wine). Afterwards we visited for a bit and then called it a day. [partly cloudy, temperature 74-92°F, wind SW 5-10 mph, thunderstorms after 3 p.m.]



Clockwise from top left: Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Bee Hummingbird, and Cuban Emerald.



Clockwise from top left: Cuban Tody, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Pewee, and Fernandina's Flicker.

22 July

Today was our day to bird the Zapata Swamp. Breakfast was mango juice and coffee and a packed ham and cheese sandwich for the road. We left the hotel at 5:45 a.m. and made a short detour to pick up a park ranger, a requirement to bird in the national park. After this detour we returned to Playa Larga and took the road west towards Asiento Santo Thomãs. This road is heavily rutted and slow driving, so unfortunately, we missed our chance to listen for Cuban Nightjars. We arrived at the town at 7:45 a.m. and met a guide for a short boat ride into the swamp. The boat ride was from 8-9 a.m. and we had excellent looks at our two target birds – Zapata Wren and Zapata Sparrow. We also saw Limpkin, Gray-fronted Quail-Dove, Cuban Parrot, Yellow-headed Warbler, and Cuban Oriole plus quick looks at a few walking catfish. The weather was pleasant and the bugs were surprisingly scarce.

We returned to Playa Larga at 11 a.m. and stopped for lunch at a local waterfront restaurant that was excellent. We had a seafood soup for an appetizer, shrimp sautéed in garlic sauce, rice, vegetables, and a glass of red wine. After lunch we took a break from the mid-day heat – Peter took a swim in the Bay of Pigs while I walked along the bay and sampled the water at a public beach to the east. We met up again at 4:45 p.m. and drove east to Ernesto's house and the town of Los Hondones. The house is still under construction, but we were able to see the basic outline as well as some of his gardening work for birds and other wildlife. Birds seen in his yard included Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Trogon, Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Tody, Cuban Pewee, Cuban Vireo, and Red-legged Honeycreeper. We took a short walk to a neighbor's house and saw two Curly-tailed Lizards. In the surrounding forest we visited a couple of large sinkholes – the larger one had several surfacing tarpon! And the nearby forest had many colorful and very large land crabs.

After we returned we had time to relax, drink some wine, and check email before dinner at 8 p.m. Dinner was the best of the trip – family style lobster, shrimp, and land crab with rice and beans, fresh vegetables, and flan for dessert. We enjoyed talking until 9:30 p.m. when we called it a night. [partly cloudy, temperature 72-93°F, wind S 5-10 mph, thunderstorms after 6 p.m.]

23 July

Today was our final birding day in Cuba. We met for breakfast at 7:30 a.m. (mango juice and coffee, bread, jams) and then headed back to Ernesto's house. Our target was Blue-headed Quail-Dove, and we had good but brief views of a pair behind his house. From here we drove south to Playa Giron and saw a Yellow-billed Cuckoo along the way. We also stopped at a small roadside park to enjoy scenic views of the bay. The water was very clear and we saw numerous reef fish along the coral shoreline. Opposite this area was a small sinkhole that was clearly attached to the ocean based on the presence of parrotfish. In Giron we toured the Bay of Pigs invasion museum from 10-10:40 a.m., which had some nice relics and photographs from this historical event. We were back in Playa Larga at 11 a.m. to clean up, pack, and check out of the Kirenia Hotel. We now began the drive back to Havana, stopping for lunch (grilled chicken with rice, soup, fresh veggies, and orange soda) at a secluded restaurant just off the main highway. We were back on the road at 1:40 p.m., and after passing through an intense thunderstorm with very heavy rain

arrived in Havana at 3:10 p.m. We checked into the Casa Valle Havana hostel and then Peter and I hiked up to nearby Havana University and a quick tour of campus. It was incredibly hot and humid, so we were back at the hotel by 4:45 p.m. for some time inside. Our guide met us at 7 p.m. for dinner (seafood medley with lobster, crab, octopus, and shrimp, rice with black beans, plantain chips, fresh vegetables, and wine) at a nice restaurant near the old fort. We hiked around the old fort just before dinner to enjoy the scenic views of Havana and a parade of old American cars. After dinner we drove to Old Havana and walked around for half an hour to see the capital, Cuban ballet, and many other sites. Unfortunately, we had to say goodbye to Ernesto, who was an excellent guide! We were back at our hostel by 10 p.m. [partly cloudy, temperature 72-95°F, light west wind, scattered thunderstorms after 2 p.m.]

24 July

This was our travel day back to Iowa. Peter and I met at 5:45 a.m. and walked a little more than a mile to the Malecón for views of the waterfront. Unfortunately, it was still dark, but we did see the first hints of sunrise. We had breakfast (scrambled eggs, fresh fruit, toast with jam and butter, orange juice) at 7 a.m. and then relaxed at the hostel until 10:30 a.m. when we met Ruggerio, who took us to the airport.

For more information, please contact: Stephen J. Dinsmore, Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management, 339 Science Hall II, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011; E-mail: cootjr@iastate.edu



Zapata Wren



Clockwise from top left: Olive-backed Warbler, Yellow-headed Warbler, Cuban Bullfinch, and Cuban Grassquit.

Birds (83 species)

Fulvous Whistling-Duck	Mourning Dove	Black-whiskered Vireo
Pied-billed Grebe	Zenaida Dove	Cuban Vireo
Neotropic Cormorant	White-winged Dove	Cuban Martin
Anhinga	Common Ground-Dove	Cave Swallow
Magnificent Frigatebird	Ruddy Quail-Dove	Barn Swallow
Great Blue Heron	Gray-fronted Quail-Dove	Cuban Crow
Great Egret	Blue-headed Quail-Dove	Zapata Wren
Snowy Egret	Smooth-billed Ani	Cuban Solitaire
Little Blue Heron	Great Lizard-Cuckoo	Red-legged Thrush
Tricolored Heron	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Northern Mockingbird
Cattle Egret	Bare-legged Owl	Olive-backed Warbler
Green Heron	Cuban Pygmy-Owl	Yellow-headed Warbler
White Ibis	Antillean Nighthawk	Louisiana Waterthrush
Turkey Vulture	Antillean Palm Swift	Zapata Sparrow
Snail Kite	Cuban Emerald	Western Spindalis
Crested Caracara	Bee Hummingbird	Red-legged Honeycreeper
Broad-winged Hawk	Cuban Tody	Yellow-faced Grassquit
King Rail	Cuban Trogon	Cuban Grassquit
Limpkin	Cuban Parrot	Cuban Bullfinch
Northern Jacana	West Indian Woodpecker	Tricolored Munia
Black-necked Stilt	Cuban Green Woodpecker	Cuban Blackbird
Killdeer	Northern Flicker	Tawny-shouldered Blackbird
Laughing Gull	Fernandina's Flicker	Red-shouldered Blackbird
Royal Tern	Cuban Pewee	Eastern Meadowlark
Rock Pigeon	La Sagra's Flycatcher	Greater Antillean Grackle
Scaly-naped Pigeon	Loggerhead Kingbird	Shiny Cowbird
Eurasian Collared-Dove	Gray Kingbird	Cuban Oriole
	American Kestrel	House Sparrow