Cuban Ornithological Study
With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures

March 15 – 25, 2018
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Naturalist Journeys, LLC
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This bird survey project is an opportunity to assist with professional research conducted under the leadership of field guide author Arturo Kirkconnell, his son, and assisting team — an excellent opportunity for birders that have long hoped to visit Cuba. We are inspired by the effort to visit and survey in detail several of Cuba’s most important conservation areas. Along the route it is very possible to see 26 of the 28 living Cuban endemics, missing only two that are so rare or so inaccessible they are extremely rare to see (Zapata Rail and Cuban Kite). A highlight is the chance to work as a team, with a professional, as you explore a fascinating mix of habitats from beachfront to mountain landscapes. This survey tour is limited to eight (8) persons.

Tour Highlights

• Bird Cuba in a small group with local experts
• Enjoy a nice mix of habitats, scenery, and time in Cuba’s best birding areas
• Take satisfaction in contributing to important research
• See nearly all of Cuba’s endemic birds
• Spot North American migrants and study how they use their wintering habitat
• Take in the incredible scenery of the Viñales Valley and Cayo Coco
• Explore and learn about the biological significance of the Zapata wetlands

Tour Summary
11-Day / 10-Night Research Bird Survey Tour with local experts & Bob Behrstock
$4550, from Havana
Airport is José Martí International (HAV)

Itinerary

Thurs., Mar. 15  Arrival in Havana
All trip participants arrive in Havana today on a commercial flight of their choice. Upon arrival, our
Cuban hosts meet you at the airport and help you get acquainted with the Cuban hosts at our bed and breakfast-style lodging in Havana.

Those arriving early in the day have time for an optional afternoon visit to old town Havana, not far from our accommodations. If you do arrive in time and are interested in this Havana visit, meet at the Hostal Myrna at 3:00 PM. This is a great opportunity to stretch your legs, learn some of the history of this fascinating city from our local hosts, and watch for Royal Tern and Laughing Gull as ships pull in to the harbor.

Meet other members of your survey team over a welcome dinner and learn what to expect on a full trip orientation this evening with your birding leader, an expert working with the team of Arturo Kirkconnell, who outlines the plan for our surveys and gives background on the group’s studies of the island’s birds. 

Bed & Breakfast Accommodations in Havana (D)

Fri., Mar. 16  Bird Surveys in the Pines: AM at Las Terrazas & La Guira en route to Viñales | PM Birding Viñales

After breakfast, we depart early for Viñales, west of Havana, 2 to 3 hours away. We have a few birding stops along the way, including at Las Terrazas, a planned community dating from 1968, and La Guira, a national park. This morning on forest surveys we hope to find Black-whiskered Vireo, Cuban Tody, La Sagra’s Flycatcher, Cuban Pewee, Loggerhead Kingbird, Cuban Emerald, Western Spindalis, and Red-legged Honeycreeper. Our plan is to arrive in time for lunch in Viñales.

Viñales is a delightful, small town situated in a lush area of the Sierra de los Oreganos. This beautiful valley has a long tradition of small-scale farming and it’s not unusual to see someone plowing with oxen
between the colorful and distinctive limestone land features locally called “mogotes.” Fresh organic produce is easy to find here and farmers are proud of their heritage.

After lunch, we start birding in the Viñales area. About 130 species have been reported here, and we have a few in mind that we want to survey for in this particular habitat: Cuban Grassquit, Cuban Solitaire, Olive-capped Warbler, and a few other Cuban and Caribbean endemics frequently encountered here.

Each evening after birding, we go over the survey results as a daily checklist. Our guide outlines survey plans for the following day, including morning wake-up time, routes to be followed, and other logistics.

*Accommodations at the Hostal Rene y Taty or similar (B,L,D)*

**Sat., Mar. 17 AM: Birding Viñales / Departure for Zapata | Late PM: Birding in Zapata**

Enjoy some early morning birding to check on several resident species in the Viñales area, particularly if we missed any of the key species the day before.

After breakfast, we depart to the Zapata Peninsula. The drive takes most of the morning, but we break up the drive with some brief birding stops at small ponds or forested areas that we record as part of our surveys. Lunch is at a restaurant en route.

By late afternoon, we reach the Zapata Peninsula, one of the most important areas in Cuba for birding with a good mix of habitats and access to forest and coastal areas. This is a stronghold of the world’s smallest hummingbird, the Bee Hummingbird, and our work helps to monitor their status.

We spend the next four full days in this area, with an effort and opportunity to find nearly all of Cuba’s endemic bird species. Today we try for the rare Zapata Wren, the very local Zapata Sparrow, resident Red-shouldered Blackbird, and check status on a migrant of note, the Yellow-throated Warbler.
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Why so much time here? The Zapata Peninsula is, undoubtedly, the best bird watching area in Cuba, and one of the most important conservation areas in the entire Caribbean region. It supports all but three of Cuba’s 28 avian endemics. The area has had over 260 bird species reported. Besides the endemics, this is a great place to find many other native bird species, both winter residents and transients, along with several summer and spring visitors (which breed in Cuba but return south in fall).

We overnight in one of the nicest guest houses in Zapata tonight and the following two, possibly three, nights. (B,L,D)

Sun., Mar. 18  Great Start for Zapata / Full Day Birding Bermeja
We have breakfast early, and then depart for the village of Bermeja on the east side of the Zapata region for some of our best morning birding survey work so far on the trip.

Bermeja is a fauna refuge with national significance a short drive north of Playa Girón on the Bay of Pigs. It is an open area with numerous Royal Palms, and abundant fruiting and flowering bushes and shrubbery. This is the best place to look for Fernandina’s Flicker, a species of concern in Cuba. Palms provide good nest areas to woodpeckers, and for Cuba’s two endemic owls. We pay particular attention to finding Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Trogon, and Cuban Tody, and we have a chance for recording Cuban Nightjar. We can find all four quail-dove species here and learn more about how they use the habitat. Our survey work is important to monitoring these resident species, but is also of note as this is a good place to find many New World warblers that overwinter on the island. A survey helps to define how varied habitats support them.
After a great morning of birding, we have lunch and time to rest back at our guest house. In the afternoon, we continue to bird the Bermeja area. By supper time, we return to our guest house and again review our surveys as we complete the bird checklist for the day.

_Accommodations at Guest House in the Zapata area (B,L,D)_

**Mon., Mar. 19  Full Day Birding in Zapata**  
- **AM:** Marsh Habitat at La Turba  
- **PM:** Additional Areas

We again have an early breakfast to support a full morning of our birding surveys. We focus this morning on the marsh habitat at La Turba. We look for Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow, and Red-shouldered Blackbird.

Lunch today depends upon our birding plans; it may be a picnic or we may return if repositioning to another area.

After lunch we focus on finding any species we may have missed in the marshy area; once successful, we focus on new species in the greater Zapata area in the later afternoon (after it cools down).

We again have supper at our nice guest house and complete the bird survey notes and checklist and then head to bed.

_Accommodations at Guest House in Zapata (B,L,D)_

**Tues., Mar. 20  AM: Zapata Birding Surveys at La Salina | PM Bermeja or Onward**

We again have breakfast early, and then travel to nearby La Salina to complete our morning surveys.

La Salina Wildlife Refuge is an important conservation area with ideal feeding conditions for many water birds (flamingos, egrets, ducks, shorebirds), which come to feast on the fishes, crustaceans, and other invertebrates. We hope to find Cuban Black Hawk, Mangrove Warbler, Northern Crested Caracara, Cuban Martin, Cuban Bullfinch, American Flamingo, Reddish Egret and maybe a Clapper Rail.

We again have lunch back at our guesthouse during the heat of the day.

After lunch, we may travel back to Bermeja, and focus our bird-
finding on any species we may have missed. We are primarily focused on finding any endemic species we are missing, and learning more about the area’s general natural history, such as the cycles of land crabs and productivity of the sea. Our team likes to make the decision about this night a few months out, based on birding abundance and activity patterns. We may move east towards Cienfuegos for a chance to count Greater Flamingo and some water birds important to that area. This also breaks up our drive to Camaguey with an overnight en route.

Accommodations in Cienfeugos (or possibly at the same Guest House in Zapata) (B,L,D)

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**Wed., Mar. 21  On to Camagüey**

From Cienfuegos we continue east, repositioning for surveys to be run the following day. If starting from Zapata, anticipate a long drive today to reach Camagüey (a drive of about five hours, not counting birding stops). If closer to Cienfuegos we cut that to about three hours.

We do plan stops along the way, and we enjoy a picnic lunch with a chance to stretch our legs. Beyond Cienfuegos, we continue on a good road that follows the coast, looking for waders and gulls and terns along the way. There are mountains to the north at a distance. You should see some of Cuba’s historic sugar mills and learn a lot about the country’s geography and history as we drive.

We stop a few times throughout the afternoon for birding and brief rest stops and our plan is to reach Camagüey city by around 5:00 PM.

We check into our local Guest House lodging and have supper there. Camagüey was a bustling city during the years of intense sugar harvest, also of note in colonial times, with some fascinating architecture in the historic area.

While largely a travel day, today still provides data for our surveys and we review the day’s bird sightings for our survey report and checklist.

Accommodations at a Guest House in Camagüey (B,L,D)

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**Thurs., Mar. 22  AM: Birding Najasa | PM: Birding Cayo Coco**

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Another early breakfast is in order to support our bird survey efforts at Najasa, just over an hour away.

Najasa is a very productive area and well worth the time to survey. This is a protected area of open country with many palm groves and with a mixture of semi-deciduous woods in the foothills at lower elevations. About 120 species of birds have been reported here to date (we may add a few!), and our focus is finding Plain Pigeon, Cuban Parakeet, Rose-throated Parrot, Bare-legged Owl, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Palm Crow, three species of woodpeckers (Cuban Green Woodpecker, West Indian Woodpecker, and Fernandina’s Flicker), and Giant Kingbird.

Once it warms up and becomes nearly too hot for birding, we pack up and continue our travels to Cayo Coco, an archipelago on Cuba’s north coast. We have lunch along the way.

Most of the afternoon is spent conducting our surveys on Cayo Coco. The Cayo Coco region is like a chain of pearls, the second-largest key in Cuba recently connected to the mainland by a rock-filled road, which we drive. The area is mostly covered by semi-deciduous forests and also has a good mix of other habitats to support a good variety of species.

Besides the forest area, we bird in habitats that include mangroves, coastal shrubs, patches of grassland, and lagoons. A total of over 200 species have been reported to date, including many Cuban rarities. We should add several new birds here, including Cuban Gnatcatcher, a race of Zapata Sparrow, and Oriente Warbler. We also make an effort to find Western Spindalis and Cuban Bullfinch.

Part of our time here is an important effort to observe and record the waders that utilize the wetlands and coastal areas, so our timing is affected by tides. We should record large numbers of American Flamingos. Piping Plover is a winter resident on these keys and a species of concern. Development in the Cayo Coco area is ramping up as tourism increases to the islands, so an understanding of habitat use on the cays is important for future management.

Around supper time, we again complete the bird checklist for the day. Birding plans for the next day, including morning wake up plans, are confirmed.

Accommodations at a resort hotel in Cayo Coco (B,L,D)
Fri., Mar. 23
AM: Birding Cayo Paredón Grande | PM: Birding Cayo Guillermo
Relax a bit this morning. We have a later breakfast than usual; we do not have far to drive before a full morning of birding at Paredón Grande.

Cayo Paredón Grande, a different island than the one we stay on, is recognizable in the distance with its black and yellow painted lighthouse. The main habitat here is sandy coast vegetation and mangroves. As the northernmost island, it is vitally important to migrants and we pay close attention to finding them. Well over 100 bird species have been reported in the area, including Thick-billed Vireo (of the recently described endemic subspecies *cubensis*) and Bahama Mockingbird (a difficult to find bird that appears to be declining across its range, including in Cuba). It is also an excellent area to find Mangrove Cuckoo, Cuban Gnatcatcher, and Oriente Warbler.

In the hot part of the day, we have lunch back at the hotel, and then depart for Cayo Guillermo for late afternoon surveys.

Cayo Guillermo is situated less than an hour northwest of Cayo Coco. This is a sandy key with xerophytic vegetation and lots of palms. This is our best opportunity to find Bahama Mockingbird, and a nice place to wrap up our birding surveys in the area.

*Accommodations at a resort hotel in Cayo Coco (B,L,D)*

Sat., Mar. 24  AM: Birding Cayo Coco or Other Coastal Area / Drive to Havana
Today, we focus on any species we may have missed. Though we spend most of the day driving to Havana, we have a final morning to bird any sites in the Cayo Coco area. We also plan some coastal birding stops to survey on the way to Havana, especially in the morning. We can also count on the expertise of our premier local guides to help us find any species we may have missed thus far.
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We arrive back in Havana in the afternoon. After completing the final bird survey checklist, we head for a celebratory dinner, and our local guide clarifies departure plans for the next day.

Accommodations at a Bed & Breakfast in Havana (B,L,D)

Sun., Mar. 25  Departures
Plan flights out at a time convenient for you; we arrange an airport transfer from the bed and breakfast accordingly.

As you travel home today, reflect on the beauty of Cuban birds and the wonderful opportunity you had to contribute to the knowledge of the beautiful birds of Cuba. Along the way you will have made new friends, and we expect you will plan to return to this fascinating island so important to the ecology and biodiversity of the Caribbean.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!
Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Offset your carbon footprint on one of the many online programs. Show us the receipt and we’ll take 50% — up to $50.00 — of your carbon offset fee off your final payment!

Cost of the Tour

Cost of the tour, per person from Havana, is $4550 DBL / $4890 SGL. The tour cost includes airport transfers, lodging for 10 nights, all meals as noted in the itinerary, service tips for those meals, water on field trips, professional guide services, park and preserve entrance and activity fees, and miscellaneous tour expenses.

Cost of the tour does NOT include airfare from your home to Havana, or items of a personal nature, such as drinks from the bar, telephone, tips for daily maid service, laundry services or gratuities for your Cuban guide and driver (at your discretion, we will give some guidelines).
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Travel Information
You may arrive at a time convenient for you on the tour start date or day prior. You may depart at a time convenient for you on the departure date. Please ask for our Arrivals and Departure Planning information to help with your planning. Our tour host intends to fly through Fort Lauderdale. You will be notified of your host’s route and schedule so you can match up flights if you choose.

Group Size
This is a small group designed to facilitate the bird survey work conducted on this tour and participation is limited to 8 persons.

Our Partners & the Surveys
Our ornithological studies in Cuba are coordinated to assist the work of the bird curator at the National Museum of Natural History of Cuba, Arturo Kirkconnell. Arturo works with his son, Arturo Kirkconnell, Jr., and a team of some of the most talented birders in Cuba that act as our survey coordinators and guides.

Our Local Guides

Arturo Kirkconnell
Arturo Kirkconnell is the author of over 70 definitive papers on Cuban birds. Data from the survey tours he leads assists with his current writings and projects. He has co-authored with O.H. Garrido an important reference for Cuba, the field guide to the Birds of Cuba and a bird-finding guide to the major islands of the Caribbean. It is exciting to help as he completes an extensive island checklist project. Our tour logistics are coordinated by Partners in International Birding, which has extensive experience in the region.

Arturo Kirkconnell, Jr. (R2 or Junior)
Arturo Kirkconnell (sometimes referred to as R2 or Arturo, Junior) has been a professional bird guide in Cuba for nine years, and he has been birding in Cuba for over 20 years. He has guided independent travelers, small groups, and large groups since 2009. Arturo completed his Bachelors of Science at the University of Havana in 2012. Though his degree is in computer science, his true passion is birding.

Arturo (R2) has participated in many of his father’s expeditions since he was nine years old (almost twenty years ago), and he fell in love with birding as he grew up. He has helped on a number of his father’s ornithological study tours as a bird researcher and field assistant over the last decade. Arturo is working to complete the Photographic Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba and an app for the birds of Cuba. The app will be photo based and have bird songs.

Besides learning to hone his field skills at his father’s side, Arturo (R2) has taught Arturo (R1) the value of high-quality customer service. Both Arturos and their team members work hard to meet the needs of their clients during the tour. You will enjoy your birding and ornithological research experience with any of the professionals on the Kirkconnells’ team.
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Legal Travel to Cuba

U.S. citizens require approval from the Treasury Department to visit (spend money) in Cuba. There are guidelines for how U.S. citizens can legally travel to Cuba if they are engaging in one of 12 categories of activities, such as professional research, participating in an athletic event, performing in a concert, working on a humanitarian project, or taking part in educational activities. This tour falls under the professional research category and you should be prepared to participate fully, and to help the recorder keep field notes as you conduct surveys in Cuba's top priority conservation areas.

Endemic Birds of Cuba

Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Black Hawk, Gundlach's Hawk, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Bare-legged Owl, Cuban Nightjar, Blue-headed Quail-dove, Gray-fronted Quail-dove, Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Solitaire, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Fernandina's Woodpecker, Cuban Palm Crow, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Yellow-headed Warbler, Oriente Warbler, Cuban Vireo, Cuban Bullfinch, Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow, Cuban Grassquit, Red-shouldered Blackbird, Cuban Oriole, Cuban Blackbird, and two that are extremely rare and almost impossible to see: Cuban Kite and Zapata Rail.

Photo Credits

Bee Hummingbird, Vickie Henderson (VH); Cuban Trogon, Arturo Kirkconnell (AK); Cuban Emerald, Jonathan Sequira; Cuban Parrot, Greg Smith (GS); Cuban Tody, Peg Abbott (PA); Cuban Pygmy Owl, Bud Ferguson (BF); Female Bee Hummingbird on Nest, AK; Havana Buildings, VH; Birding Stop, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Malecon in Havana, PA; Havana Walkway, PA; Viñales Valley, Dodie Logue (DL); Cuban Grassquit, PA; Female Bee Hummingbird, PA; Cuban Parakeet, AK; Bee Hummingbird, PA; Walk in Zapata Wetlands, NJS; Flamingoes, GS; Cuban Parakeet, BF; Cuban Tody, PA; Cuban Pygmy Owl, AK; Oriente Warbler, AK; Zapata Sparrow, PA; Greater Flamingoes, GS; Clapper Rail, PA; West Indian Woodpecker, Lynn Feryus; Zapata Sparrow, AK; Blue-headed Quail-dove, AK; Cuban Pewee, AK; Cuban Bullfinch, PA; Thick-billed Vireo, VH; Cuban Gnatcatcher, PA; Cuban Grassquit, AK; Tropical Birding, DL; Crested Caracara, Alex Vargo.