

Cuban Ornithological Survey

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures

November 1 – 13, 2019

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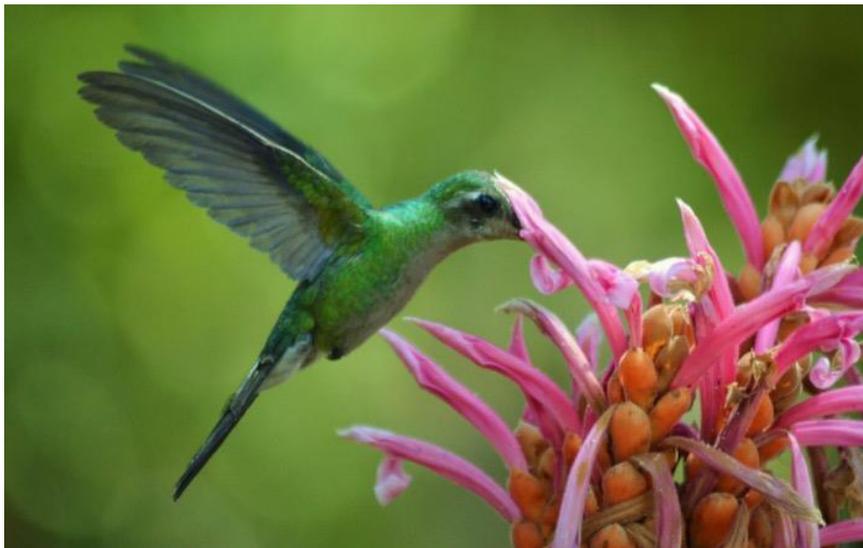
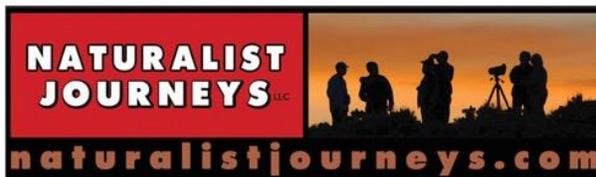
800.426.7781

520.558.1146

naturalistjourneys@gmail.com

www.naturalistjourneys.com

or find us on Facebook at
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

13-Day / 12-Night Cuban Ornithological Survey with Andrew Haffenden

\$4890 from Havana

Airport is José Martí International Airport (HAV)

Itinerary

Fri., Nov. 1 Miami | Havana | Viñales Valley

Welcome to Cuba! Please plan to arrive today in Havana this morning, no later than 1:30 PM. You may need to arrive a day early; we are happy to recommend a hotel. Once the group assembles, we head southeast in the at

Cuban Ornithological Survey

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about 2:30 PM to the Viñales region in Pinar del Rio province, a little under four hours away. The Viñales valley is an area rich in birdlife and with some of the best landscape in Cuba. The prime landscape feature of the region are the mogotes — limestone karst that has formed dramatic hills ranging from 50 to 1000 feet. They are usually steep sided and often domed, due to a hard, weathered limestone cap and softer limestone sides. Caves are found throughout the mogotes, including shallow open ones where it's possible to see stalactites while driving the roads. We spend two nights here to have time to enjoy the area, and get our bird survey off to a good start with endemic Cuban Blackbird.

Accommodations at Hotel La Ermita or Rancho San Vicente, Viñales (L,D)

Sat., Nov. 2 Viñales Valley

We record many of the birds today that become familiar to us over our Cuba journey, including the gorgeous Cuban Trogon, cute Cuban Tody, Cuban Bullfinch, Cuban Green Woodpecker, and the stunning Red-legged Thrush, which like the Western Spindalis is particularly colorful in Cuba. Cuban Grassquit and Cuban Solitaire are most likely to be found in the Viñales area, and we make a special effort to see these. The Solitaire, a rather drab bird, is usually not difficult to find by call, but much harder to see, even when close. Its call sounds like what you might get if you crossed a Northern Mockingbird with a Wood Thrush, and is quite ventriloquial. Since it prefers densely foliated trees and stays quite still, it can be a frustrating beast indeed. But we have plenty of time, and should be successful.

We visit a number of locations with opportunities, but especially Cueva de los Portales adjacent to Parque Nacional La Guira. This large cave in a mogote is both scenic and historic; Che Guevara used it as the headquarters of his army during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it is now a national monument. Among the pine trees we look for endemic Yellow-headed Warbler and regional endemic Olive-capped Warbler.

Accommodations at Hotel La Ermita or Rancho San Vicente, Viñales (B,L,D)

Sun., Nov. 3 Viñales Valley | Playa Larga

We depart for Playa Larga this morning — our departure depends on whether we need to find and record any birds we missed or need further time with. Along the way make a stop at a lake that is good for ducks, Least

Cuban Ornithological Survey

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Grebe, kingfishers and other waterbirds. We also make other stops as needed for birding along the way, especially at some agricultural ponds for Snail Kite, Cuban Black Hawk, herons and egrets, and the likely to become endemic Eastern Meadowlark.

We should arrive by mid-afternoon in Playa Larga, located at the norther tip of Bahía de Cochinos, better known to most in the US as the Bay of Pigs. Immediately adjacent is Zapata Swamp, the largest and best preserved and protected swamp in the entire Antilles, and is home to many endemic plants, birds, and other animals, including the extremely endangered Cuban Crocodile. Tonight and another nights we check a couple of spots for the nearly mythical Stygian Owl, and we also look for other night birds like the former Greater Antillean Nightjar, now split resulting in another endemic, Cuban Nightjar.

Accommodations in casa particular, Playa Larga (B,L,D)

Mon., Nov. 4 Playa Larga

The Zapata Swamp is rich in birds — it supports 20 of Cuba's endemics — so once again endemics are high on our list. The southern race of Zapata Sparrow is usually reliable here, though patience is required for this shy species; Zapata Wren is also usually encountered here. While looking for these we also listen for the rare Cuban Sandhill Crane. Gundlach's Hawk breeds here, and both endemic Red-shouldered and near endemic Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds (the island of Hispaniola is its other location) should be seen here. The large Great Lizard-Cuckoo is common, and Cuban Oriole is often seen in flowering shrubs and trees, including in built-up areas. There's an area nearby that's usually good for Gray-fronted Quail-Dove and White-crowned Pigeon. Since we have a number of areas within easy reach, and birds can be harder to see in the thick swamp and forest, we've devoted two full days to Zapata, giving us better chances of finding everything and time for both careful study and getting important photographs for the records. One day we visit the home of a local couple, whose yard attracts both Bee Hummingbird and Cuban Emerald due to the planting of preferred food species. Those interested can learn more about the Bay of Pigs invasion at a small museum in Playa Girón.

Accommodations in casa particular, Playa Larga (B,L,D)

Tues., Nov. 5 Playa Larga Area

We continue to find and record the birds and natural world of Zapata, visiting a large saline area where we find hundreds of American Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Red Knot during migration, Gull-billed Terns, Cuban Yellow Warbler, and many more. We take a river journey in a small boat to search for birds in a fresh to brackish water environment, and may see the endangered Cuban Crocodile. One of

Cuban Ornithological Survey

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



our mornings here a local guide takes us to a protected area with many endemics — Cuban Trogon, Tody, Oriole, Screech Owl, Pewee, Vireo, Parakeet, and Parrot can all be found here, as can the endemics Bare-legged Screech Owl and Blue-headed and Gray-fronted Quail-doves. By walking around the village we can interact and learn more about our Cuban neighbors, as they do of us.

Accommodations in casa particular, Playa Larga (B,L,D)

Wed., Nov. 6 Playa Larga | Trinidad

This morning we drive west to Trinidad, a small historical colonial city. Along the way we stop at the Cienfuegos Botanical Garden, a good place for warblers, Red-legged Thrush, Scaly-naped Pigeon, Cuban Parakeet, Loggerhead Kingbird, and especially Gundlach's Hawk. In Trinidad we enjoy a guided walk around the town center to learn some of the history and interact with local Cubans. There are also mud and sand flats just south of the city, which we visit for waders and shorebirds.

Accommodations in casa particular, Trinidad (B,L,D)

Thurs., Nov. 7 Trinidad | Camaguey

We have a longish drive this morning to Camaguey, but break it up with stops listening for endemic Cuban Palm Crow; we should also see and hear Cuban Crow to compare the calls. We also look for the Cuban form of Eastern Meadowlark and for Cave Swallows along the way.

Once we reach Camaguey, we settle into our accommodations and, if time, bird a bit around the hotel before dinner.

Accommodations in casa particular, Camaguey (B,L,D)

Fri., Nov. 8 Camaguey | Cayo Coco

We make a very early start this morning, with breakfast in the field, as we travel to the Najasa area in search of Giant Kingbird and Cuban Palm Crow; this is the most reliable area in Cuba for both, and it's important to add records of their continued existence — both are endangered due to land clearing. Once we've spotted spent time watching and documenting at Najasa, we turn towards the northern coast and the Archipelago Jardines del Rey, where we stay for three nights on Cayo Coco. We should arrive late afternoon, giving us time for a slow drive along the 17-mile long causeway to the cay. Royal, Caspian, and Sandwich Terns and Brown Pelicans can be seen over the water, and often Flamingos, Black-necked Stilts, and other waterbirds may also be seen. In bushes along the road, warblers, vireos and Red-legged Thrush are common, and Cuban Black Hawk and Northern

Cuban Ornithological Survey

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Caracara are usually present.

Accommodations at an all-inclusive resort, Cayo Coco (B,L,D)

Sat., Nov. 9 Cayo Coco

We spend today birding around Cayo Coco, starting off early at the Disco (Jubali) Cave for Key West Quail-Dove and a number of endemics, including the northern race of Zapata Sparrow, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Oriente Warbler, Cuban Tody, and near endemic Cuban Emerald among others. Non-endemics include Zenaida Dove, Western Spindalis, — the Cuban race is perhaps the brightest colored — Mangrove Cuckoo and Greater Antillean Grackle. We visit several areas for other endemics such as Cuban Green Woodpecker, waders, and many others. We should be able to find resident West Indian Whistling-Duck on a small lake near our hotel. We can also visit a market where local artisans and craftspeople sell goods. The locals speak a bit of English, so our wanderings a good opportunities to interact with these entrepreneurial Cubans.

Accommodations at an all-inclusive resort, Cayo Coco (B,L,D)

Sun., Nov. 10 Paredón Grande | Cayo Guillermo

We take an early breakfast this morning, then depart to Paredón Grande, with its famous black and yellow lighthouse. This area is another endemic high point, with Cuban Bullfinch and Cuban Vireo being in our sights. This is also the best place to find the extremely restricted Bahama Mockingbird, and Thick-billed Vireo, also restricted to just part of the archipelago. Zapata Sparrow, Cuban Gnatcatcher, and Oriente Warbler are also here, and of course the ever-present and active Cuban Emerald. We return to our hotel for lunch and some free time, or more local birding, then later in the afternoon head west to Cayo Guillermo, with American Flamingo being one of our goals this afternoon, along with Bahama Mockingbird if we dipped earlier in the day. But we see many other birds as well, likely including a range of waders and shorebirds, a variety of ducks often including whistle-ducks, as well as Cuban Black Hawk, Antillean Palm-Swift, Crested Caracara, Greater Antillean Grackle, LaSagra's Flycatcher, and a number of our own warblers starting to get colored up and about to leave for the US and Canada.

Accommodations at an all-inclusive resort, Cayo Coco (B,L,D)

Mon., Nov. 11 Cayo Coco | Havana

We have a long day of travel today, though we break it up with several stops along the way as birding opportunities present. Our first stop is a wetland near Morón, and our main stop is Santa Clara, where we have

Cuban Ornithological Survey

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lunch at a hotel with nesting Antillean Palm-Swift in the roofing material, and visit the fascinating Che Guevara Memorial. On our way into Havana we stop at Revolution Square, with the impressive José Martí Memorial facing the huge square where Fidel Castro gave his famous and lengthy speeches.

Accommodations in casa particular, Havana (B,L,D)

Tues., Nov. 12 Havana

Today we explore Havana, founded in 1519, full of both restored and decaying old buildings, arts, music, and people — over two million people live here, about 20% of Cuba's total population. Old Havana is not just a tourist area, but a living one, with homes and schools. Flanked by forts and churches, the narrow streets and four historic plazas make for easy walking around Habana Viejo, the old part of the city contained within the old city walls, parts of which still remain. And, of course, there are the American vintage cars.

We enjoy a walking tour, learning of the history both old and recent, including the hotel Hemingway stayed in before buying Finca Vigía, and his favorite bar, Bodeguita del Medio. And speaking of bars, we have lunch at Sloppy Joes, the origin of the sandwich — and still selling it — and the most famous bar in Havana back when Cuba was a weekend place for visiting Americans ranging from movie stars to mobsters. We also visit the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes with a superb collection of mostly modern Cuban art, and there may be time to visit the Museum of the Revolution for those who would like to.

We make time to visit the artisan and artist market, a huge affair housed in a wharf warehouse. Unlike at many such markets, everything has to be made in Cuba, and other than t-shirts and similar, most are not factory produced. While there are plenty of the typical and tacky souvenirs ranging from the ubiquitous Che-embazoned t-shirts to fridge magnets seen in other countries, there's some great artwork, often with the artist in attendance, and other worthy purchases. And it's not just for tourists; many of the people wandering around are Cubans, who buy things for their homes and clothing for their children here, among other things.

To return to our casa particular we join together in groups of three or four and take a 1950s American car for a one hour tour, which goes to places we didn't get to, including Lennon Park and areas outside the old city for a true understanding of Havana. A walk along the famous Malecón is also a tradition with Habaneros, as long as the wind isn't blowing seawater over the edge.

Accommodations in casa particular, Havana (B,L,D)

Cuban Ornithological Survey

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Wed., Nov. 13 Havana | Miami

This morning we continue to explore Havana, likely visiting the amazing Fusterlandia, part of an inner suburb where an artist expansively decorated his house with tiles and tiled statues of all designs; locals asked him for help decorating their own homes. We have other options as well, and this morning's activities are decided by each group the evening before. Depending on your flight time you are transferred to the airport for your flight back to the US (some may miss the morning activity). While different airline's flights may vary, all have flights that arrive in time for a generous connection allowing for immigration and customs to continue to your home city. (B)

Our 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 (R1) has taught Arturo (R2) the value of high-quality customer service. Both Arturos and their team members work hard to meet the needs of their

Cuban Ornithological Survey

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clients during the tour. You will enjoy your birding and ornithological research experience with any of the professionals on the Kirkconnells' team.

Andrew Haffenden

Andrew started in the tourist industry in 1968 on Australia's Dunk Island, then worked in the Melbourne Zoo's reptile department, followed by a stint at the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service. Here he did field work, supported by captive studies, on Brolgas, Sarus Cranes, Magpie Geese, Herbert River Ringtail Possums, Longtailed Pygmy Possums and a few others. He also participated in captive studies of tree kangaroos, antechinuses and leatherback turtles. In 1986 he started a small eco-tour company in North Queensland, which grew into a nature and adventure company. Once Andrew moved to the US, he was responsible for tours to the Pacific, Southeast Asia, Chile and Alaska, before starting Nature Travel Specialists in 2003. He resides in the peaceful birding haven of Dauphin Island where he quickly entered the local community to share interests of conservation. He enjoys cooking, reading, networking with friends and colleagues, and the challenge of a new adventure.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Tour

Cost of the tour, per person from Havana, is \$4890 DBL / \$5290 SGL, per person. The tour cost includes airport transfers, lodging for 12 nights, all meals as noted in the itinerary, service tips for those meals, tips for local guides, 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). One local beer, soft drink, or bottle of water is supplied with lunch and dinner and other than at the all-inclusive Cayo Coco hotel, additional drinks and wine are not included.

Travel Information

Please arrive no later than 1:30 PM on November 1. If you need to come in a day early, we can make hotel recommendations. You may depart at a time convenient for you on November 13, though we do have optional morning activities available if you'd like to plan for afternoon departures. You will be notified of your host's route and schedule so you can match up flights if you choose. Please talk with us before finalizing your flight details to make sure your arrival and departure times work with the arrival and departure days' activities.

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.

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Our Partners & the Surveys

Our ornithological studies in Cuba are coordinated to assist the work of the former bird curator at the National Museum of Natural History of Cuba, Arturo Kirkconnell, who continues fieldwork on Cuban birds aimed at expanding knowledge of their abundance and distribution for scientific and conservation purposes. 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.

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 Support for the Cuban People 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.

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; Malécon, PA; Birding Stop, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Viñales Valley, Dodie Logue; Cuban Blackbird and Horse, Doug Greenberg (DG); Cuban Trogon, VH; Cuban Tody, DG; Cuban Black Hawk, DG; Great Lizard Cuckoo, DG; White-crowned Pigeon, Carlos Sanchez; Stygian Owl, DG; Cuban Parakeet, AK; Bare-legged Screech Owl, Rich Wagner | WildNaturePhotos (RW); Cuban Oriole, PA; American Flamingos, GS; Cuban Parrot, RW; Crested Caracara, NJS; Cuban Green Woodpecker, RW; Key West Quail-Dove, DG; Zapata Sparrow, DG; Havana Buildings x2, DG; Che Guevara Memorial, PA; Havana Buildings, PA.