

# Puerto Rico Birding & Nature | Trip Report

## Feb 2 – 8, 2026 | by Rick Weiman



**With host Rick Weiman and 7 adventurous clients that included Eileen, Rich, Christine, Barbara, Katherine, Gretchen, and Vivian, and local guide Alcides Morales.**



### **Monday, February 2 - Arrivals in Puerto Rico and Pre-tour Extension**

Five of the group including Rick arrived the day before in order to take part in a pre-tour extension. We stayed at a B&B called Casa Wilson not too far from the airport and the local beach. The tour included a guided walk of Old San Juan in the morning with a lovely local historian name Sara. We learned many things about the history of Puerto Rico such as that San Juan became the capital in 1521, and the Franciscans established the first Catholic Churches. Christopher Columbus and Ponce de Leon were early Spanish explorers that led the way for the island to be held under Spanish rule for several hundred years. Sugar, molasses, and coffee became its main exports. In the late 1890s the Spanish-American War resulted in the United States taking Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and other colonial possessions from Spain. Spain subsequently ceded the island to the United States by the Treaty of Paris, which was signed in December 1898 and in 1913 native Puerto Ricans officially became US citizens.

Many of the streets we walked on interspersed through the colorful buildings and churches were blue cobblestone. Sara told us an interesting fact that the cobblestones came from Liverpool and they are blue



because they're coated with a metal slag. During the tour we also added a few of the local birds including Eastern Red-legged Thrush, Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds, and a few American Oystercatchers near the port area. We enjoyed an authentic Puerto Rican lunch at Deaverdura Restaurant, where some of us tried Mofongo, a local dish made with a plantain bowl shaped crust and loaded with delicious filling choices like beef, chicken, fresh grouper, or shrimp.

After lunch our driver Carlos transported us to the University of Puerto Rico Botanical Gardens where we walked the trails in a light misty rain. The bird life was mostly quiet here due to the weather, but we did enjoy watching a brightly colored Green Heron successfully hunt for some fresh fish. We also had good looks at White-winged and Zenaida Doves, Bananaquits, and a Common Gallinule.

Around 6:00 we met up with Vivian and Gretchen, who had both flown in today, and our local guide for the week, Alcides Morales. We walked a few blocks to a local restaurant called Cayo Caribe for our welcome dinner and enjoyed a fine meal of Puerto Rican specialties and fresh seafood as we got to better know one another.

## **Tuesday February 3 – Caguas, Aguirre, Bahia de Jobos & La Parguera**

We had an early morning departure today as Alcides arrived with the van and some to-go breakfast sandwiches and coffee. After loading the van with our luggage we headed west towards Caguas, our first stop at the day. Here we did some roadside birding next to a stream that was very productive. One of our target birds was the Plain Pigeon, a large pale pigeon of woodlands and forest edges, and this would be our main chance to see it. We had some distant views of perched and flying birds but then one landed in a tree near us for an excellent look. In the stream we added our first herons of the tour with several Tricolored and a Green Heron, as well as a Great and Snowy Egret. Barb spotted a distant bright orange bird on top of a hibiscus tree that turned out to be a Venezuelan Troupial. It was soon joined by a second one. We then added our first endemic bird of the tour in the same tree, a black and yellow Puerto Rican Oriole. In all this stop gave us 20 species, a good start to the first full day of the tour.

We continued west for another short stop at Eco Plaza Borinquen where we birded along a stream under a gazebo as a light rain fell. We had nice looks at Scaly-naped Pigeons as well as a migrant Northern Parula, more Bananaquits, and our first of many Northern Antillean Grackles. We then visited a location in Aguirre that Alcides knew to look for two of our target hummingbirds, the Green-throated Carib and Antillean Crested Hummingbird. Alcides told us they frequented the pink flowers of the local white cedar trees and before long we added both birds to our list. We also added our second endemic of the tour, as a yellow and orange Puerto Rican



Spindalis flew into one of the cedars. A migrant Merlin, a local Red-tailed Hawk, and several Cave Swallows joined our growing list as well.

Our next stop was at an estuary called Bahia de Jobos. As we parked the van, we heard the loud chatter of parakeets and soon realized we were near a large colony of introduced Monk Parakeets and their massive colonial nests. We walked the trails there surrounded by several species of mangroves and our first bird as if on cue was a cooperative Mangrove Cuckoo that we had heard calling. We added several new birds to the list including endemic number three, a Puerto Rican Woodpecker, as well as a pair of migrant Peregrine Falcons perched on a distant tower, a local American Kestrel, several Royal Terns, and our first shorebird, a Spotted Sandpiper. We had an outdoor lunch at a local restaurant where more mofongos were tried, then headed to La Parguera and settled into our La Jamaca hotel for the next 3 nights. We had the rest of the afternoon off to unpack, relax by the pool, and catch up on some rest.

We had dinner in town and afterwards drove to a location that Puerto Rican Nightjars were known to frequent. These nightjars do not rest on the ground and fly hunters, but perch in trees so they are not as easy to see as others in this family of birds. We heard several calling almost immediately upon hopping out of the van. Alcides used voice recording playback which got several of them flying and calling and we were able to follow their eyeshine with his powerful flashlight. After about a half hour of trying to coax them closer we had good enough looks to add endemic bird number four to the checklist. A pair of Yellow-crowned Night Herons also flew by, outlined in the beams of our lights.

### **Wednesday February 4 – Maricao State Forest, La Parguera, Bioluminescent Bay**

We departed the hotel at 7:00 AM for our approximately one-hour drive to Maricao State Forest. Along the way we stopped for a quick to-go breakfast and some coffee and tea. The forest is located in the western Cordillera Central mountains of the island. With an area of 10,803 acres it is the largest of the 20 forestry units of the Puerto Rico state forest system. Our drive took us from sea level to almost 2800' feet in elevation at our first stop. Our Puerto Rican endemic list quickly grew from four to seven as we added great looks at Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo and Puerto Rican Tanager, and most of us got glimpses of the diminutive Elfin-woods Warbler. We also observed a few migrant warblers including a Black-throated Blue and a pair of super cooperative Cape May Warblers in breeding plumage. Other birds at this stop were Pearly-eyed Thrasher, Shiny Cowbird, and Christine finally got some good looks at her elusive Bananaquit.

We moved on to another location in the forest with a gorgeous overlook of the Caribbean Sea and had a local photographer take a group picture of us at this scenic site. A short walk amazingly gave us four new endemic



birds including Puerto Rican Vireo, Puerto Rican Emerald, Puerto Rican Bullfinch, and the incredibly cute Puerto Rican Tody. If you're counting that's eleven endemic species on only the second full day of the trip. Here we also had great looks at both Gray and Loggerhead Kingbirds for a nice comparison, including a Loggerhead adult on a nest. We added an American Redstart and another Elfin-woods Warbler but before we moved on Kathy shouted "snake!". She had spotted an impressive Red-tailed Boa Constrictor, maybe 5 feet long, crossing the path in front of us. We watched it disappear into the brush as Alcides explained it was another introduced species to the island.

We made one more roadside stop where Alcides had seen Puerto Rican Euphonias before and within a few minutes a pair appeared before diving out of view. This is one of the more colorful euphonias with the classic yellow underside and dark blue back but also with a powder blue crown in both sexes. We watched a hummingbird feed on hibiscus flowers and then noticed it return to a nest and start feeding young! It turned out to be our thirteenth island endemic, a Green Mango. A few more repeat birds were seen before a flycatcher sallied over giving us endemic number fourteen, a Puerto Rican Flycatcher. Not a bad stop but it was time to leave and drive back towards the hotel. We had a late lunch and then made it back to the hotel mid-afternoon. As we unloaded the van we noticed some large black birds in the field behind the hotel that turned out to be Smooth-billed Anis. We also added at least eight Bronze Mannikins hopping on the ground near the Anis, making for a very productive day.

We took a short break at the hotel (pool time for some of us) and then drove towards La Parguera village and walked along the edge of some mangroves onto a dock by the bay. There was bird feeder behind a house where Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds sometimes frequented. Before long we had several in view alongside some House Sparrows, and by the time we were done twenty-five or more flew by us into the mangroves. That brought our endemic total up to fifteen out of a possible nineteen species. We added African Collared Dove, Killdeer, an immature Little Blue Heron, and had a great look at a Clapper Rail preening amongst the mangrove roots. Then it was on to dinner at a local pizzeria before heading back to the Lajas docks for our nighttime boat trip on the La Parguera Bioluminescent Bay. Bioluminescence in the bay is due to the large concentration of dinoflagellates, tiny organisms that light up when disturbed. La Parguera on Puerto Rico's southwest coast is the only bioluminescent bay in Puerto Rico (there are two others) where motorboats are allowed. Our group was joined by several other travelers and off we went into the darkness of the bay with our experienced captain and only the lights of the stars above us.



None of our group had decided to swim but we enjoyed watching the others splash around (wearing life vests of course) with their arm and feet movements causing shiny green flashes of light. The captain poured a bucket of water onto the boat deck for us non-swimmers and the green flashes of the dinoflagellates were even more evident. After about an hour on the water we returned to the hotel to complete our species checklist and then retired for a much-needed rest after a very full and rewarding day.

### **Thursday February 5 – Laguna Cartagena, Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuge, & La Parguera Nature Reserve**

Today started with a more relaxing pace with a nice order off the menu breakfast at the hotel. Before boarding the van we birded around the hotel and added endemic number sixteen, a male Puerto Rican Mango that was buzzing around a local garden. An immature male of this species was seen earlier in the tour by Gretchen but this was the first good look by the rest of the group. We also added some common birds like Northern Mockingbird, Mourning and Common Ground Doves, Black-faced Grassquit, and great views of a wire perched Venezuelan Troupial, glowing orange in the early morning sun.

We were then off to visit the Laguna Cartagena National Wildlife Refuge in Lajas to enjoy a morning birding walk around the ponds and freshwater wetlands. The refuge is comprised of 1043-acres and is part of the Caribbean Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The refuge is one of the most important freshwater habitats for migrating waterfowl and aquatic birds in Puerto Rico. On the drive into the refuge a few of us spotted a Prairie Warbler in the roadside reeds. As we walked the trail, several new birds were added to the trip list like Yellow-faced Grassquit, a migrant Common Yellowthroat, a sneaky Great Blue Heron spotted by Barb, and a young Purple Gallinule. Mangrove Cuckoos were not shy and during our almost 2-hours here we had five of them in view foraging for insects. A patient Merlin sat in a tree quietly while we walked by and Gretchen got a wonderful picture of it. We also had more close looks at a Puerto Rican Tody, which of course you can never get enough of, and endemic bird number seventeen, a colorful Adelaide's Warbler.

We walked a boardwalk trail next to a freshwater pond and had good views of a pair of Sora rails, a lone Glossy Ibis, and a not so common female Masked Duck, which was Alcides favorite bird of the day. Later we had two additional females on a second pond as we exited the refuge. Before leaving the boardwalk, we heard a calling Limpkin and a Least Bittern and counted at least five Common Gallinules.



In the late morning we made a stop at the Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuge salt flats and added some migrant shorebirds here like Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Black-bellied Plover, Black-necked Stilt, and decent sized flocks of Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers. On the way back to the van Vivian spotted a distant perched bird that once in the scope turned out to be our first Belted Kingfisher. One more stop in the refuge gave us several more Black-necked Stilts and Black-bellied Plovers, and we added Semipalmated Plovers and Ruddy Turnstones to our shorebird list for the day.

We stopped at a restaurant called Annie's Place in Cabo Rojo which was an open-air restaurant right on the beach. Right next to us was an old pier with a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls and stacked with Royal and Sandwich Terns. Gretchen noticed that one of the Royal Terns had a red and silver leg band that Rick later found out was banded on the coast of Georgia. As we enjoyed fresh seafood, we watched Brown Pelicans dive for fish and got excited when Alcides spotted a Brown Booby fly by. A Magnificent Frigatebird also decided to pay us a visit. There were several Ruddy Turnstones and Sally Lightfoot crabs on the rocks near our table and we watched a Green Moray Eel hunting along the rocky shoreline. Rick found and released a hermit crab trapped in the restaurant and spotted another Red-tailed Boa Constrictor in some cinder blocks near the beach. Definitely our favorite lunch stop of the tour! After lunch we headed back to the hotel for an afternoon break.

Around 4:30 we took a short hike in the nearby La Parguera Nature Reserve. A family group of Loggerhead Kingbirds were apparently having a dispute as they were calling loudly and flying back and forth when we entered the reserve. Alcides played a mobbing recording through his speaker that in theory would hopefully get the attention of the nearby birds of the forest. Well, it worked as soon we had a nice mixed flock of birds coming in to see what all the commotion was about. In the flock were several Adelaide's Warblers, seven (yes seven!) Prairie Warblers, a few Northern Mockingbirds and Venezuelan Troupials, a pair of Puerto Rican Flycatchers, and a new bird for the tour, a Caribbean Elaenia. A short walk across the street into a different habitat of mangroves and mudflats gave us several more Clapper Rails, both calling and visible, and another Black-bellied Plover. Here we added some new birds as well including a pair of Willets, a single Hudsonian Whimbrel, and three new warblers for the tour – Prothonotary, Mangrove Yellow (the race here is all yellow), and Northern Waterthrush.

We had one more birding stop before dinner, a half hour drive away to El Cayul-Bermeja, a forested road on the outskirts of Cabo Rojo. We arrived just before sunset and had a late Caribbean Martin fly over and nice looks at a pair of Puerto Rican Woodpeckers. Our main goal here was to try and find the Puerto Rican Owl. As the sunset



we heard its trill-like call, not unlike our own Screech Owl. Alcides played some recorded calls and a pair of owls soon answered and flew closer to the group. Despite our efforts we did not get good looks at them but by hearing them call we were able to add them to the list as island endemic number eighteen. Before leaving we also heard the calls of Puerto Rican Nightjars.

We had dinner at the hotel and completed our checklist but before retiring Gretchen mentioned that another birding group who shall remain nameless had recently done a Puerto Rico tour and ended up with 101 species. At that point we were around 95 birds so the challenge was on for our last few days on the island.

## **Friday February 6 – Rio Abajo State Forest, Hatillo, Humedal Carrizales, Los Amadores**

An early day today as we met at 5:30 AM with our luggage and loaded everything into the vans. Along the way we made a stop for a grab and go breakfast. We were heading to Rio Abajo State Forest to search for the endangered and endemic Puerto Rican Amazon, one of the rarest parrots on Earth. As we drove Alcides explained to us that the parrots once numbered only thirteen birds, but conservation and captive breeding efforts (which Alcides was involved with) had helped the numbers of these parrots grow to around five hundred birds. Alcides drove to a spot with a flat, straight trail leading deep into the forest. As we walked, Black-whiskered and Puerto Rican Vireos serenaded us and several more todies and lizard-cuckoos were spotted. We witnessed several pairs of amazons flying across the path and calling but had difficulty initially getting clear looks due to the dense forest canopy. After a frustrating half hour or so of neck craning our perseverance paid off when several amazons landed in a royal palm tree and began feeding on the seeds. At least six amazons were in view at one time as we watched them rip the seeds with their strong beaks.

After enjoying this special moment with endemic bird nineteen of the tour, we slowly walked back towards the van, birding as we went. We added several new birds including Lesser Antillean Pewee, Ruddy Quail-Dove (heard only) and two local Broad-winged Hawks. A Black-and-white Warbler popped into view as did two American Redstarts and several Puerto Rican Woodpeckers.

We then drove west to our hotel in Hatillo and enjoyed a buffet lunch at El Buen Café which is associated with the hotel. It was a bit too early to check in so we went birding instead. Our first stop was at a pond near the beach called Humedal (wetland) Carrizales, very close to the hotel. Here we added Pied-billed Grebe, a perched



Osprey, and an American Coot, along with other birds we'd seen before like Belted Kingfisher, and several Great and Western Cattle-Egrets.

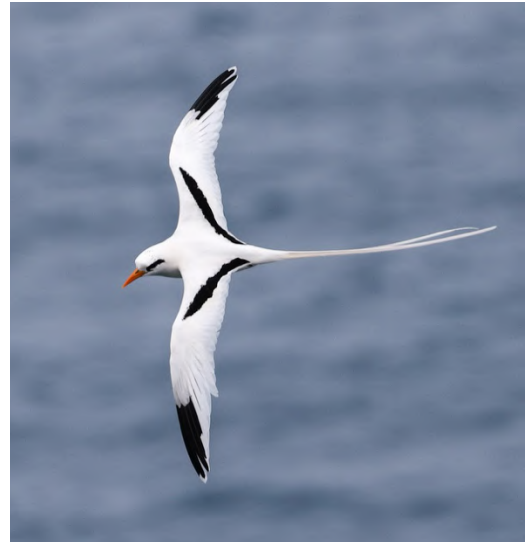
Our next stop was a pretty amazing one as we crossed a road next to Los Amadores beach (after a group picture with the beautiful aqua-blue water of the Atlantic Ocean behind us) to view another large pond that was surrounded by grazing cattle. There were over 100 Black-necked Stilts in and around the pond (diligently counted by Alcides), along with a mix of ducks including Blue-winged Teal and White-cheeked Pintails. We added another Green Heron, and more Glossy Ibis, Snowy Egrets, and Common Gallinules.

Our next stop was at a ranch called Charca Yeguada to scan another pond shared by cattle and birds including more Black-necked Stilts, Glossy Ibis, and gallinules, teal, and pintails. Where there's cattle there are usually Western Cattle-Egrets, and we counted at least forty along with some Smooth-billed Anis.

We then checked into our efficiency apartment type rooms and had the rest of the afternoon off to relax. Gretchen, Barb, and Kathy went to the hotel pool while Eileen and Rick walked to the beach and enjoyed a swim in the calm waters protected by a rocky reef that surrounded the beach. The birding never stops on a bird tour, as the pool group spotted an American Kestrel and a Gray Kingbird perched on poles by the hotel and a Puerto Rican Mango, while Rick and Eileen enjoyed seeing at least fifty Black-bellied Plovers on the rock jetty, several American Oystercatchers, Brown Pelicans diving for fish, and a large flock of over one hundred Glossy Ibis. After a short rest we then met the rest of the group and had dinner at the hotel café, completed our species checklist, and retired for the evening.

## **Saturday February 7 – Los Merenderos, Cambalache State Forest, Julio Enrique Monagas National Park, San Juan**

Today was a travel day back to San Juan with some birding planned along the way. Our first stop after breakfast and checking out of the hotel were the cliff bluffs at Los Merenderos where White-tailed Tropicbirds nested in the rocky crevices below. We enjoyed watching about thirty of the birds soar and circle over the Atlantic in front of us with their long streamer tails trailing gracefully behind them. We added a fly by Peregrine Falcon while there and had a few nice group pictures taken by a local nature enthusiast. After that stop we continued east to Cambalache State Forest to bird some lowland forest habitat. Here we walked some grassy trails and saw several of the same birds we'd seen earlier in the tour but with better looks. These included Eastern Red-legged Thrush, Northern Parula, and Rich and Christine finally had good views of the Puerto Rican Bullfinch and its



contrasting red and black color pattern. We added one new species, a pair of cooperative Saffron Finches before we left.

Lunch was at a seaside restaurant along the ocean called Pura Pesca in La Boca. While we were enjoying fresh mahi mahi and shrimp dishes, Rick spotted a Willet and Belted Kingfisher on the beach and Gretchen added another American Oystercatcher to the list. Our final birding stop of the tour was at Julio Enrique Monagas National Park. We learned that Julio was integral into adding Puerto Rico into the Olympic games in the 1940's. At the park we enjoyed close views of introduced White-winged Parakeets feeding on bark and a pair excavating a nest in a large termite mound nestled in the fork of a tree. Other birds observed were Puerto Rican Woodpeckers, a Pearly-eyed Thrasher, and good looks at White-fronted and Scaly-naped Pigeons. Our last new bird of the tour was a foursome of Pin-tailed Whydahs in their winter plumage, without the impressive long tails of the males.

Once in San Juan we checked in and met up again at 6:00 for a walk to dinner back at Cayo Caribe. Rick brought the group a round of drinks to celebrate a successful tour. We ended up shattering the previous bird tour's recent count with our 115 species of birds total, including all nineteen island endemics. While waiting for our food to arrive we went around the table and shared our favorite birds and memories of the tour. Vivian's favorite bird was the Venezuelan Troupial and her favorite moment was when Kathy yelled "snake!" and then seeing a snake in the wild. Kathy really enjoyed seeing all the White-cheeked Pintails mixed in with the cattle and other birds in the pond by the ranch. Rich picked the Puerto Rican Tody as his favorite bird. He also really enjoyed the Los Amadores beach scene with the beautifully colored ocean water mixed with sunshine and sea breezes as he filmed our smiling faces for the trip video he was taking and planning to share with us all. Christine really enjoyed seeing the White-tailed Tropicbirds as did Barb, and the views of the Orion nebula the night we searched for the Puerto Rican Owl. Gretchen and Eileen also picked the Puerto Rican Tody as their favorite bird, giving us a winner for favorite bird of the trip. Gretchen was also excited to add two new families of birds to her life list and really enjoyed the bioluminescent boat trip. Finally, it was Rick's turn and he went with the Mangrove Cuckoo as his favorite bird of the tour, as he had never had such frequent and close looks at them before. Seeing the Puerto Rican Amazons feeding on the royal palm seeds was his favorite moment, and this was then echoed by Alcides. He said it was a very rare and special thing we had witnessed that day with the parrots as it was almost as if they had accepted our presence in the forest and no longer viewed us as a threat.



Most of us had early flights the next morning so this would be the last time we were together. We thanked Alcides for his excellent guiding and driving skills and said goodbyes to our new friends. Hopefully we'll all travel together again in the future on another Naturalist Journeys adventure.

*Photos: Group at Maricao State Forest (Rick Weiman - RW), San Juan Streets (Barbara Griffith - BG), Puerto Rican Emerald (Gretchen Locy - GL), Puerto Rican Spindalis (GL), Venezuelan Troupial (GL), Puerto Rican Tody (GL), Clapper Rail (GL), Royal Terns (RW), Adelaide's Warbler (RW), Puerto Rican Amazons (GL), Scenic (BG), White-cheeked Pintail (GL), White-tailed Tropicbirds (GL), Pearly-eyed Thrasher (GL), White-winged Parakeets (GL), Grouper Mufongo (RW), Brown Anole (RW), The Ladies at Los Merenderos (RW)*