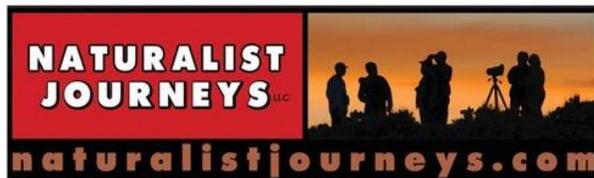


Cuban Ornithological Survey | Trip Report

March 15 – 25, 2018 | Written by Bob Behrstock



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With Cuban Guides Alejandro Llanes Sosa and local guides; Naturalist Journeys Guide Bob Behrstock; and Participants: Robert and Bev, Joan, Linda, Brent and Gail, and Cynthia

A Bit of an Overview

This was Naturalist Journeys' fourth Cuban Ornithological Survey tour this year. Most logistics were handled by Partnership for International Birding, who facilitated our permitting and sent out the pre-tour information. Our permits to visit Cuba were predicated upon us censusing birds and sharing the data with the scientific community, deemed a type of humanitarian project by the U.S. government. This is happening — largely through eBird, which has the power to instantly reach biologists (and birders) throughout the Americas. The tour was designed, as are most Cuban birding events, to attempt to see most of Cuba's endemic birds (24 – 26 are possible, depending on taxonomy), as well as the Antillean endemics that inhabit Cuba (about 26 are possible). We saw all these birds except one, which we heard. In order to visit the haunts of all these species in a reasonable amount of time, the itinerary requires substantial drives and, in our case, several late arrivals. Happily, we had a large comfortable bus with unlimited cold water, and a very pleasant and safe driver. We were accompanied by a representative of a Cuban ground agent who worked in the background smoothing out various issues. Our local bird guide was Alejandro Llanes Sosa, an ornithologist (formerly curator of birds) at the Instituto de Ecología y Sistemática in Havana. He has done field work in the U.S. and Canada and around Cuba, has a long list of publications, and had been a leader on many tours. He was always happy to discuss plants, habitats, or cultural questions posed by participants, and his knowledge of the distribution, plumages, and vocalizations of Cuban birds was solid. It was my third trip to Cuba and while most of the birds were old friends, I did see several birds for the first time. Throughout the trip, the food was good, the lodgings somewhat variable but safe and usually comfortable (or deluxe), and the participants were, I'm happy to say, a good-natured group.

Wed., Mar. 14 Early Arrivals

Joan, Linda, and Cynthia arrived in Havana a day early and were transferred to the Hostal Guido, a large rambling *casa particular* (private home turned hotel) located in the Vedado neighborhood of Old Havana.

Thur., Mar. 15 Arrivals, Rendezvous & Dinner in Old Havana

Joan, Linda, and Cynthia joined their local guide Claudia for an all day tour of Havana. Bob, Robert, and Bev, who had overnighted in Ft. Lauderdale, arrived in Havana at 1:30 PM, but by the time everyone's baggage was sorted out, they left the airport at 3:00. After dropping their luggage at the Hostal Guido, they were delivered to Old Havana where they and the other afternoon arrivals Brent and Gail joined the walking tour with Claudia. This gave the rest of us a short opportunity to see some of Old Havana's historic buildings, lovely architecture, statues, and iron work, as well as our first Greater Antillean Grackles, Palm Warblers, Red-legged Thrushes, and Northern Mockingbirds. At 6:30, we rendezvoused

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with ornithologist Alejandro Llanes Sosa, the tour's Cuban bird guide, and had dinner at Paladar Doña Eutimia adjacent to the Plaza de la Catedral. Most of us opted for the *picadillo*, a tasty dish of ground beef, onions, tomatoes, raisins and olives, accompanied by huge portions of Cuba's ubiquitous rice and beans, and a dessert of flan. During dinner, participants became acquainted with Cuba's famous *mojito*, a cocktail--frozen or not-- of white rum, lime juice, sugar, soda, and mint. As some seek the ideal Key lime pie in South Florida, or the best deep-dish pizza in Chicago, a few participants added the quest for the perfect *mojito* to the trip's birding goals. I, eschewing alcohol while working, concentrated on finding the ideal flan.

Fri., Mar. 16 Old Havana | Las Terrazas | Viñales

The owners of Hostal Guide provided us with a 6:30 breakfast so that we could depart by 7:00 but a flat tire on the bus delayed our departure until 7:30. While waiting, we noted endemic Cuban Blackbirds and more grackles outside the hotel. We also became aware that it was still dark until somewhat after 7:00 AM, a result of the recent time change that is also observed in Cuba. When the bus arrived, we met Carlos, the representative from our ground agent, and our driver Ivan. Both remained with us for the balance of the tour.

We departed through Havana, amazed, as is everyone, by the traffic, a combination of motor scooters, bicycles, peddled cabs, horse-drawn vehicles, trucks, 65 year-old American cars, and newer vehicles from the Soviet Union and the Far East. We also became aware of a phenomenon that is very difficult for most North Americans to accept. Horse carts and bicycles have the right-of-way, even on major roads, meaning that busses, cars, and trucks must slow to two miles per hour and line up behind a bicycle until it is safe to pass. This practice alone added much time to each day's journey. At 8:40, we made our first birding stop at an unassuming side road just outside the planned community of Las Terrazas. In the open scrub and scattered trees, a short stroll provided participants had a rapid-fire introduction to Cuban birdlife, seeing, in short order, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Tawny-shouldered Blackbird, West Indian Woodpecker, Black-whiskered Vireo, Smooth-billed Ani, Yellow-faced Grassquit, and several endemics, i.e., Cuban Pewee, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Green Woodpecker, and, for a couple participants, Fernandina's Flicker. We also found a number of migrant warblers and the first of many, many Gray Catbirds. Here, I noticed that our guide Alejandro was an eBird fiend, as were participants Brent and Gail. Kindred spirits on the first morning. Back in the bus, we made a short drive into Las Terrazas to visit the community's pig farm, a must-see spot for birders. The walk down the driveway produced Cuban Green Woodpeckers at a nest hole, Shiny Cowbirds, Common Ground-Doves, Loggerhead Kingbirds, Cuban Blackbirds, plus other species we'd seen earlier. The pig farm's objective bird was the pretty (and endemic) Cuban Grassquit, several of which were attracted, along with many Yellow-faced Grassquits, to seed put out by the farmers. Located in the Sierra del Rosario, Las Terrazas is a planned community that began in 1968 with the reforestation of land savaged by logging. Terraces (*terrazas*) planted with a variety of trees created some 5,000 hectares of secondary forest that, along with the rest of the community, have become a popular venue for tourists from around the world. In 1984, the success of Las Terrazas was recognized and the area was designated a Biosphere Reserve by

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UNESCO. After a short introduction by our local guide, we walked for about an hour and forty minutes past a lake, through the woodland, and eventually into tall pines. Birds were numerous and besides seeing many we'd found earlier, we added Common Gallinule, Antillean Palm Swift, Western Spindalis, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Yellow-throated, Yellow-rumped, and Olive-capped warblers, Cuban Emerald, Yellow-throated Vireo, and finally, on a pine-covered hill, a roosting pair of elegant Stygian Owls. I think everyone agreed that the first morning's birding was beyond productive. After a short drive within the community, we stopped for lunch at Casa de Campesino, a popular spot with tour groups. We had shredded beef, rice and beans, various greens (yes, we ate the salads), a hot ham and chickpea concoction, plantain chips, and vanilla pudding, all accompanied by live music and, for some, the next round of *mojitos*.

Leaving Las Terrazas, we headed west for the town of Viñales in Pinar del Río Province, Cuba's famous tobacco growing region. En route, we stopped at a number of fish ponds that yielded various species of large waders and shorebirds, the endemic race of Eastern Meadowlark, Brown Pelicans, Osprey, Caspian Terns, and a few Least Grebes. These ponds are probably the best place in Cuba to find Snail Kites. That said, I was astonished to see 28 in the air together at one pond. Finally, we had a slow ride to our hotel, passing through an attractive landscape of emerald green fields dotted with tobacco drying barns, rugged carved limestone hills called *mogotes*, and the popular tourist town of Viñales. We reached the Rancho San Vicente at 6 PM, only to be subjected to the first of a series of glacially slow check-ins that require passports to be collected, information to be written down, forms to be signed, keys to be checked and double checked, etc. While waiting by the pool, a Cuban Oriole appeared, incrementally sweetening the ordeal. We had a nice buffet dinner at 7:30, and then ran through the bird list in the hotel's lobby.

Sat., Mar. 17 Viñales | Playa Larga

The day began with a 6:30 departure and a half hour drive to the Sendero Maravillas, part of Parque Nacional Viñales. Alejandro was hoping to find the very local Cuban Solitaire here, but we only heard them. However, we did see Cuban Bullfinches, Cuban Vireo, the delightful Cuban Tody, Yellow-headed Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, and a number of other species. After a buffet breakfast at the hotel, we left at 10, stopping almost at once to take a short hike that brought us to the face of a limestone *mogote* not far from the hotel. The eerie high-pitched calls of Cuban Solitaires could be heard nearby and it didn't take long for Robert to spot one feeding on small red fruits not far above eye level. As we watched it, a second bird joined it, giving everyone great views. Our Cuban guide Alejandro was sweating this bird, and was obviously very happy that we connected with it early in the day. After leaving Viñales, I happened to glance out the window and saw the wing flash of a Northern Jacana over a vegetated pond. A stop there produced nice views of these strange shorebirds, including a nest perched on floating water lettuce (*Pistia*). We also found a small flock of Cave Swallows, Purple Gallinules, a Solitary Sandpiper, and numerous Zebra Longwings nectaring on roadside shrubbery. At 1:00 we stopped for lunch at Centro Turística Las Barrigonas, a large, open roadside restaurant that provided us with plates of shredded beef, salads, beans, rice, and cold drinks. At 3:15, we checked a

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small roadside pool where a Masked Duck had recently been seen. The duck wasn't present and the best we could do was to find a Black-crowned Night-Heron. At 4:10, we reached Niña Bonita reservoir, a large lake that's a standard stop for birding groups. Here, we had the opportunity to sift through and count large rafts of Lesser Scaup and Ruddy Ducks, but there were lots of other birds present. We noted a single Ring-necked Duck, a Barn Swallow among several Tree Swallows, Least and Pied-billed grebes, American Coots, and a number of large waders and other waterbirds. We arrived at Playa Larga at 7:40; to be subjected to another slow check-in. Walking into dinner, we found a Cuban Treefrog hunting from a light fixture. Dinner included a choice of grilled entrees, a salad bar, fish soup, and several kinds of cake; clearly, we would not starve in Cuba.

Sun., Mar. 18 Playa Larga | Refugio de Fauna Bermejas | Bee Hummingbird | Cueva de Los Peces | Playa Girón

Playa Larga is a jumping off point for birding the vast Zapata Swamp region, a huge mosaic of semi-deciduous woodland, saline flats, mangrove forests, sandy beaches, rocky shores, and saw grass prairies. Although impacted by agriculture, tourism development, introduced vegetation, and tree cutting for charcoal, the swamp is home to nearly all of Cuba's endemic birds as well as a vast numbers of resident and wintering waterbirds and migrant songbirds. Additionally, as documented by a number of roadside billboards and monuments, Playa Larga is also at the north end of the *Bahia de Cochinos* (Bay of Pigs), site of the C.I.A.'s failed invasion of Cuba during April, 1961. The many stops for today's sanctioned invasion dictated a 6:00 breakfast. I had enjoyed Playa Larga on two previous tours, so was sorry to learn at breakfast that a number of the tour participants lacked water pressure in their showers. Carlos appeared to have a plan. Departing in the dark, we drove for about 25 minutes, and then met our local guide Octavio. At 7:15, as the sky began to brighten, we found ourselves in the Refugio de Fauna Bermejas, a few feet inside the forest and lined up behind a shoulder-high wooden fence that served as a blind. Beyond us, in a cleared area that appeared to be a road, was an eye-popping display of doveage that included two stunning and endemic Blue-headed Quail-Doves, at least six subtly beautiful and endemic Gray-headed Quail-Doves and just as many Zenaida Doves. Further away from us, a Ruddy Quail-Dove (always a difficult bird to see) gave us a brief walk-by, and an Ovenbird foraged along the edge of the clearing. As we stood in hushed disbelief, the sound of clicking cameras was all the noise we made, but it was difficult to not gasp as the occasional Gray-headed Quail-Dove walked around the end of the fence, passing nearly between our legs. Other birds singing and flitting around us included Yellow-throated and Black-whiskered vireos, trogons, lizard-cuckoos, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Cuban Pewee, and a variety of northern migrants. What an extraordinary way to start the day. From the blind, we made a short drive to a site called La Cuchilla. As we stepped out of the bus, we immediately saw a pair of endemic Red-shouldered Blackbirds in a roadside tree. In short order, the site also provided an endemic Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Limpkin, a flock of endemic Cuban Parakeets, Common Yellowthroat, West Indian Woodpecker, and several large waders. Moving down the road a bit, we stopped in an open grove of *Sabal maritima*, sometimes referred to as Bull thatch palm. This was our best chance to see Fernandina's Flicker, one of the world's rarest woodpeckers, nesting in the palms. By walking the slightly

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muddy trail crisscrossed by morning glory vines, we were able to see a couple nesting pairs of these ornate birds, as well as nesting West Indian Woodpeckers, the Cuban race of American Kestrel, more Cuban Parakeets, a perched Crested Caracara, and a wonderful look at a pygmy-owl. After a quick bathroom stop, we returned to the forest at Bermejas, where we walked for a couple hours. Our main target there was the endemic Bare-legged Owl but it would be a bit longer before we actually saw one, despite checking a number of known nest sites with Octavio. As always, there was much else to see, including Prairie, Black-throated Green, Black-throated Blue and Worm-eating warblers, Cuban Tody, Cuban Vireo, many American Redstarts, and a pair of Gray Kingbirds sitting roadside as we returned to the bus.

From Bermejas, we backtracked to Playa Girón at the southeast entrance to the Bay of Pigs. At Hostal Luis, we enjoyed a bounteous lunch that included fresh garlic shrimp, baked fish, *picadillo*, rice and beans, *sigua* (essentially a seafood *picadillo* of the volute snail *Livonia picta* that tasted better than it sounds), potatoes, salads, papaya, pineapple, rice pudding, and, IMHO, the best flan of the trip. After this feast and the warm hospitality of the hosts, we were delighted to learn that Carlos, our ground agent's representative, had cancelled the next two night's reservations at Playa Larga and transferred us to Hostal Luis. After lunch, we returned to Playa Larga to fetch our luggage, then continued a short way north to Casa Bernabe, a private home that has opened its yard to birders seeking Bee Hummingbird, the world's smallest bird. The yard had a number of fruit and nectar feeders, and various flowers to attract hummingbirds, the star of which was a huge blooming Firebush (*Hamelia patens*), a member of the coffee family. Perched on its branches and feeding at its flowers (and nearby feeders) were at least five Bee Hummingbirds and a number of comparatively huge Cuban Emeralds. Everyone on the trip was eager to see this unique bird, Linda especially so, and there were lots of other birds in the yard including Cuban Orioles, Shiny Cowbirds, Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds, a Northern Waterthrush, and very approachable Black-throated Blue Warblers, so we took our time and enjoyed the owners' hospitality. Leaving around 4:10, we made a very short drive to Cueva de los Peces, a restaurant with a swimming beach and a natural freshwater pool. The site was crowded with tourists and diners and music was playing, so participants were surprised to see even more Blue-headed Quail-Doves, here habituated to the noise and commotion. Hearing a Northern Flicker (of the endemic race *chrysocaulosus*), I played a couple notes of flicker music and it flew in where we could all see it well (to the amusement of the nearby beach-goers). As we left, several of us photographed a large Northern curly-tailed lizard sunning on a rock pile at the entrance to the restaurant. Returning to Hostal Luis, we unpacked and planned a 7 PM bird list. Our plans were thwarted when we learned that Robert and Bev were trapped in their room by a dysfunctional lock. After a minimum of five people performed surgery on the door, they were finally freed to join us. We ran through the bird list, then had a fine dinner that featured different salads and more of the local seafood including baked Wahoo filets, fish, octopus, and squid, as well as delicious sweet potatoes (theirs, known as *boniato*, are white not orange) and more flan.

**Mon., Mar. 19 Playa Girón | Santo Tomás | Criadero de Cocodrilos |
Woodland at Soplillar | Playa Girón**

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At 6 AM Hostal Luis provided us with a nice breakfast and we were off to Santo Tomás. En route, we picked up Silvario, our local guide for the day. The drive took about an hour, but was prolonged by a stop to look for the endemic and extremely local Cuban race of Sandhill Crane, which, frustratingly, we only heard. The stop did produce a treetop Cuban Crow and a few migrants. By 8:10 we were in the small village of Santo Tomás. It was here that the Spaniard Fermin Cervera discovered Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow, and the now rarely seen and perhaps nearly extinct Zapata Rail. Although we had essentially no hope of seeing the rail, the wren (its world range consisting of a small part of the Zapata Swamp) and the sparrow were targets for the morning. A walk of a couple hundred meters netted us Cuban Parrots, our only White-eyed Vireo, and a calling Summer Tanager. The soggy trail ended at a narrow canal bordered by low shrubs, and a few trees. In two small boats, we were polled along the canal, seeing White-crowned Pigeons, Zenaida Doves, and a Zapata Sparrow as we glided along. Eventually, we reached a short path that led to a small wooden deck surrounded by mud and a dense blanket of saw grass. Here, Silvario played a few notes of Zapata Wren. After a minute or two, a wren approached the deck, allowing us nice looks but always keeping a photo-precluding branch or two in the way. The wren disappeared for a moment then came back so everyone had several good looks at this very special bird. On the return trip, we had more looks at Zapata Sparrows, and saw several huge white water lilies that had opened while we were on the deck. The walk back to the bus was highlighted by three Cuban Trogons. Another good morning.

After returning south, we had a tasty lunch on the roof of the Paladar Enrique just west of Playa Larga, seeing Northern Harrier and Cuban Black Hawk fly by while we were eating. After lunch we drove north just a bit to the Criadero de Cocodrilos (crocodile farm) in Boca de Guamá, a park-like blend of ponds, bridges, lawns, caged enclosures, and tourist shops. Besides providing us with photo opportunities of endangered Cuban Crocodiles of all sizes, we saw 30+ species of birds including Gray Kingbird, Cape May, Prairie, Black-and-white, and Palm warblers, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Killdeer, and Belted Kingfisher. At one point, we thought we were going to leave but we were ahead of schedule, and had a bit of extra time, so some of us chatted over a cold drink and others went back to birdwatch around the ponds. By 4:30, we were in the nearby woods of Soplillar where we hiked for perhaps an hour and a half, successfully seeing Bare-legged Owl located by Silvario, many Cuban Parrots, a nesting Fernandina's Flicker, Cuban Pewee, and several other species. Our final destination was just outside Playa Larga. En route, a White-tailed Deer (introduced to Cuba in the 1930s) dashed across the road just in front of the bus. Near the Playa Larga dump and sawmill, we sat for a while waiting for darkness then tried for Cuban Nightjar. Often, a local guide has one of these up his sleeve on a day roost; but a number of sites we checked yielded no birds. Ultimately, we heard one bird call but it refused to leave its perch in the woods and became the trip's first and last Heard Only endemic. Adding insult to injury, we reached the Hostal Luis for dinner at 9:20, sending a couple folks to their rooms for granola bars and sleep.

Tue., Mar. 20 Playa Girón | Las Salinas | Cienfuegos

Because of last night's late return, we had a bit of a lie-in with breakfast at 7 AM. The arrival of another group necessitated a post-breakfast check-out, so we got our bags in the bus and bid adieu to Jimmy

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and the kind folks at Hostal Luis--who sent us off with two flans in insulated containers. From the Hostal, we drove north then southwest into Salinas de Brito, a portion of Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata. This was a waterbird morning and we saw a great number of species from the shoulder of the main road and from strategically placed platforms. A sample of the birds we'd not yet encountered included huge flocks of American Flamingos, a few Wood Storks, Magnificent Frigatebird, Roseate Spoonbills, Reddish Egrets (both dark and light morphs), White Pelicans, Black Skimmers, a Stilt Sandpiper, a Willet, and two Short-billed Dowitchers. At one flamingo stop, I played a bit of Clapper Rail call, causing one bird to approach us for mutual views, and several more to call back. At 12:30, we turned around, exited the park, and had lunch on the breezy second floor of the Restaurant Tiki where we had, not surprisingly, fresh seafood (I'm sure I saw some *mojitos*). The afternoon was largely dedicated to the drive eastward to Cienfuegos on the Caribbean coast; however a stop at a rice field yielded a flock of Glossy Ibis, Long-billed Dowitchers, Solitary Sandpiper, approximately 100 Least, and for Gail, a Red-tailed Hawk. In Cienfuegos, we settled in at the Hostal Tania, had an hour and a quarter break then did the bird list on the roof. We took a short ride to have dinner at The Drake. The food was excellent, but a huge tour group had ordered just before we did, so dinner was painfully slow and we didn't get back to the hotel until just before 10 PM

Wed., Mar. 21

Cienfuegos | Laguna de Guanaroca | Jardín Botánico | Camagüey

We began with a 6:30 breakfast atop the Hostal Tania and were packed and off by 7:15. Our first stop was Laguna de Guanaroca, a large brackish lake at the junction of the Arimao River and Cienfuegos Bay. The lagoon is a popular spot for birders and general sightseers because of the numerous flamingos, but we were hoping for some birds we'd not yet seen. Arriving well before they opened, we found ourselves in a sea of tourists from Cuba and various other countries. Again, a long wait as my passport was collected and compared to our reservation, but Carlos got us on the first set of departing boats. Our group was divided up--three per boat--each with a local guide who rowed us around the lagoon. It would be hyperbole to call this a Cheated-Death-Again experience but there were only several inches between the waters of the lagoon and the gunwales of the rowboats and any minor movement resulted in unnerving rocking of the boat. After a few minutes, everyone became comfortable with their close proximity to salt water and we enjoyed the ride, which included views of many flamingos, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Anhinga, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, a flock of American Avocets (a sparse and local bird in Cuba), and Spotted Sandpiper, as well as other waterbirds we'd seen previously. The woodland trail between the bus and the lagoon was birdy and we encountered trogons, todies, Prairie and Yellow-throated warblers, Northern Parula and a host of other species. A short drive brought us to the Jardín Botánico de Cienfuegos, Cuba's oldest botanical garden. Our quest here was Gundlach's Hawk. One skittish bird was in the area and eventually everyone was able to stitch together enough brief looks (perched and flying) to feel comfortable with seeing this rarity. It would have been nice to spend some time looking at plants and the other numerous birds, but we had to proceed eastward to Camagüey. In the pretty town of Trinidad (a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its architecture and

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historic sugar mills) we stopped for lunch at the attractive Restaurant Marinero where many of us had *paella*. Afterward, we paused at a school and I gave the teacher and some of her students bilingual wildlife coloring books, crayons, and colored chalk, and Linda handed out a doll or two to appreciative children. Finally entering Camagüey, Ivan navigated a maze of narrow streets, and we arrived at 7:30 in front of the very beautiful Hostal San Rafael where we had a welcome drink of pureed fresh papaya with tiny bits of pineapple. We bussed to a nice restaurant on a square decorated with life-like statues, had a very good dinner and were back around 10 PM

Thur., Mar. 22 Camagüey | Najasa Vicinity | Cayo Coco

At 6:00 AM, the San Rafael provided us with a good breakfast and we hit the road at 6:30. Today's drive promised to be long, as we had to drive southeast to the municipality of Najasa, back to Camagüey, then north to Cayo Coco. At 8:00 we made a stop in ranch country near La Desiada at a stop that, I believe, Carlos suggested. We immediately found a pair of Giant Kingbirds, a very sparse bird that's special, even among Cuba's many specialties. We also found another of the day's targets, Palm Crow, which has become very local in Cuba. Birds were numerous at this stop and included Gray Kingbird, Northern Flicker, Limpkin, Cuban Vireo, and many migrant warblers. Continuing on, we picked up our local guide Camilo and proceeded to the Area Protegida de Recursos Manejados Sierra del Chorrillo. Our quest targeted Plain Pigeon and better looks at Palm Crow. Walking through the open towering trees, we encountered a number of Palm Crows, here flying and calling with Cuban Crows, and allowing us to compare their voices and flight profiles. We found additional Giant Kingbirds, Cuban Trogon, West Indian Woodpecker, and many colorful migrants. The site also produced a variety of butterflies including Malachite, Florida White, Zebra Longwing, Gulf Fritillary, and one individual of the endemic Cuban Peacock. We were hearing Plain Pigeons but having difficulty seeing them, so Camilo suggested another site nearby, a side road called La Carbonera. Indeed, the site had Plain Pigeons and we got nice looks at several perched in the open. We also saw Polydamas Swallowtail, many White Angled-Sulphurs, and, in the dragonfly realm, a pair of tiny orange Slough Amberwings. Here, we also stopped at a small school where I passed out the remainder of the coloring books, crayons and chalk and a couple of bilingual children's books. We then returned to Camagüey for a nice lunch at the Hotel La Sevillana. On the recommendation of a fellow member of the International Brotherhood of Itinerant Naturalists, we stopped in downtown Camagüey and went to the roof of the Gran Hotel, a known nesting site for Cuban Martins. Curiously, the martins were not present, but I spotted a Peregrine Falcon roosting on a nearby radio tower and the 'scope views proved instructive for the tour participants. Departing the Gran Hotel at 3:15, we proceeded uninterrupted to a gas station in Morón where we picked up fuel and our local guide Odey Martinez. We got to the coast at 6:15 and checked the south end of the Cayo Coco causeway for terns, picking up Red-breasted Merganser and a small flock of Ruddy Turnstones. A stop at the north end of the causeway was considerably more productive yielding more than a thousand flamingos, Herring and Lesser Black-backed gulls, a large flock of White Pelicans and nearly a hundred more mergansers. At 7:30, we arrived at the Hotel Pullman, a sprawling, cruise ship-like all-inclusive resort filled with people from all over the globe. We then sat through an especially long check-in, as we had actually made a hotel change (because of some maintenance issue) and our rooms were not quite

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ready. After spending about 50 minutes in the noisy (loud music) lobby, we went downstairs to the huge buffet that featured most anything you might want. Having once again fended off starvation, we went upstairs to fetch our bags (that had been guarded in our absence) and find our rooms.

Fri., Mar. 23 Cayo Coco | Cayo Guillermo

In the pre-dawn darkness, we found the hotel's snack shop where a cheery bartender cranked out various espresso drinks for us and we picked up bag breakfasts. Departing at 6:35, we drove westward to Cayo Guillermo, one of the only spots on the north coast of Cuba where one has a prayer of finding the now very rare Bahama Mockingbird. Unfortunately, this bird has been a casualty of both oceanfront development and hurricane damage to its habitat. I was not feeling very positive about the foray as Odey took us to the exact place south of Playa Pilar where he and I had missed the bird on my last trip. However, with patience and lots of ears, we eventually had satisfying looks at two individuals. A quick stop at a sand flat to look at plovers turned into a mini-adventure, as the bus's battery was dead. Several of us pushed it backwards onto pavement then forward fast enough to allow Ivan to pop the clutch and get it started. Whew. A bathroom stop at the recreation center was birdy; the shallow lagoon across road was jammed with large waders including spoonbills, ibis, and our first of several white morph Great Blue Herons (formerly "Great White Heron"). Continuing to an unmarked side road, we walked along the edge of the scrubby woodland and encountered two delightful and local endemics: Cuban Gnatcatcher and Oriente Warbler, as well as a fly-by Merlin. Alejandro and I were about to get on the bus when I noticed a flock of Cedar Waxwings drop into a nearby tree. A quick whistle brought the group out to see the birds before they flew off. Our next stop was in mangroves to look for roosting West Indian Whistling-Ducks, which we heard but didn't see. The roadside was seething with dragonflies and several butterflies so those inclined to look at insects had an opportunity to pick up some additional lifers. Here, we also saw Zapata Sparrow, but of a different race and in different habitat than the birds we'd encountered earlier in the Zapata Swamp. We then continued to the west part of nearby Cayo Romano to a huge salt flat with roosting ducks, terns, and shorebirds. Although the light wasn't favorable, we were able to pick out numerous Lesser Yellowlegs, American Wigeon, Northern Shovelers, Caspian Terns, and saw several Magnificent Frigatebirds. The site also produced dozens of tiny Seaside Dragonlets, the only dragonfly that completes its life cycle in salt water. Back at the hotel at 12:30, people hit the buffet or snack shop and took a bit of a break. We reconvened at 3:30 but changed the plans a bit as West Indian Whistling-Ducks and Cuban Martins had been seen by some of us on the hotel property during the break. A quick walk to the site yielded the roosting ducks and most people returned later and picked up the martins. We then made a quick trip to a stretch of beach where Piping Plovers had been wintering. Missing the plovers (the tide was too high) but seeing a number of other birds, we continued to the Cayo Coco water treatment ponds which produced a number of ducks and shorebirds previously seen and our second Ring-necked Duck. We also spent a few minutes looking at Mallow Scrub-Hairstreaks nectaring on the tiny white blossoms of scorpionweed (*Heliotropium*). Continuing to Cueva del Jabali, a defunct disco turned popular eBird hotspot, we immediately encountered Key West Quail-Dove feeding at seed and a water drip with Zenaida and Common Ground-Doves, thus completing our sweep of the island's quail-doves. At that point, the rational people in the group were dropped off at

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the hotel but the beach was just a couple minutes away, and the tide had dropped, presenting the possibility of Piping Plovers feeding on the flats. Happily, I picked one Piping Plover out of the numerous Semipalmateds for those who made the trip, so the foray was a total success. By now people were scattered so we broke up into small groups for dinner.

Sat., Mar. 24 Cayo Coco | Cayo Paredón Grande | Havana

Again, we convened at the snack bar at 6 AM for coffee and a sack lunch. We departed at 6:30 for the 40 minute drive eastward to the Diego Velázquez lighthouse at the tip of Cayo Paredón Grande. A few acres here, brutalized by Hurricane Irma in September 2017, host Cuba's tiny population of Thick-billed Vireo. As we approached the site, I could see that both the mangroves and the low woodland just inland had been extensively damaged since my last visit. In concert with the habitat destruction, as many as six new hotels have been planned for this area so the vireo's future on Cuba appears dismal. Hearing a vireo vocalize, and apparently a second one several hundred feet away, we were able to get fairly good looks as it flitted through the foliage, pausing now and then on a reasonably visible perch. We then walked the last couple hundred feet to the lighthouse to scan the rocks for oystercatchers--which were not present. Returning to the hotel, we had a nice lunch in the snack bar, packed up, and left the hotel at 1:30 for the rather long drive to Havana. After a truly butt-numbing drive, relieved only by a couple of bathroom breaks, we arrived in Old Havana and walked a block or so the excellent Nao Bar - Paladar for our final dinner as a group. Several of us had seafood plates that included delicious lobster tails, and participants had the opportunity for a final round of *mojitos*. We then continued a short distance to our lodging at the Hostal Los Balcones, an oddly configured affair with a steep narrow stairway.

Sun., Mar. 25 Havana | Departures or Extra Days

After a nice breakfast at Los Balcones, featuring the first crêpes of the trip, Cynthia was picked up by a transfer agent and taken to the airport, followed a bit later by the departure of Brent and Gail. The rest of us spent another day in the city. Joan and Linda disappeared into Old Havana but I know they made it home to the U.S. Robert, Bev and I walked to the Hotel Ambos Mundos where Ernest Hemingway began *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and had coffees or drinks and eye level Cuban Martins on the roof. The drinks and people-watching eventually morphed into lunch. We then found a red and white 1953 Chevy convertible taxi and went sightseeing for a couple hours. Later in the day, we walked a few blocks and were steered into Restaurant La Calesa Real, which offered very good food and pleasant music.

Mon., Mar. 26 Departures

Robert, Bev, and I had an early transfer to the airport for our flight to Ft. Lauderdale. Joan was transferred to the airport for her early afternoon flight to Atlanta.

Tues., Mar. 27 Departure

Linda was transferred to the airport for her late morning flight to Miami.

Photo Credits

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Yellow-faced and Cuban Grassquits, Doug Greenberg; Bee Hummingbird, Vickie Henderson; Cuban Trogon, Arturo Kirkconnell; Cuban Emerald, Jonathan Sequira; Cuban Parrot, Greg Smith; Cuban Tody, Peg Abbott; Cuban Pygmy Owl, Bud Ferguson.