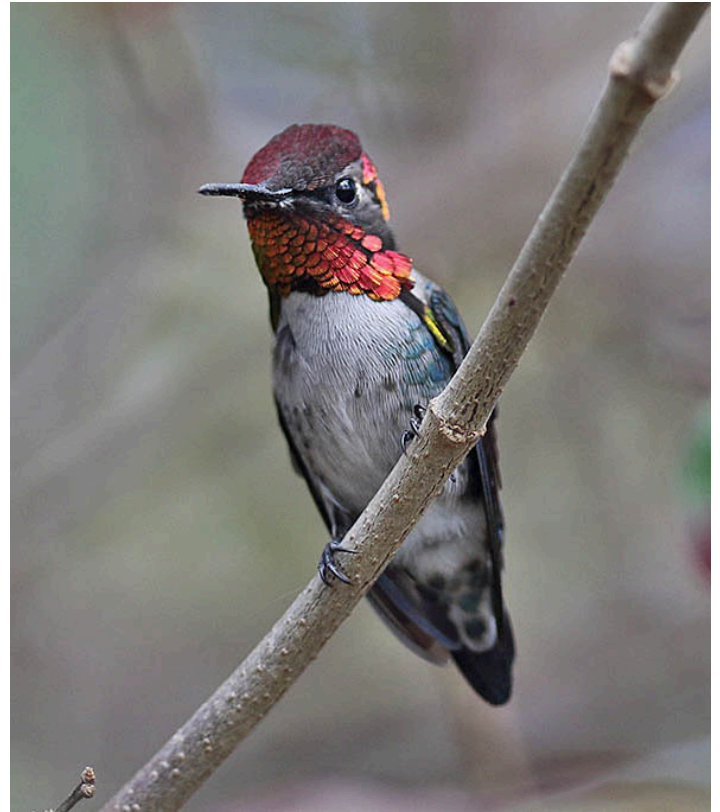


Cuba

20 February–3 March 2017

Participants

Robert and Rachel Carr
David Fieldsend
Anthony Hukin
David Hunter
Andrew Jones
Robert Leighton
Nigel and Carole Mears
Nicholas Parker
Pete Reader
John and Susan Rowe
John Tomkins



Bee Hummingbird

Leader Nigel Warren

Day 1 Flight from London via Madrid then a long drive west for a two-night stay in San Diego de Los Baños.

Day 2 The first days birding started in La Güira National Park with a visit into Cueva Los Portales. The endemics, Cuban Blackbird, Cuban Oriole, Cuban Solitaire, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Fernandina's Flicker, Cuban Pygmy-owl, Giant Kingbird and Yellow-headed Warbler were all seen along with Black-throated Blue, Cape May and Yellow-throated Warblers, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Cuban Bullfinch, Western Spindalis, Greater Antillean Grackles, Red-legged Thrush, Olive-capped Warbler, Cuban Emerald, West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Pewee, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Loggerhead Kingbird, Cuban Martins, Antillean Palm-swifts Scaly-naped Pigeon, Great Lizard-cuckoo, Smooth-billed Ani, Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds and a Red-tailed Hawk. In the afternoon we added Cuban Grassquit and Eastern Meadowlark, then at Vasquira Fish Ponds Snail Kite, Limpkin and a good selection of herons. 11 endemics out of 27 (Zapata Rail and Cuban Kite highly unlikely) so only 14 more to find and its only day one.

Day 3 Cuba is a huge island and with the best birding locations for endemics widely spaced; today was largely spent in the coach heading east to Camagüey with a stop at Santa Clara for lunch where a couple of Prairie Warblers amongst a number of other warblers were added. Our first Crested Caracaras were amongst other birds seen on route. The next two nights were spent in Camagüey.

Day 4 Today we visited spent at El Belen Reserve in the Sierra de Najasa where a further two endemics were found in the shape of Cuban Parakeet and Cuban Palm Crow. Normally we need to look for a third endemic

here, the rare and highly-localised Giant Kingbird but with the bird safely on our lists from La Güira National Park it wasn't necessary to spend time looking. Other birds seen during the day included Solitary Sandpiper, Plain Pigeon, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Crow and Shiny Cowbird whilst Tennessee Warbler was seen in the wooded areas. An area of open water produced two Northern Jacanas, Blue-winged Teals, Cave and Northern Rough-winged Swallows and a few common waders. At a stop on the way back to the hotel we saw our only Least Grebe of the trip.

Day 5 After breakfast we headed for the island of Cayo Coco on the north coast. We passed through the Sierra de Cabitas where a Gundlach's Hawk cruised passed the bus and after an emergency stop everybody had good views as it circled upwards and away. Cayo Coco is reached by a long causeway across the sea so we saw our first Magnificent Frigatebirds, Laughing Gulls, Royal Terns and Red-breasted Mergansers as we crossed. On arrival at the hotel a Great Lizard-cuckoo was hopping around on the grass, which caused some initial confusion! A lagoon near the hotel produced a flock of 63 roosting West Indian Whistling-ducks, a Tricoloured Heron and a Reddish Egret, while a sickly-looking Royal Tern gave very close views. Mid-afternoon we visited the grounds of a nightclub called 'Wild Boar Cave' where food is put out for Key West Quail-doves and they appeared on cue along with Zenaida and White-winged Doves. Three more endemics, Cuban Vireo, Zapata Sparrow and Oriente Warbler were seen as well as close views of White-crowned Pigeons. On the way back to the hotel we made a stop for Clapper Rail, which responded almost instantly to a play-back tape and also found our first Yellow Warblers there. Four full days gone and our endemics list had risen to an impressive 17 species. We spent the next two nights at an all-inclusive hotel on Cayo Coca, rather touristy but unlimited food and drink made it bearable!

Day 6 The whole day was spent on Cayo Coca and first we headed for Cayo Paredon Grande. In the trackside bushes on the way to the point we heard then saw several Thick-billed Vireos, more Cuban Vireos and a good selection of warblers. At the Point we finally connected with our main quarry, a rather showy singing Bahama Mockingbird. Also in the area were American Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, lots of waders, a Peregrine Falcon and everyone caught up with Cuban Black Hawk and Cuban Gnatcatcher, whilst a lucky few saw a Mangrove Cuckoo. Another stop produced four Piping Plovers and a Brown Booby. In the afternoon we revisited the 'Wild Boar Cave' and saw a similar selection of birds as the previous day. Now up to 19 endemics with only six more 'gettable' ones to go and five days to do it in!

Day 7 Another long drive, this time to drive to Playa Girón on the south coast. Before we left a couple of the group saw a Black Skimmer and a Forster's Tern. A good number of birds were seen from the coach as we headed south including some 500 American Flamingos, a quick stop gave us good views of some closer ones, then at a comfort break for the driver we saw about 20 White-collared Swifts. The next stop was Santa Clara for lunch, some went birding instead and found a Worm-eating Warbler so we all had a look before re-boarding the coach. We stopped at the memorial to Che Guevara and had an interesting hour or so looking around the museum before we continued onto Playa Giron and checked into our individual chalets for the next three nights.

Day 8 We started the day at Bermejas looking for quail-doves and we weren't disappointed as we saw both Key West and Grey-fronted Quail-doves from a screen looking down a track into the woods. We then walked to a pond farther into the woods and saw more Key West and Grey-fronted Quail-doves as well as Ruddy Quail-doves. Also in the area we saw Cuban Parakeets, Yellow-headed Warblers, an obliging Bare-legged Owl (after a little encouragement) and the star attraction a pair of Bee Hummingbirds. A track off into a more open area produced Fernandina's Flicker and then a short drive to a marshy area north of Playa Larga produced Red-shouldered Blackbirds, Tree Swallows, Northern and Louisiana Waterthrushes and a Northern Harrier. In the afternoon we visited an area close to the hotel called Sendero Enigma de Las Rocas, an area of woodland and pools where we saw what we thought were American Crocodiles and a good selection of woodland birds. We then headed to another stop called Cueva de Los Peces for Blue-headed Quail-doves

which come to feed behind the restaurant there in the afternoon and they duly obliged. Unfortunately, an evening session to look/listen for Stygian Owl proved fruitless but with four more endemics under our belts it was still a fantastic day.

Day 9 This was the day we were heading out in boats into the swamp proper, so after a nervous 30km drive down a track that was just a little narrower than our coach we reached Santo Tomas and boarded our two small rowing boats. Louisiana Waterthrushes were seen along the bank by some, but not easy viewing as we drifted past. Fortunately, we were soon able to pile out onto a small area of boardwalk where we stood and listened for our quarry. A couple of brief glimpses then sat out in the open was a singing Zapata Wren, much to the relief of all there. As we were leaving two Zapata Sparrows put in an appearance. We then headed back out of the swamp and along the track, through Playa Larga to Soplillar Village and walked the area called Mera. It didn't take long for our guide to find a roosting Cuban Nightjar, which provided a great photo opportunity and also seen there was our only Swainson's Warbler of the trip. In the afternoon some revisited Sendero Enigmada Las Rocas for another look at the presumed American Crocodiles but the jury is still out as hybrids do occur. Another try for Stygian Owl after our evening meal and although a local man rang us to say it was there, by the time we got there it was gone! With the last two possible endemics seen with nearly two days to spare however, it was still another fine day.

Day 10 As finding new birds for the trip had become very difficult we headed back to Bermejas as one or two hadn't had particularly good views of the Ruddy Quail-doves, but that was soon remedied when we stopped at the pond and all four species were seen there. We then drove into Playa Larga and visited a garden with bird feeders where the owner put on a show for the photographers when he held a bunch of leaves soaked in sugar water and a Bee Hummingbird came to drink just a few feet from their lenses. In the evening we tried again for the Stygian Owl but to no avail, although we did see a Barn Owl.

Day 11 This was our last day and before packing up and leaving for Havana one or two saw eight Cabot's Terns along the beach in front of our hotel. We stopped just north of Playa Larga at La Boca Crocodile Farm where we saw plenty of waterbirds including Purple Gallinules and a Northern Jacana and the usual selection of warblers. At another stop at a Fish Farm we saw a couple of Anhinga's, a bird that a few had missed earlier. After arriving in Havana we spent several hours exploring the city and then it was off to the airport and home arriving back in the UK on Day 12.

Nigel Warren
Birdfinders