



ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Cuba

Caribbean Endemic Birding VI

29th January to 7th February 2019 (10 days)



Bee Hummingbird by Dušan Brinkhuizen

Cuba, the Caribbean's largest island, lies just 120 km (75 miles) south of Florida, yet offers an impressive 28 endemic birds, numerous Caribbean specialities and a rich assemblage of overwintering North American warblers and waders. Our comprehensive Rockjumper tour targets almost every possible endemic and near-endemic species; and, using the services of local bird

specialists at each site, we promise an impressive success rate in observing the island's amazing avian diversity. From the world's tiniest bird (Bee Hummingbird) to such sought-after species as Giant Kingbird, Cuban Tody, Cuban Trogon, Gundlach's Hawk, Oriente and Yellow-headed Warblers, Zapata Wren and no less than four species of stunning quail-doves, Cuba is an absolute pleasure to bird!

On this tour, we will cover a wide variety of habitats, ranging from interior tropical forests and mangroves, to extensive wetlands and white sand beaches along the northern coral cays. The awesome birdlife is further augmented by ease of travel, comfortable lodges, fascinating culture, a turbulent history, vintage cars that take one back to the 1950's, and super-friendly people, making this a thoroughly enjoyable adventure for both the hardcore and casual birder alike!

THE TOUR AT A GLANCE...

THE ITINERARY

Day 1	Arrival in Havana
Day 2	Havana to Viñales via Las Terrazas Biosphere Reserve and La Güira
Day 3	Viñales to Zapata Peninsula via Cuevas de las Portales
Days 4 & 5	Zapata Peninsula
Day 6	Zapata Peninsula to Camaguey
Day 7	Camaguey to Cayo Coco via Najasa
Day 8	Cayo Guillermo, Cayo Coco, Cayo Paredón Grande
Day 9	Cayo Coco to Havana
Day 10	Final departure

TOUR ROUTE MAP...



THE TOUR IN DETAIL...

Cuban Trogon by Dušan Brinkhuizen

Day 1: Arrival in Havana. After landing in the capital city of Havana, we will be met and escorted to our lodgings in one of the western hemisphere's oldest European cities. Guests are welcome to explore the city, where history drips from every building, famous landmarks dot almost every street corner and live music and dancing are considered de rigueur. This evening we shall meet up for a welcome dinner and talk over our plans for the forthcoming tour of this much maligned (unfairly!) Caribbean Island.

Day 2: Havana to Viñales via Las Terrazas Biosphere Reserve and La Güira. From the city of Havana, or La Habana as it's locally known, we will head westwards into the Pinar del Río Province. En route we may scan several wetlands while keeping a look-out for Snail Kite hovering or perched around these lakes, migrant waterfowl, commoner species include Ring-necked Duck and Blue-winged Teal while both Greater and Lesser Scaup are occasionally recorded. Wading birds such as Limpkin, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpiper and Tricolored, Little Blue and Green Herons are also probable. We will soon be struck by the abundance of Turkey Vultures; these huge birds are almost a guaranteed sight each time we cast an eye skywards!

We will make a stop at Las Terrazas Biosphere Reserve. This community-run reserve was once clear cut for charcoal production, but millions of replanted trees have restored the area to its former grandeur. The reserve hosts one of our primary targets for the day, the delightfully coloured Cuban Grassquit. This beautiful little finch is now endangered largely due to trapping for the cage-bird trade. We can also expect to see many of Cuba's specialities including Cuba's national bird, the Cuban Trogon, and the very cute Cuban Tody. Belonging to a family of 5 species endemic to the Caribbean and most closely related to kingfishers, this brilliantly coloured jewel of the forest sometimes allows for an incredibly close approach and amazing photographic opportunities. There will also be time for the common buff-bellied Cuban sub-species of Red-legged Thrush and Cuban Green Woodpecker. It won't take long to work out that we are in North American wood warbler heaven, as these brightly coloured gems flit around us and respond strongly to spishing. Particularly common are American Redstart, Northern Parula, Palm Warbler and Black-throated Green Warbler.



Cuban Tody by Dušan Brinkhuizen

Later in the day, we pay a visit to La Güira Park. This formerly glorious colonial mansion's expansive manicured grounds offer superb birding. Species we are likely to encounter are the colourful Western Spindalis (or Western Stripe-headed Tanager), the dumpy Cuban Bullfinch, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Cuban (or Crescent-





Cuban Solitaire by Dušan Brinkhuizen

Yellow-headed Warbler, another Cuban endemic; small family groups of this wood-warbler often allow close approach. Another warbler target is a relict of the past ice ages. The lovely Olive-capped Warbler is a denizen of tall pine trees and shares its limited range in Cuba with a population in the Bahamas.

After a morning's birding, we head east and southwards to the famed Zapata Peninsula. On the drive, we will notice numerous signs commemorating the Cuban revolution as well as Cuba's national heroes, including of course Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara. We will see a large variety of transport modes on Cuba's roads, from oxen pulling wooden sleighs, fancy horse-drawn buggies and vintage 1950's US automobiles in every shape, size and colour! Tonight we will settle in for the first of three nights at our private lodge, nestled on the shores of the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs), close to the infamous 1961 invasion point of Playa Giron.

Days 4 & 5: Zapata Peninsula. The Zapata Peninsula is the essence of Cuban birding. Large areas of this reserve now protect salt pans, mangroves, swamps and dry evergreen forests, home to most of Cuba's endemic birds. With the help of a superb local birding guide, we will visit numerous sites in search of these localised specialities. High on our agenda will be the world's smallest bird, the minuscule Bee Hummingbird. Measuring in at just 2.5" (tail to bill!),



Blue-headed Quail-Dove by Clayton Burne

eyed) Pewee, Loggerhead Kingbird and the beautiful Red-legged Honeycreeper. We also have our first chance at seeing the impressive Fernandina's Flicker. This evening we will spend a night in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Viñales, surrounded by the stunning Cordillera de Guaniguanico.

Day 3: Viñales to Zapata Peninsula via Cuevas de las Portales. After breakfast, we depart Viñales for the karstic Cuevas de las Portales. This impressive system of caves set within a high limestone formation is famous for hosting Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The humid, vegetation covered limestone hills provide the perfect habitat for arguably Cuba's most accomplished songster, the Cuban Solitaire. Although it's not the most beautiful thrush in the world, it more than makes up for this with its sweet, melodic jangled notes.

Here we may have more chances to see the beautiful lattice-tailed Cuban Trogon. This stunner sports Cuba's national colours – white, red and blue (as well as an ample supply of green!). We should also locate the lovely





Zapata Wren by Dušan Brinkhuizen

this tiny hummer really does resemble a bee as it flits around flowers. Its numbers have decreased dramatically, unfortunately, and it can prove a tough bird to find. We will also encounter the far more common Cuban Emerald, a sparkling green, fork-tailed nymph of the forest edge.

One of our mornings here will require an early start to reach a deciduous forest reserve where an incredible 4 species of secretive and beautiful quail-doves can be seen! A local conservationist has started putting out food along a forest trail, and both the stunning Blue-headed

and iridescent Grey-fronted Quail-Doves often come in, allowing excellent viewing. We will also walk the trails to stand a reasonable chance of observing the more widespread Key West and rarer Ruddy Quail-Doves, while the attractive Zenaida Dove, as well as Common Ground and Mourning Doves, occur as well.

Along these trails, we will also seek out the Cuban Pygmy Owl and Bare-legged (or Cuban Screech) Owl, which are usually found at known roosts. We will take the time to seek out Cuban Crow; this large, all black *corvid* is rather rare and we will listen out for its loud and distinctive parrot-like vocalisations in order to track it down. Another tough and rare endemic best found on the peninsula is the huge Fernandina's Flicker, a surprisingly attractive woodpecker. Other species in this group that occur here are West Indian Woodpecker, Northern Flicker (an endemic resident race) and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Raptors are not particularly numerous but we will keep a look out for Red-tailed and Broad-winged Hawks, Northern Crested Caracara, Merlin and of course the endemic and extremely tough Gundlach's Hawk.

Another morning will be spent along the edges of the great sawgrass Zapata Swamp in the Cienega de Zapata National Park. Our chief target here is the very secretive Zapata Wren, a rather aberrant *troglodyte* that is the sole member of its genus. It might take some patience and sharp spotting in order to obtain views of this speciality, though sightings are by no means guaranteed. Here we will also seek the surprisingly attractive and fairly accommodating Zapata Sparrow. This is also the prime



Grey-fronted Quail-Dove by Rich Lindie



locality for the localised Red-shouldered Blackbird; the males are almost identical to the North American Red-winged Blackbird but the females differ in sporting all-black plumage. We will also look out for the near-endemic Tawny-shouldered Blackbird and endemic Cuban Oriole (recently split from Greater Antillean Oriole, and now considered a good species).

Further excursions will take us onto the tidal flats and mangrove islets at Salinas de Brito, which are situated along the southern shore of the Zapata Peninsula. The salt water marshes are justly famous for their waders and waterfowl, and we will seek out the recently split Cuban Black Hawk, now an endemic (previously considered a subspecies of Common Black Hawk). Stunningly pink American Flamingos occur in healthy numbers and we will add numerous waterbirds to our burgeoning list, including Brown Pelican, Anhinga, Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, American White Ibis, Wood Stork, Clapper Rail, Caspian and Royal Terns, Black Skimmer, Grey (Black-bellied) Plover, Short-billed Dowitcher and Least Sandpiper, among many others. Family groups of Smooth-billed Ani abound and Cuban Martins nest in dead snags on the salt flats.



Cuban Amazon by Rich Lindie

An evening excursion may be taken to search for Cuban Nightjar and the impressive Stygian Owl. The latter is a dark and imposing-looking predator so-named after the black river Styx (in Greek mythology 'Styx' symbolised the boundary between Earth and the underworld).

Day 6: Zapata Peninsula to Camaguey. After a final morning of searching out any targets we may still need on the Zapata Peninsula, we shall embark on a lengthy drive to the south eastern city of Camaguey. En route we are likely to make a short stop at Santa Clara, synonymous with Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara. Site of his most famous battle during the Cuban Revolution, it now plays host to Ché's mausoleum – where his remains were finally interred in 1997 after their discovery in a secret grave in Bolivia. The remainder of the day is set aside for travel, but we shall make the odd birding stop when possible.



Gundlach's Hawk by Dušan Brinkhuizen

Day 7: Camaguey to Cayo Guillermo via Najasa. We leave our private lodgings early this morning for a short drive to the reserve of Rancho la Belen in the Sierra de Najasa. The reserve protects unspoilt lowland forest and palm groves that harbour a great diversity of flora and fauna. Our two main target species are the Cuban Palm Crow and the endangered, massive-billed Giant Kingbird (with an estimated population of fewer than 1000 birds). The region is also host to several other endemics and near-endemics, and we will keep a careful look out for the lovely Cuban Amazon (also known as Rose-throated or Cuban Parrot) and flocks of Cuban Parakeet screeching overhead. The early morning is also



our best chance of finding Plain Pigeon, as they sit on exposed perches before heading off to their feeding grounds. We have another chance to find the elusive Gundlach's Hawk should we still require it, while being treated to a regular supply of North American warblers that may include Worm-eating and Swainson's if we are very lucky.

As our Cuban birding adventure begins to wind down, we head northwards to explore some of the thousands of small coral islets fringing Cuba. Upon reaching the coast, we will drive over a scenic 17km (10 ½ mi) causeway that separates the island of Cayo Coco from the



Giant Kingbird by Adam Riley

mainland (somewhat reminiscent of Key West), and during our journey, we should spot large numbers of waterbirds. Highly probable species include Magnificent Frigatebird, Neotropic Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons, Pied-billed Grebe, American Wigeon, American Coot, Western Osprey, Laughing Gull, Royal Tern, Belted Kingfisher, Semipalmated Plover, Killdeer, Willet, Black-necked Stilt and numerous smaller migrant waders.

Day 8: Cayo Guillermo, Cayo Coco & Cayo Paredón Grande. We have a full day's exploration of Cayo Coco, Cayo Guillermo and Cayo Paredón Grande. These low-lying coral islands support a wide variety of birding habitats, ranging from stunning beaches and mangrove-lined mudflats and swamps, to low growing thorn-scrub and dwarf semi-deciduous forest in the island interior. A new suite of species will be sought here including the delightful Oriente Warbler, Cuban Gnatcatcher, endemic Cuban and highly localised Thick-billed Vireos, and the scarce Bahama Mockingbird. A short search of the nearby beach may yield the rare Piping Plover, Sanderling and even small flocks of Cave Swallow.

Please note: The 2017 hurricane season incurred significant damage in and around the Caribbean, Central and northern America. Hurricane Irma destroyed large swathes of the northern Cuban Cayos



Cuban Gnatcatcher by Adam Riley

(keys), specifically affecting most habitat types on Cayo Paredon Grande. Consequently, both Thick-billed Vireo and Bahama Mockingbird have become increasingly difficult to find. Indeed, neither species was seen on our early 2018 tours. Fortunately, alternate sites have been found for the two primary Cuban endemics of the region: Oriente Warbler and Cuban Gnatcatcher.

Day 9: Cayo Coco to Havana. Today we depart Cayo Coco and drive back to Havana. Upon arriving in Havana, we will head out for a short walk through the historical old city. Complete with its traditional narrow streets and picturesque overhanging



balconies, this culturally dynamic city offers a unique experience that we will have a chance to sample during this concluding evening of our tour. We will enjoy our final farewell dinner at a classic Cuban restaurant. Whether you're into dancing, dining, shopping or simply sightseeing, Havana has it all!

Day 10: Havana City & departure. After breakfast this morning, we transfer to the Jose Martí International Airport where the tour will conclude.

***Havana City Tour:** Our visit to the old town of Havana on the last day of the tour is typically very short. People that are interested in spending more time in this unique city for sightseeing are advised to organize a dedicated historical tour before, or after the main tour.*

REQUIREMENTS FOR US CITIZENS TO ENTER CUBA:

Entry into Cuba is both simple and complicated. Cuba is unique for US citizens for entry requirements, as compared to other countries in the Americas. In the end, getting in and out of Cuba is fairly simple.

As you know, the United States placed an embargo on financial transactions with Cuba in the early 1960's after the Cuban Missile Crisis. After more than fifty years, the Obama administration announced in late 2014 that they would be opening opportunities for US citizens to travel to Cuba for certain specified purposes (including humanitarian purposes). The Trump administration in June of 2017 announced changes to the Obama Cuba travel regulations; however, the Trump changes will not impact our Cuba group ornithological study tours in any significant way. Currently, the US government continues to allow travel to Cuba for ornithological study tours, as they are group tours with the specified purpose of humanitarian assistance.



Antique Car, Havana by Clayton Burne



El Capitolio, Havana by Clayton Burne

Both the Cuban and US governments view these same travel opportunities in two different ways.

Unites States perspective: The key to your visit to Cuba is stating that you are travelling to Cuba for humanitarian purposes. Humanitarian purposes are one of the 12 authorised purposes for travel to Cuba covered by the general license.

Description of our Humanitarian Project: The ornithological data we collect is used by ornithologists in Cuba to support efforts in educating the Cuban populace about their natural resources. As this is an environmental project, supporting the education of the Cuban people about their natural resources, it is classified as a humanitarian trip.



For the record, US Citizens have travelled for years to Cuba for the purpose of collecting ornithological data to support the education of Cuban people about their natural resources. In the past, these trips have been under a specific license. However, we are now able to travel to Cuba for humanitarian purposes under a general license.

For the rest of this entry description, we will explain the few and simple steps you need to accomplish to support your entry into Cuba.

- **TRAVEL HEALTH INSURANCE WHILE IN CUBA.**

You will need a health insurance policy that covers any health care costs you may have while in Cuba. Most clients flying from the USA to Cuba have found that this required health insurance is included as part of their air ticket price. The cost is nominal, though not always detailed in your air ticket.

One receipt of your air tickets, please ensure that you do have this health cover. Alternatively, policies range from US\$30 to US\$80 dollars dependent on age and existing health issues.

- **CUBA VISA AND OTHER ENTRY REQUIREMENTS.**

Passport: Please ensure that your passport is valid for 12 months beyond the time you will be in Cuba. Two blank pages in your passport are required for entry and exit stamps.



Plaza Che Guevara, Santa Clara
by Clayton Burne



Playa Giron Museum by Clayton Burne

Proof of Departure: Please have two paper copies of your flight itinerary, showing your departure flight from Cuba. A print out of your airline flight reservations will suffice. In many cases, the Cuban authorities will not ask for this information. However, if you are asked, you will need to provide it.

Accommodation List: We will provide you with a list of accommodation as part of your Pre-departure pack. In most cases, the Cuban authorities will not ask for this information. However, if you are asked, you will need to provide this information.

Visa: Most US Citizens flying from US cities on an airline ticket ending with a stop in Cuba will need to get a Cuban visa. Most airlines provide plenty of support in assisting you with obtaining your Cuban Visa. The processing and visa costs currently (as of December 2017) range from US\$50 to US\$85 in most situations. Completing the Cuban Visa documentation takes most travellers 10 to 30 minutes, and in



many cases you will be able to complete this form on-line. We do recommend you get a copy of this visa in advance of your travel. This typically incurs an extra nominal fee, but is valuable to have said confirmation.

- **STATEMENT OF YOUR PURPOSE OF TRAVEL TO CUBA (ENTERING CUBA).**

We will contact you approximately 10 to 20 days before you depart for Cuba to ensure you fully understand the process of getting through Cuban customs. This is a fairly easy process.



Hotel Nacional de Cuba, Havana by Clayton Burne

- **STATEMENT OF YOUR PURPOSE OF TRAVEL TO CUBA (RETURN TO USA).**

We will contact you approximately 10 to 20 days before you depart for Cuba to ensure you fully understand the process of returning through US customs. This is a fairly easy process. In the last year (2017), this process has been as easy as returning from any other country.

- **US STATE DEPARTMENT INFORMATION ON CUBA.**

[Click here](#) for further information that covers issues related to entry/exit requirements, crime, safety and security, health facilities, limited information on other health issues, medical insurance, traffic and road conditions, and other issues and information for travellers.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:

Tour dates, prices, single supplement rates, approximate flight costs and spaces available for this tour are displayed on our website. Please see under IMPORTANT NOTES below.

This includes:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 10;
- A bottle of purified water each day;
- All lodgings during the tour;
- All ground transportation;
- Soft drink/water/coffee/tea at meals;
- All national park and other reserve entrance fees; and
- All guiding services (including tips for local guides and services).

This excludes:

- **ANY flights** (see above);
- Alcoholic beverages;
- Visa fees;
- Special gratuities; and
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.



Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

a) **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is however fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing (usually 4 months before the tour.) The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates, which are also quoted in the respective fixed currency.**

b) **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration a small party supplement will have to be charged.**

c) **Furthermore, these costs are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**

d) **Lastly, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary and / or the designated Rockjumper leader at short or no notice due to unforeseen circumstances; please be aware that we will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader. If, therefore, you feel that he has given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip him.

Please Note:

- It can be hot with harsh sun in some areas of Cuba, especially along the coast, so please come prepared with hats and sun cream for protection. Humidity levels are also high throughout most of Cuba.
- Mosquitoes and tiny bloodsucking flies can be numerous at times and it's advisable to pack a good supply of DEET or another effective insect repellent. There is **no** malaria in Cuba.
- There are some long days in the field taking advantage of available habitat, but overall the tour pace is relaxed and the walking is easy.
- There are some long drives on this tour, but the comfort of the transport and flat, straight nature of the roads means these days are not uncomfortable.
- Accommodation throughout the trip is more comfortable than on most other Cuba tours. The majority of tours to Cuba stay in government owned and operated hotels. These suffer from little upkeep, many have facilities that no longer work and service is typically very slow. On this tour, we stay in Private houses and lodges, owned by local Cubans. The standards of comfort and service are of a decidedly higher standard and allow for a proper authentic experience.
- Food on this tour is also of a much higher standard as we eat at our Private houses and private restaurants for the most part. Cuba certainly doesn't lack for a variety or quantity of food, but you need to know where to find it! Government operated hotels and restaurants typically have very limited options and volume.

ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE DETAILS:

This tour **does not** include ANY airfares. The tour will start with a welcome dinner in Havana in the evening of Day 1. The tour will conclude in Havana after breakfast on the morning of day 10.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your **Tour Confirmation** package once the tour has been



officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

FLIGHTS:

Jose Marti International Airport, Havana (IATA: HAV) is the main port of entry for international flights into Cuba and is serviced by several international carriers. **Please DO NOT book any flights until you have consulted the Rockjumper office for confirmation on the status of the tour.**

**Rockjumper Birding Ltd
Vanilla Village, Royal Road
Black River
Mauritius**

Tel (USA & Canada) toll free: 1-888-990-5552

Email: info@rockjumperbirding.com

Alternative email: rockjumperbirding@yahoo.com

Website: www.rockjumperbirding.com

