

ENDEMIC OF CUBA

November 7- November 17, 2019

Cuba: so close but yet so far away. Lying just a little over 90 miles from Florida's southern tip, this largest island in the Great Antillean chain has been off limits to most American travelers since 1958 when Fidel Castro ushered out the Batista regime and assumed control of the Cuban government. In 2014, nearly 60 years later, Barack Obama's historic visit to Havana began the inevitable thaw in relations between the two nations and opened up more travel opportunities in Cuba for Americans. To be sure, there are still some restrictions in place and hassles to overcome, but several commercial airlines are now offering daily flights to Cuba and as time goes by, a complete normalization of relations seems quite likely.

For birders this is certainly good news as Cuba, despite intense logging and deforestation, still has 24-26 endemic birds (depending upon your taxonomic point of view). Only the Cuban Macaw is definitely extinct having last been observed in 1864. The Zapata Rail is extremely rare and on the verge of extinction, or possibly extinct, and though it still appears on checklists, there is no realistic chance of seeing one during a visit to the island. Some authorities consider the form of Greater Antillean Nightjar that occurs on Cuba to be a separate endemic species, and the Giant Kingbird has been extirpated from all of its former range outside of Cuba and for all practical purposes is now an endemic. If those latter 2 species are included in the endemic list, then the total number of possibilities stands at 26. The good news is that during a 10 day birding trip to Cuba, it is quite possible to see all 26 species. During my two most recent tours to Cuba we saw 25/26 and 26/26 missing only the Gundlach's Hawk in December 2016.

Though this tour will focus primarily on the endemic birds of Cuba, there are also a host of Caribbean endemics available as well that will add a bit of spice and flavor to the trip. Examples of these include Scaly-naped Pigeon, Zenaida Dove, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, West Indian Woodpecker, Loggerhead Kingbird, Red-legged Thrush, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Emerald and La Sagra's Flycatcher .

Despite the U.S. travel embargo, Cuba has been hosting an abundance of European and Canadian tourists for many years and has a well developed tourism infrastructure in place that makes travel easy and comfortable. As part of Zunzun Education Services, a US government approved organizer of the legal People-to-People program , the tour will provide participants with ample opportunities to meet and interact with Cuban people in their towns and villages. In addition to the ornithological aspects, the tour will include various cultural and historic aspects as well including a walking tour of Old Havana, a visit to Cuba's Museum of Natural History, a tour of the historic city of Santa Clara and a visit to the site of the Bay of Pigs invasion. We will be aided by local Cuban birding guides at the various sites we visit and accompanied throughout by a representative from the Cuban Natural History Museum in Havana.

Day 1-Thursday November 7: The tour begins today with your arrival via US commercial airline in Havana. At the time of this writing, American, Delta and Jet Blue are all offering multiple daily direct flights from the US to Havana. American flights originate in Miami, Jet Blue flights in Newark and Delta in Atlanta. As travel to Cuba is in a current state of flux, there

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likely will be changes to this schedule by next December. Even so, there should be multiple options available for participants to fly to Havana in December 2017. People should plan their arrival in Havana no later than 2:30 PM. After you have arrived and cleared immigration and customs, you can proceed to the arrival hall where a driver will be waiting to transfer you to our hotel in Havana. If time allows, we can walk a few blocks to the Hotel Nacional and have a welcome drink and short orientation session of the grassy plaza overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. Here we can also have close encounters with Cuban Blackbirds, our first endemic species. Night in Havana.

Day 2-Friday November 8: We'll have a very early and simple breakfast in the hotel lobby before departing Havana for the western province of Pinar del Rio. Our first stop will be a small forested patch about an hour from Havana which always proves to be a terrific introduction to Cuban avifauna. Here we can see Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Tody, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Vireo, and Cuban Trogon. Stopping here always makes for a rousing beginning. Nearby, a visit to a government owned pig farm will allow us close encounters with the endangered Cuban Grassquit. This colorful finch has been nearly extirpated due to its popularity as a cage bird, but good numbers remain at this farm where they can be seen feeding in and around the pig holding areas. Though Fernandina's Flicker also occurs in the palm stands near the pig farm, it is generally much easier to find further south in the Bermudas region. Nevertheless, we will stop and check as this is one of the more difficult endemics. The route to Pinar del Rio passes a series of roadside wetland complexes and we will stop here and there to see what is around. Past tour stops here have produced Masked Duck, Least Grebe, Snail Kite and Gull-billed Tern. We'll end the day in the quaint highland town of Finales where we can poke around the hotel grounds a bit in hopes of finding Olive-capped Warbler. In 2017 our group found Cuba's 4th record of Blue-headed Vireo here! Night in Vinales.

Day 3-Saturday November 9: This morning we will begin at Cueva de los Portales, a large limestone cave famous for being the command center for Che Guevara during the Cuban missile crisis. The lush forest around the cave is famous to birders for being one of the best places in Cuba to find the endemic Cuban Solitaire. Other birds generally common in the area include Cuban Bullfinch, Yellow-headed Warbler, Cuban Trogon and Scaly-naped Pigeon. We'll spend a few hours birding the area as well looking at some of the historic exhibits within the cave. A short distance from Cueva de los Portales there is an area mixed with scrubby woodland and cultivated fields where a small population of Giant Kingbird resides. We will invest ample time to find one as this will be the only site covered by the tour to find them. We'll return to the hotel for lunch and a mid-afternoon siesta. Later on we'll drive a short distance to a large reservoir where we might find Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant and a few other water denizens. The forests along the road to the reservoir is largely composed two species of pines (*Pinus tropicalis* and *Pinus caribaea*) that are the preferred habitat for Olive-capped Warbler, a Caribbean endemic. Fortunately they are quite common here and we have had excellent views on past tours. If time allows we will also explore the village of Vinales, a popular destination for foreign and Cuban tourists visiting the western highlands. Night in Vinales.

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Day 4-Saturday November 10: This morning we will take a leisurely breakfast at our hotel and then drive back toward Havana stopping in the community of Las Terrazas for lunch at an old coffee plantation. Set on a high hill, the site provides a commanding view of the surrounding lowlands and the forests around the restaurant are often filled with birds including Western Spindalis, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Red-legged Thrush and many North American migrants. After lunch we'll begin driving south to the Zapata Swamp area and our hotel in Playa Larga. Along the way we'll stop at a large reservoir that usually holds good numbers of wintering waterfowl (Ruddy Ducks and Lesser Scaup are most common) and sometimes an unexpected surprise (a lone Bonaparte's Gull in February 2017). Just before reaching our hotel, we'll make one final stop at a facility that breeds the endangered Cuban Crocodile. Past late afternoon visits here have produced Cuban Parrot, Cuban Crow and Purple Gallinule. Our hotel is near the site of the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 that cemented the nearly 60 year freeze in US-Cuban relations and the extensive grounds our hotel provide good birding, especially after dark. Past tours have seen Stygian and Barn owls and Greater Antillean Nightjar. Night at Playa Larga.

Days 5-6-November 11-12: We'll spend the next two days birding sites within the Zapata Swamp, which is probably Cuba's most famous natural preserve. Many of Cuba's least common endemic birds can be found within this vast wetland complex including Cuban Parakeet, Bare-legged Owl, Red-shouldered Blackbird, Fernandina's Flicker, Zapata Sparrow and Zapata Wren. The wren is especially difficult as it is shy and reclusive and to reach the appropriate habitat it is necessary to travel in pole boats for about a mile along a quiet creek. It's never easy to see, but we have had good success getting everyone in past groups to see it. In February 2017 several people were able to get outstanding photographs...a rare feat with this shy bird. The wren expedition will take one full morning of our time in Zapata Swamp and on the other morning we'll travel south to Refugio de Bermeja.

Local guides here scatter seed near a blind each morning and the ensuing feeding frenzy usually affords close views of Blue-headed and Gray-fronted quail-doves. These birds are very shy and retiring and seeing them in the forest is a difficult proposition. From the quail blind we will travel further west making stops for Red-shouldered Blackbird, Fernandina's Flicker and Bare-legged Owl, three more very scarce endemics.

On one afternoon we will also visit a large wetland complex known simply as Las Salinas. Formerly a salt producing facility, Las Salinas is now a series of abandoned salt pans that provide excellent wintering habitat for an abundance of birds including American Flamingo, Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, West India Whistling-Duck and many other herons, shorebirds and waterfowl. Nights at Playa Larga.

Days 7-8-November 13-14: We'll depart early this morning and begin the drive to Cayo Coco where we will spend the next two nights in a comfortable seaside resort that provides easy access to most of the good birding sites on the northern keys. We'll plan to arrive by early afternoon so we'll have time to explore some of the mangrove forests for Cuban Gnatcatcher and Oriente Warbler, two endemics best found in this part of Cuba. Near our hotel we can also visit a beach where low tide attracted Piping Plover and other shorebirds. We can also visit a nearby water treatment plant where in December 2016 we found one of the few Clay-colored Sparrows ever recorded in Cuba! The following morning we will drive about an hour to Cayo Paredon Grande, the last bastion on Cuba for Thick-billed Vireo, When Hurricane Irma ravaged this portion of the

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island in the fall of 2016, the vireo population was decimated and since that time there have been reports. However on both of our previous tours (December 2016 & February 2017) we had excellent views and hopefully we can continue that track record. This is also one of the few remaining places in Cuba to see Bahama Mockingbird, another species devastated by Irma. We also had great views of this difficult species on both previous trips. In the afternoon we will drive to Cueva del Jabali where a feeding station sometimes attracts Key West Quail-Dove. This is also a good area for Mangrove Cuckoo. Nights on Cayo Coco.

Day 9-November 15: We'll spend a few final hours birding on Cayo Coco before continuing onward to our next venue, the historic city of Santa Clara where we will spend one evening on the way back to Havana. Santa Clara is Cuba's answer to American counter-culture bastions like Berkeley, Austin and Key West. It's edgy culture was born in 1958 when Che Guevara won a decisive victory on the city's outskirts and essentially ended the Batista regime's grip on Cuba. It is now home to a prestigious university where students have pushed the envelope on Cuba's censorship laws for years with events like an annual beauty pageant for transvestites and the country's only drag show. With plans for a mid-afternoon arrival, everyone will have several hours to explore this vibrant Cuban city. Our hotel is outside the city in a quiet, wooded area and will provide excellent birding for more interested in avian culture. The bottle brush trees on the grounds are especially good for Cuban Oriole and Red-legged Honeycreeper. Night in Santa Clara.

Day 10-November 16: After breakfast we'll do a bit of birding on the hotel grounds before making the three-hour drive back to Havana. If there is time we will stop at Playa de Chiva, a beach east of Havana where there are often good congregations of shorebirds and terns. We will then head directly to Old Havana where we will have a walking tour of the city and a chance to buy some authentic Cuban rum and cigars. Then it will be on to our hotel on the Havana waterfront to prepare for the trip home. We can compile our final checklist before going to a private restaurant nearby for a final farewell dinner together complete with some lively Cuban music. Night in Havana.

Day 11-November 17: After breakfast at the hotel participants will be transferred to Jose Marti International Airport for flights home.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 10 participants.

TOUR COST: The cost of the tour will be \$4100 per person from Havana. A single supplement of \$400 will be charged to anyone in a single room. The price includes all lodging in Cuba, all meals beginning with dinner on Day 1 in Havana and ending with breakfast on Day 11 in Havana, airport transfers in Havana, ground transportation during the tour in an air-conditioned coach, guide service and any park entrance fees. The tour cost also includes Cuban medical insurance during the tour which is required for all visitors to the island. It does not include alcoholic beverages, tips or round trip airfare between your home and Havana or the cost of a Cuban tourist visa (\$50 as of this writing).

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REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: In order to reserve a space on the tour, a completed and signed registration form is required along with a \$500 deposit. Registration forms are available on the website www.otusasiotours.com

Deposits should be mailed to:

Otus asio Tours at 900 Hillsborough Road Chapel Hill NC 27516.

CANCELLATION POLICY: The \$500 deposit for this tour is non-refundable. Full payment will be due 90 days prior to departure (August 8, 2019).

Any refunds will be made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made:

less than 90 days before the departure date (after August 8, 2019 or later) and after full payment has been received will be limited to that which can be recouped from vendors, airlines and booking agencies. This may be as little as 25% of the amount paid.

Registrants are strongly encouraged to consider purchasing trip insurance to protect them from financial loss due to cancellation of the tour less than 90 days prior to departure.

TRANSPORTATION: We will be traveling in an air-conditioned luxury coach throughout the tour.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL COVERAGE IN CUBA: All visitors to Cuba are required to have an emergency medical coverage policy issued by an authorized Cuban agency. The tour price includes this policy for all of the tour participants. It includes \$25,000 of coverage for any emergency medical procedures required during the tour and \$7,000 of coverage for emergency medical evacuation. Please be aware that it does not cover trip interruption or cancellation and all participants are strongly encourage to purchase their own insurance to cover such contingencies. A good source for trip insurance is squaremouth.com which will provide various policy quotes from multiple companies allowing you to easily purchase the most appropriate policy for your travel.

LEGAL TRAVEL TO CUBA: Even with the recent ease of restrictions on travel to Cuba, the US government and Office of Foreign Asset Control still allows US citizens to visit Cuba only if their travel fits into one of 12 government approved categories. Our tour will be made possible by Cuba Explorer Tours, a subsidiary of Zunzun Education Services which is licensed by the US Office of Foreign Asset Control to provide US citizens legal travel opportunities in Cuba.

CUBAN GUIDE: We will be accompanied throughout the tour by a Cuban national representative from the Cuban National Natural History Museum who will facilitate our interaction with Cuban people and lead our birding excursions. We will also use a variety of local guides at several of the birding venues that we visit.

ORNITHOLOGICAL DATA: Each day we will conduct ornithological surveys at the various birding sites that we visit with a special emphasis on Cuban endemic species. All of the data will be submitted to the Cornell Laboratory for Ornithology using eBird.

MONEY MATTERS IN CUBA: At this point in time, US credit and debit cards do not work in Cuba, so participants will need to bring enough cash for their spending needs during the trip. Since the tour cost covers most of your needs, the amount of cash generally required on such a tour is relatively small. You will need enough cash to pay for one dinner in Santa Clara, alcoholic beverages and tips for your driver and guide. The currency used in Cuba is the Cuban Convertible Peso. You will be able to exchange cash at the airport upon your arrival in Havana although be aware that there will be roughly a 10% exchange fee, so plan for that when you budget your cash needs. Don't forget to budget for tips. Reasonable tip amounts would be 30-50 CUC (driver) and 50-70 CUC (guide) at the tour's conclusion. Since cash from ATM's will not be available on this tour, it will be wise to over budget your projected cash needs for this trip; better to have too much cash than to run out during the trip.

FLYING TO CUBA: As of this writing, there are now at least three US based airlines offering daily flights into Havana. American has four daily flights departing from Miami; Jet Blue has several departing from Newark and Delta has several departing from Atlanta. Due to the travel restrictions relating to government approved categories of travel to Cuba, the airlines are requiring that you sign affidavits affirming that your travel fits one of the approved categories. Jet Blue allows this to be completed online, while Delta and American are requiring travelers to sign a form at the gate. Please note that you do not need to have a special license for the trip, but only to sign a document indicating that you are participating in an OFAC approved itinerary. If you have any questions or concerns about this you can check visit the OFAC website. It is also recommended that participants carry a copy of the tour itinerary that documents our day-to-day activities while in Cuba.

PASSPORT & CUBAN TOURIST VISA: You will need the following two documents to legally enter Cuba: a valid US passport with an expiration date at least one-week after your departure date from Cuba and a Cuban tourist visa. You must obtain the Cuban tourist visa before leaving the US. You will need to check with your airline regarding how to obtain the tourist visa. At this point both Delta and Jet Blue are selling the visas at the departure gate. American is allowing online purchase before your trip. All of this in flux and there has been talk of including the cost of the tourist visa in the price of the airline tickets, so be sure to check with your airline when you purchase your ticket for the current policies. The cost of the visa is \$50-85 USD depending where it is procured.

BAGGAGE: Space in vehicles is always limited, so please restrict your luggage to one medium-sized bag and one small carry-on bag. Large hard suitcases are strongly discouraged on this tour.

PACE OF THE TOUR: This is not a physically demanding tour. Obviously we will be doing a lot of walking, but it will be at a relaxed pace and walks will be of relatively short duration (1-2 hours). Anyone in reasonably good physical condition should be able to manage any of the tour activities.

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LODGING: We will not stay at 5-star hotels during the tour, but our accommodations throughout will be very comfortable and have a lot of character.

CLIMATE: The weather in Cuba in December is very pleasant with daytime temperatures between 75-85. Evenings are cooler, but comfortable with average lows in the mid-60's. It seldom rains in Cuba in December, so comfortable, dry conditions are generally expected.

CLOTHING: Lightweight, quick-dry clothing will be most appropriate as day wear during the tour. This provides sun protection and takes up less room in luggage than heavier cotton clothing. Perhaps the most critical item for the tour will be a comfortable and sturdy pair of walking shoes or hiking boots.

EQUIPMENT: Pack a pair of binoculars in good condition, along with a belt pack or daypack for your daily accessories. Some essential equipment to carry would include sunglasses, lip balm or chapstick and an alarm clock. It is always a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items and medications in your carry-on bag, so that in the event of lost luggage you will have your essentials.

INFORMATION: For further information contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or otusasiotours@gmail.com.