

Cuba

14-21 July 2001



Report compiled by
Roger Ahlman

All photos by
Lars Petersson

Introduction and Logistics

As July is the main holiday month in Sweden and factories are more or less closed for some weeks, we decided to go somewhere for birding and our choice was Jamaica and Cuba. We knew that there would be no migrants or wintering birds and birdwatching would probably be rather slow and this turned out to be right. However, both islands boasts 25-30 endemics each plus a number of Caribbean endemics and those birds were our main target. July is definitely not the best time for birding in the Caribbean because the heat and the end of the breeding season with very low songactivity and no other birds than the resident ones to look at.

Participants were:

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"Baby" Bengt Larsson

All from around Värnamo in Sweden.

We found Cuba to be cheaper than Jamaica and prices similar to Sweden.

The roads on Cuba are generally good or very good. Through the country runs a rather new autopista (highway) which is good and very sparsely trafficed. Average speed can easily be 120 km/h. That road ends rather abruptly at Turgoeus and continues eastwards as a normal two-way road, which is good but not as fast and slightly more traffic, specially near towns. Driving is on the right side of the road. Petrol can be bought at Cupet and Oro Negro stations for dollars. At these stations you can also buy biscuits, drinks, cigarrs and sandwiches. The currency is US dollars and that is used even by the cubans and all prices are in US dollars. You often get change back in convertible pesos or sometimes in cents.

A slightly cheaper alternative to hotels are casa particulares; you stay in private houses either with the family or the family moves out for a night or two. We stayed two nights with a family in Moron and they also cooked food for us which was good and probably cheaper then eating at restaurants.

I have only included a couple of maps as there was no reason doing them all over again as good maps are found in both Sutton and Woudes reports. I haven't made to much differences between the localities around Zapata as a guide is probably necessary to see all the good stuff there anyway.

Birding Places

Soroa. About 70 kms west of Havanna and signposted along the autopista. Birdwatching is done along the trail up to the viewpoint (mirador).

La Güira. About 110 kms west of Havanna. We only spent a short time here near the cliff-face at Cabaneros de los Pines.

Zapata. Only little birding was done in the swamp. Most birding is done in the dry forests around the villages Soplillar, Palpite and Bermejas. A guide is essential here.

Najasa. Birding is done in a rather small patch of forest near the cemeny a few kilometres south of Najasa. Best time is in the afternoon as Cuban Palm Crow and Plain Pigeon comes to roost here as well as Cuban Parakeet which is much easier here then at Zapata.

Cayo Coco. 45 minutes north of Morón in the sea is several cays which are reached by causeways. Cayo Coco is the largest and holds all the wanted species but some may be easier on other islands. From Cayo Coco you can go to Guillermo to the west and Romano and Paraendon Grande in the east. South of Cayo Coco along the causeway are many reefs and islets which are very good for shorebirds. At this time of the year only few waders were present. See also map on page 5-6.

30 kms east of Morón. This is a site for Sandhill Crane of the Cuban race. We had a guide and he asked many farmers for the cranes and they are wellknown (Grulla in local language). The whole area was good for birds in general and we saw our only Gundlach's hawk here. See also map on page 5.

Itinerary

13 July. We arrived late in the evening at Havana and went with a girl to a casa particular in central Havana where an elder couple moved out of their apartment at midnight and let us have the entire apartment!

14 July. We called Cubacar and asked if we could have our prebooked car 6 days earlier than we were supposed to. We were told to call hotel Meliá Havana but the telephone line was rather poor so instead we went there with a taxi and they were already preparing a car for us. After the traditional procedures, we were off towards Soroa and La Güira. We had lunchstop at Soroa and walked a bit on the way up to the mirador and got some introduction to Cuban birds. We checked in at hotel Soroa and went in the afternoon to La Güira where we notched up most of the other necessary birds in this part of the country and also found a Stygian owl on its daytime roost. Again an evening walk at Soroa.

15 July. Early morning walk at Soroa all the way up to the Mirador seeing among other things Solitaires. The rest of the day was spent driving to Zapata. An extra hour was spent trying to find the right way out of Havana as the autopista goes into the town and out again with very few signs. At Playa Larga we found el Chino doing nothing and we hired him for the rest of the day and tomorrow. We checked in at hotel Playa Larga and soon went to pick up Chino and went to the vicinity of Soplillar and he found us Bee hummingbird, Fernandina's flicker, Blue-headed quaildove etc. Evening meal at a casa particular next to Chino where we were served grilled lobster or Crocodile stew.

16 July. Early departure with Chino for Bermejas and search for quaildoves and the rest of the species we missed. Most of the day was a fruitless search for quaildoves, although we saw a grey-headed flying from the trail ones. At a lagoon we saw 2 West indian whistling ducks, but most surprisingly was a Louisiana waterthrush.

17 July. Another try by ourselves for Key-west quaildove and Red-shouldered blackbird gave nothing before we sat off for a long drive to Najasa. We arrived there at 2.30 pm and knocked at Pedro Regalados house and fortunately he was home doing nothing. He invited us and said that he had received my letter only the day before (it took over one month!). We were of course one week early but that was no problem and Pedro switched clothes and brought his taperecorder and soon we were out birding with him. We tried in vain for the Giant kingbirds, three territories, which he use to study but couldn't find them! We saw Palm crow, Plain pigeon and Cuban grassquit without effort. In late afternoon we went back to Pedro's house, he said a pair use to roost in his back yard, and they were there when we came. We had some juice and a chat with Pedro for a while and Roger also bought a painting of a Cuban trogon by him for 25USD, before we said goodbye and went to Camaguey and found a nice casa particular.

18 July. Driving all morning to Moron and found a very nice casa particular where we checked in and rested during the midday heat. Afternoon was spent on Cayo Coco seeing among other things 3 Zapata sparrows and several Oriente warblers and some wetland birds.

19 July. Up early and 45 minutes drive to Cayo Coco and another half hours to Cayo Perande Grande where we found Cuban gnatcatcher and Thick-billed vireo within half an hour. Seawatching from the lighthouse gave a flock of Brown noddys, sooty and bridled

terns. We then went to Sitio La Güira where birdwatcher Elicer is supposed to work, we got his name from Chino. We didn't find him but found Tio who also has some knowledge in birds. He took us through some trails in the forest for a couple of hot hours in search for KWQD but in vain. The trails here could possibly be good during migration and winter for skulking birds as they give good access to the forest interiors. We went to the research station and send some emails and checked the internet before going back to Morón. In the evening we took part in some of the festivities that was going on in the town.

20 July.

Long drive to Zapata where we searched by ourselves for KWQD and Red-shouldred blackbird in vain. Night at hotel Playa Larga which has Stygian owl calling every night.

21 July. Another try for the dove and the blackbird. We finally got the blackbird along the main road north of la Boca and the Crocodile farm. We then left Zapata and headed towards Havana and the airport. We still had several days on Cuba but decided to try and rebook our tickets and got on a plane the same evening to London.

Places we stayed at:

Havana. Casa particular. Juanita Durán Pereira, San Rafael No 967 Apto 75, 7mo. piso e/ Espada y Hospital, Centro Habana

Soroa. Hotel Villa Soroa. Good cabins for 43 USD

Playa Larga. Hotel Horizontes Playa Larga. Good Double rooms for 40 USD

Camaguey. Casa particular. Lecusay's rent, General Reeves No 28, e/ Victoria y Unión El Diamante, Camaguey. Nice place with a good restaurant across the street.

Moron. Casa particular. Sr. Nelson Morales Garcia, Ave. Tarafa No.91, e/ Calle Patria y Calle 8, Morón. An excellent place to stay at, nice family who will cook for you if you like and easy to find and easy to get out of Morón for Cayo Coco.

Giudes

Orestes Martinenez Garcia (commonly known as el Chino)

cisam@atenas.inf.cu (note that the email in John van der Woude's trip report is wrong).

He charges 10 USD per person and day. Well spent money.

Pedro Regalado, Apartado postal 161, Camaguey, CP 70100 Cuba.

I wrote him a letter and it took just over one month to reach him! Allow plenty of time for correspondence with him. He speaks good English and is very keen to show you the birds around Najasa. He also paints birds and does it well. I bought an A4 size picture of Cuban Trogon for 25 USD and was very pleased. He didn't charge anything but we gave him 5 USD each for 3 hours guiding and he seemed satisfied with that.

Trip reports

Mark Sutton & John Martin 22/4-6/5 2000. Can be found at surfbirds.com.

A good report with lots of good and accurate maps.

John van der Woude 4-17/3 2001. Can be found at <http://johnbirding.wolweb.nl>.

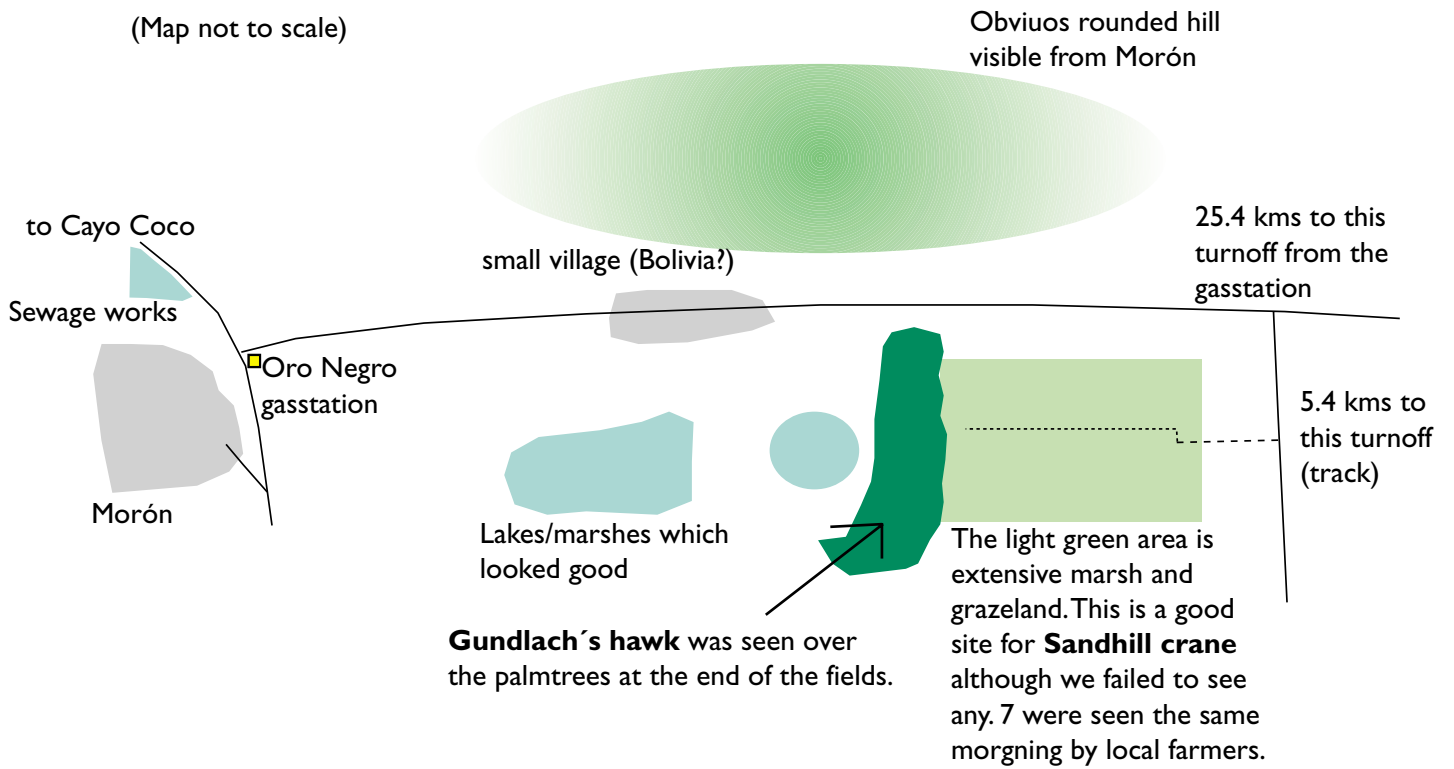
A good report with lots of maps. The maps are very different from Sutton but shows the same thing. Also GPS stake-outs if you got one of those.

John Hornbuckle January 1999. Can be found at worldtwitch.virtualave.net/cuba_1999.htm.

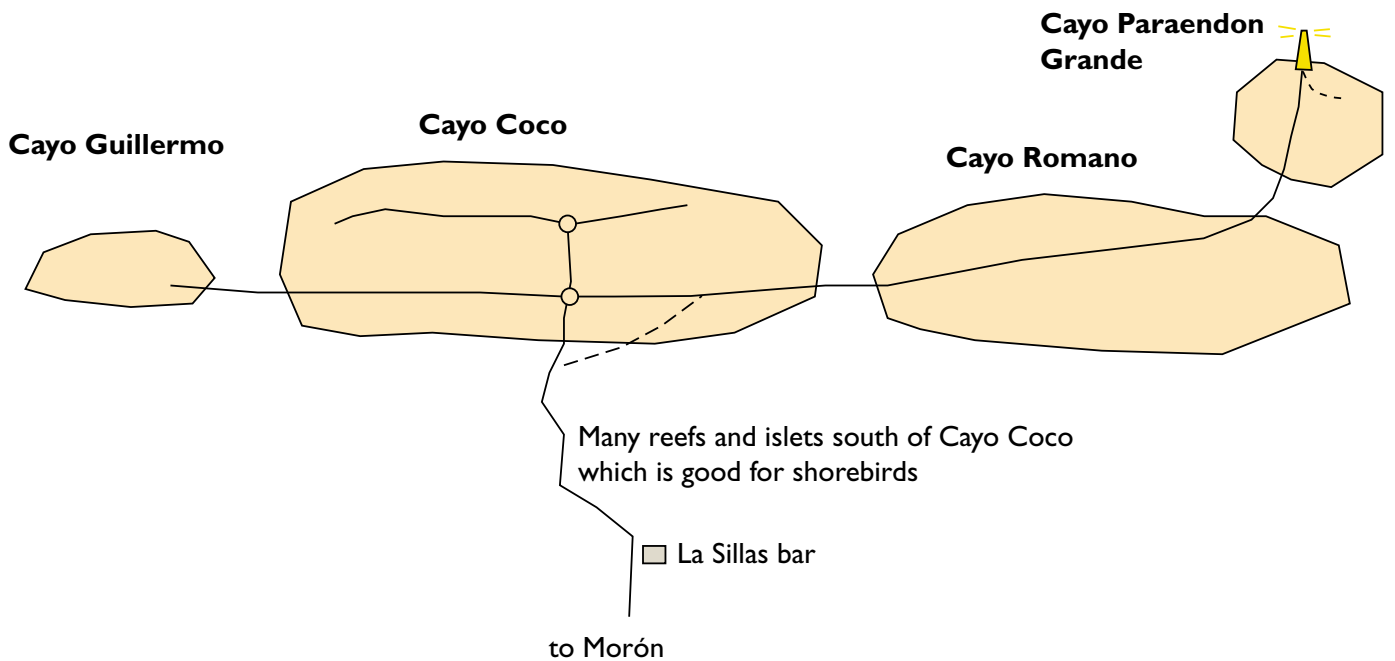
A good report but without maps which makes it a bit less useful.

30 kms east of Morón

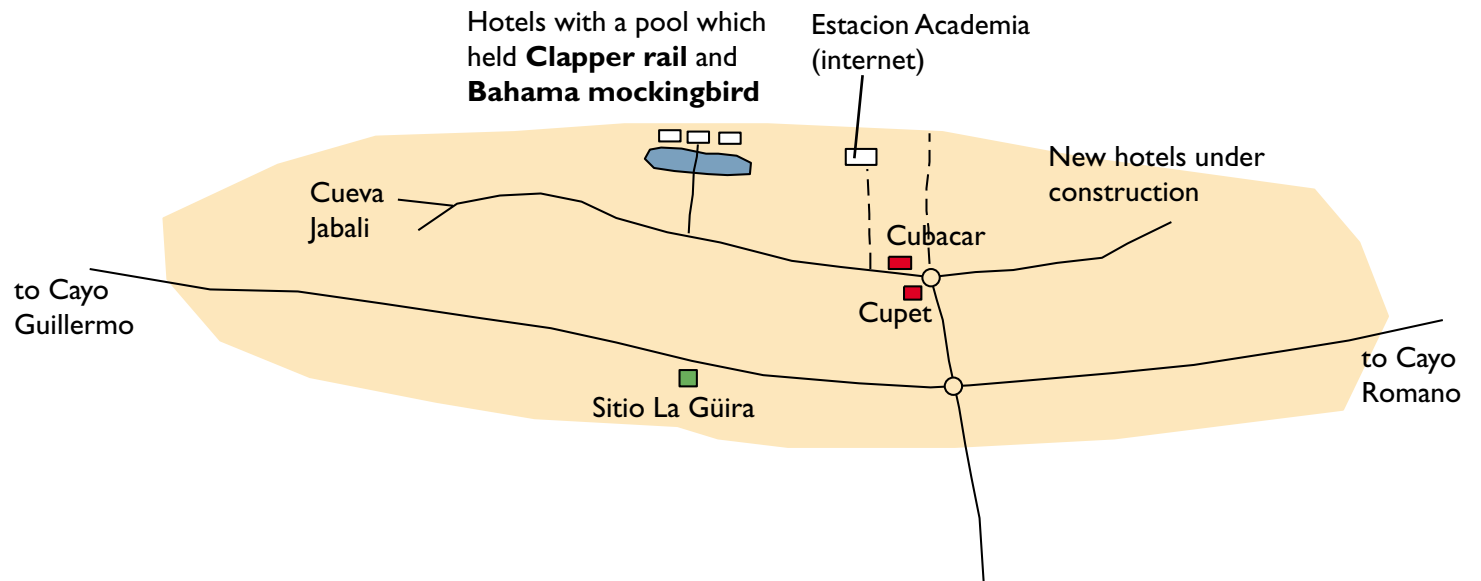
(Map not to scale)



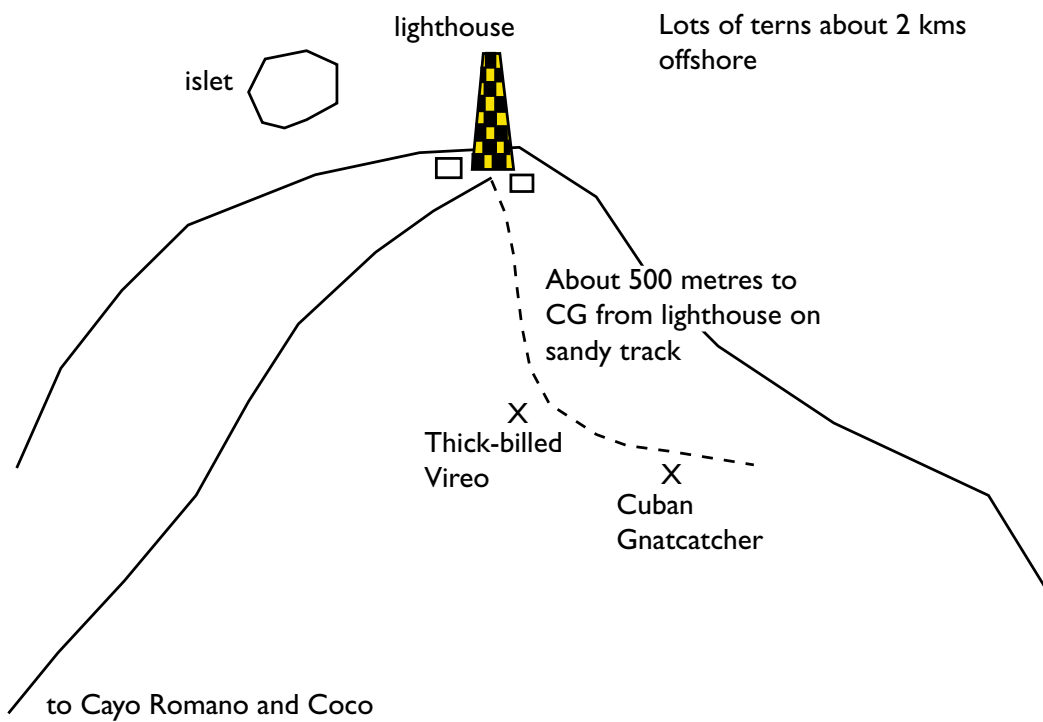
Overview of the Cayo Coco area



Cayo Coco



Cayo Paraendon Grande



Least Grebe

1 near Soroa

Pied-billed Grebe

20 near Soroa, 1 en route to Camaguey.

Neotropic Cormorant

2+10 at Zapata

Double-crested Cormorant

About 50 seen mainly south of Cayo Coco

Anhinga

2 30 kms east of Moron.

Brown Pelican

10 seen daily at Cayo Coco

Magnificent Frigatebird

1 at Zapata, up to 25 at Cayo Coco

Least Bittern

1 30 kms east of Morón, 2 Zapata

Tricoloured Heron

At least 25 Cayo Coco

Little Blue Heron

10 near Soroa otherwise singles

Reddish Egret

75 on Cayo Coco, about equal numbers of white and dark.

Snowy Egret

10 near Soroa, about 75 on Cayo Coco

Great Blue Heron

1 Zapata, 3 Cayo Coco

Great Egret

Singles mainly at Cayo Coco and 30 kms east of Morón.

Cattle Egret

Common

Green Heron

5-10 daily

Black-c Night-heron

1 Najasa

Yellow-c Night-heron

1 Najasa

White Ibis

3 on Cayo Coco

Greater Flamingo

500 on Cayo Coco

Roseate Spoonbill

3 on Cayo Coco

West Indian Whistling-duck

2 at Zapata

Wood Duck

10 seen around Zapata

Ruddy Duck

60 in a large pond east of Havana towards Zapata.

Turkey Vulture

Common

Snail Kite

1 30 kms east of Morón.

Gundlach’s Hawk

1 30 kms east of Morón.

Common Black-hawk

2 at Zapata, 2 at Cayo Coco

Osprey

2 on Cayo Coco

Northern Caracara

5 on Cayo Coco

American Kestrel

Up to 25 daily, only 1 darkbreasted individual seen.

Northern Bobwhite

1 north of la Boca, Zapata, 1 north of Morón.

Clapper Rail

1 seen in a lagoon near the hotels on Cayo Coco

Am Purple Gallinule

Singles at Zapata

Common Moorhen

4 at Zapata

Limpkin

2 at Zapata, 3 30 kms east of Morón.

Black-necked Stilt

Failry common near water, over 100 at Cayo Coco

Grey Plover

2 at Cayo Coco

Wilson’s Plover

1 at Cayo Paraendon Grande

Snowy Plover

1 with a recently hatched chick south of Cayo Coco



Roseate Spoonbill. A few seen on the south side of Cayo Coco.



Common Black-hawk. Sometimes considered a separate species - Cuban Crab-hawk.



Northern Caracara on Cayo Coco.

Killdeer

Fairly common

Northern Jacana

Up to 5 around the Crocodile farm at la Boca, Zapata.

Least Sandpiper

1 south of Cayo Coco.

About 25 *Calidris* sp seen flying at Morón sewage works could possibly have been this species.

Greater Yellowlegs

12 south of Cayo Coco

Ruddy Turnstone

8 Cayo Coco

Willet

3 on Cayo Coco

Laughing Gull

Common on Cayo Coco. A few seen near the Bay of Pigs.

Caspian Tern

1 near Soroa

Royal Tern

Common Cayo Coco.

Least Tern

Common Cayo Coco.

Sooty Tern

1 Cayo Parendon Grande.

Bridled Tern

5 Cayo Parendon Grande. About 50 unidentified Bridled/Sooty terns were seen together with the Noddies off Cayo Parendon Grande lighthouse. Most of these were thought to be Bridled.

Brown Noddy

About 50 seen off Cayo Parendon Grande lighthouse.

Gull-billed Tern

Singles near Morón sewage works and Cayo Coco. About 15 seen 30 kms east of Morón.

Scaly-naped Pigeon

About 5 seen and/or heard at both Soroa and La Güira.

White-crowned Pigeon

4 Cayo Coco

Plain Pigeon

10 Najasa. A few large *Columba* pigeons seen at Cayo Coco and Romano were probably this species.

Mourning Dove

Common

Zenaida Dove

Common

White-winged Dove

Fairly common

Common Ground-dove

Common

Grey-headed Ground-dove

1 seen briefly at Soplillar.

Ruddy Quail-dove

1 heard Soroa

Blue-headed Quail-dove

4 seen near Bermejas and 3 seen Palpite, Zapata.

Cuban Parakeet

2 at the Crocodile farm, La Boca, Zapata, 10 near Najasa.

Cuban Parrot

Fairly common Zapata, specially around hotel Playa Larga, also seen at Najasa.

Great Lizard Cuckoo

3 at Soroa, 3 at Cayo Coco, about 10 daily at Zapata.

Smooth-billed Ani

Common

Bare-legged Owl

2 at nesting tree at Zapata.

Cuban Pygmy Owl

1 Soroa hotel, 8 seen and/or heard Zapata.

Stygian Owl

1 on daytime roost at La Guira, 1 every night at hotel Playa Larga.

Greater Antillean Nightjair

1 heard near Soplillar, Zapata.

Antillean Nighthawk

Up to 20 seen in late afternoon in Zapata, specially near hotel Playa Larga, 4 seen at Cayo Coco.

Antillean Palm-swift

Singles, about 30 seen in total.

Cuban Emerald

Singles daily, about 40 seen in total.

Bee Hummingbird

2 males near Soplillar. Probably heard at the Crocodile farm.

Cuban Trogon

10 Soroa and La Güira, 5 in Zapata.



Cuban Parrot. Most easily seen around the hotel complex at Playa Larga.



Cuban Pygmy Owl (top) and Stygian Owl. Both species can be found at hotel complex.

Cuban Tody

3 Soroa, 5 Zapata, 5 Cayo Coco.

West Indian Woodpecker

Seen on all places except Cayo Coco. 28 seen in total and most conspicuous at the Crocodile farm.

Cuban Woodpecker

3 Soroa, 3 Zapata, 2 Cayo Coco.

Northern Flicker

1 at Palpite, Zapata.

Fernandina's Flicker

1 near Soplillar.

Crescent-eyed Pewee

1 Soroa, 9 Zapata, 8 Cayo Coco.

La Sagra's Flycatcher

4 Zapata, 1 Cayo Coco.

Grey Kingbird

Common

Loggerhead Kingbird

Fairly common.

Giant Kingbird

2 at Pedro's house at Najasa and probably 1 near the cemetery.

Cave Swallow

Singles

Cuban Martin

Singles at Zapata and Morón, 75 seen 30 kms east of Morón.

Zapata Wren

1 seen and 1 heard Zapata swamp north of Palpite.

Northern Mockingbird

Common

Bahama Mockingbird

1 seen near the hotels at Cayo Coco.

Cuban Solitaire

2 heard La Güira, 2 seen and 1 more heard Soroa.

Red-legged Thrush

Fairly common, seen on all places.

Louisiana Waterthrush

1 at Zapata, 1-2 at Cayo Coco.



Cuban Tody. Nice as ever!



Crescent-eyed Pewee.



Cuban Solitaire singing near the Mirador at Soroa.

Cuban Gnatcatcher

1 pair on Cayo Paraedon Grande. Responds to pishing when the male came within 2 metres and sang.

Cuban Palm Crow

5 near the cementry at Najasa.

Cuban Crow

About 15 seen at Zapata. Best views near hotel Playa Larga.

House Sparrow

Seen all days.

Cuban Vireo

2 Zapata, 1 Cayo Coco.

Thick-billed Vireo

2 Cayo Paraedon Grande, probably also a family party at Cayo Coco.

Black-whiskered Vireo

Singles, 25 in total. Seen at Soroa, La Güira, Zapata and Cayo Coco.

Black-and-white Warbler

1 Cayo Coco, 1 Cueva de los Peses, Zapata.

Olive-capped Warbler

5 at La Güira. The only species one needs to go to La Güira for.

Yellow-headed Warbler

2 Soroa, 4 Zapata.

Oriente Warbler

Fairly common on Cayo Coco.

Western Stipe-headed Tanager

2 Soroa, 5 Zapata, fairly common on Cayo Coco.

Red-legged Honeycreeper

5 Soroa, 7 Zapata.

Zapata Sparrow

6 on Cayo Coco.

Cuban Bullfinch

3 La Güira, 2 Zapata, fairly common on Cayo Coco.

Cuban Grassquit

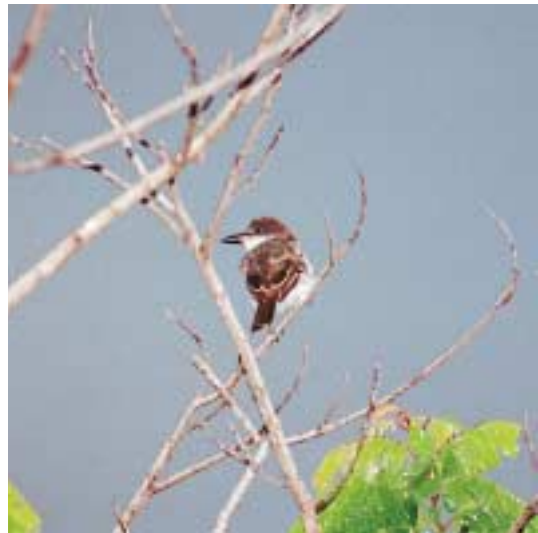
7 at the cementry at Najasa.

Yellow-faced Grassquit

Fairly common.

Black-cowled oriole

9 at Zapata, 2 at Najasa and 5 on Cayo Coco.



Giant Kingbird at Najasa. A good fieldmark, according to Pedro, is that this species never raises a crest as Loggerhead frequently does.



Cuban Gnatcatcher responded well to pishing and started to sing from an exposed perch.



Thick-billed Vireo, apparently a breeding bird on the northern Cays.

Red-shouldred Blackbird

2 along the main road north of the Crocodile farm, Zapata.

Tawny-shouldered Blackbird

Fairly common but local.

Eastern Meadowlark

Singles along the autopista. Common 30 kms east of Morón.

Cuban Blackbird

Singles on all places, often with other blackbirds and grackles.

Greater Antillean Grackle

Common

Shiny Cowbird

2 at Zapata.



Oriente Warbler is common and easy to see at Cayo Coco.



Cuban Grassquit at the cementry at Najasa, apparently a good site for this declining bird.



Zapata Sparrow. Difficult to see at Zapata but easier on Cayo Coco. Here represented by a different race, *varonai*.