

Zapata, Cuba

20-25 February 2009



A visit to Cuba is like being part of a live movie

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General

This was a short family visit to Cuba. We spent time sightseeing in La Habana, enjoyed a few days at a resort on the south coast near Zapata. Of course I pitched in some birding in the Zapata area and scored on virtually all my target birds of the area. Highlights were the set of four species of Quail-Dove in the same forest patch, the smallest bird of the world: Bee Hummingbird, the Zapata duo: Wren and Sparrow, Cuban Parrot, Trogon, Tody, Bare-legged and Stygian Owls and a trio of smart endemic Woodpeckers.

Itinerary

20/1

We left Panama in the evening and arrived at La Habana airport 2.5 hours later. After a bit of hassle changing USD to local CUC (pesos aka convertibles), we soon had our pre-booked rental car in our hands. With a map over La Habana we rather easily found our way to the hotel at Beach Miramar. It is absolutely necessary to have a good city map (4 USD at the tourist booth at the airport), unless you like getting lost or have too much time to spare. Very few roads and streets are sign-posted.

21/1



La Habana waterfront

This was going to be our first day of sightseeing in La Habana and we drove east along the coastline towards Old La Habana. We stopped along the sea-wall to admire the waves breaking and splashing the street. In the old city we drifted around for several hours, as well as checking in at the interesting Museo de la Revolucion. After lunch we left La Habana along Autopista Nacional in the direction of Playa Larga and Playa Giron. The latter was going to be our base while exploring the Zapata area over the next three days.



The autopista was extremely reminiscent of the highways in North Korea; i.e. wide and empty

Between Playa Larga and Playa Giron we stopped for some Cuban Parrots, which proved to be the only sighting of this nice endemic. About one hour before dusk we checked in at Hotel Playa Giron, which turned out to be quite a decent place to stay. Being an all-inclusive beachside resort with proximity to birding grounds always makes a good combination. After dinner I went to check the trees for Stygian Owl and was fortunate that one of the local birding guides just had one pinned down. I also phoned Chino, another local birding guide in Playa Larga, in order to reconfirm our birding for the next day.



Hotel grounds at Hotel Playa Giron, complete with Stygian Owl performing at night

22/1

My appointment with Chino was at 07.00, so well ahead of time (06.00) I left Playa Giron and drove in the dark to Playa Larga. Soon thereafter we were on our way north of Playa Larga and going on a small dirt track into Zapata Swamp. It did not take us long to hear a Zapata Wren singing. A snatch of playback made the trick and we soon had a male singing in a bush as well as the female creeping at our feet. Cool feeling to see at Zapata endemic, something that has been on my wish list for a couple of decades. There was more to come, as soon after we located a pair of Zapata Sparrows that also appeared on cue. Adding to this was a selection of more common Cuban endemics. Having been successful with these two endemics, we returned to a nearby patch of woodland for a brief Grey-headed Quail-Dove. Then we continued south to Palpita where Fernandina's Flicker and West Indian Woodpeckers performed well. As it was now mid-morning we were anxious to get to the Bee Hummingbird before the breeze picked up. The first spot sometimes holds a female, but we draw a blank. However, the next spot quickly delivered a nice male singing from an exposed perch! We also pulled out a few more common birds before returning to the main road where we after a

while found a pair of Red-shouldered Blackbirds. By noon we returned to Playa Larga and I dropped Chino off at his house and continued south to Playa Giron for lunch and a few afternoon hours on the beach. When it cooled off a bit we all went to Bermejas for a walk in the forest at Refugio de Fauna. Fortunately we instantly found Orlando, the local guide of the area, and he showed us a nest of Bare-legged Owls and a few other endemics including a perched Greater Antillean Nightjar near his house at dusk. With 21 lifers in a day (it was a loooong time ago when that happened last time!), it was appropriate to celebrate with some Cuba Libre and Mojitas in the evening.

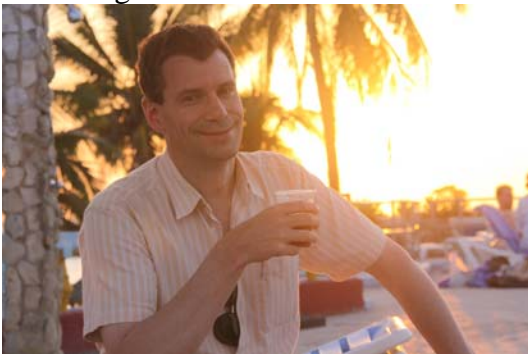


Quail-Dove quest strategy being contemplated

23/1

Target birds of the day were Quail-Doves, always a favorite genus. We started the morning with a singing Grey-headed at dawn and half an hour later a pair of smart Blue-headed walked straight towards us. Then we shifted position to a water-hole 1.5 km away. The hoped for Key West Q-D never materialized, but instead we enjoyed several views of Grey-headed and a showy Ruddy. Amazing that all four species occur in the same area! Eventually we gave up on the Key West and drove 15 km east to a marshy area to look for Gundlach's Hawk. This turned out to be a sore dip (the only such on the trip!).

By noon I was back at the hotel and a relaxing afternoon on the beach. Later I made another attempt on the Key West Q-D, but still negative result. Anyway, Blue-headed is still the best of the Q-Ds, so it was clearly worth celebrating!



What is a visit to Cuba without a Cuba Libre or Mojito?

24/1

Today was going to be the last possible try for Key West Q-D, and sure enough, it was right there on the trail, feeding on the rice that we had put out for it the day before! Back at the road we also pulled in the Cuban Bullfinch, a widespread bird that had eluded me so far. Happy with the success I was back at the hotel for breakfast. We checked out and together with Orlando we drove north to Playa Larga and paid the obligatory visit to the Park Office to pay the visit fees. Before lunch we decided to go for a quick visit to Las Salinas to look for Flamingos. These were, not surprisingly, rather easy to track down and we also managed a pair of the endemic taxon of Black Hawk. When returning to the gate, I appreciated the Cuban Crown that was sat on a phone pole right in front of us, sparing me to search for it at lunch-break.

We had lunch at one of the beach side hotels before saying goodbye to Orlando. Two hours later we arrived at the Old La Habana for some regular sightseeing. We had dinner in town before going to the hotel at Beach Miramar.

25/1

This was a full half-day sightseeing



Bullet holes since the revolution



A typical street in La Habana



Cigar-smoking senior



Next generation Cubans - with varying approaches to foreigners



Visiting La Habana was like being in a movie...

Weather

The weather at this time of the year was absolutely stunning. No complaints whatsoever...

Site descriptions

In the Zapata area we contacted Chino, chino.zapata@gmail.com, who is one of the real good guides in the area. He lives in Beach Caletón in Playa Larga and can also be reached at 5253 9004 or 98 73 73. At Bermelas we got the local recommendation to contact Orlando. He can be contacted through the people in the first house on the left side when getting to the village of Bermelas.

Birds

Brown Pelican, *Pelecanus occidentalis occidentalis*

A few at La Habana and a few at Playa Giron.

Double-crested Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax auritus floridanus*

A few around Playa Giron and many at Las Salinas.

Anhinga, *Anhinga anhinga leucogaster*

One near Playa Larga.

Magnificent Frigatebird, *Fregata magnificens*

A few at Playa Giron and at La Habana.

Great Blue Heron, *Ardea herodias occidentalis*

A few at Zapata Swamp, many at the marsh east of Bermejas and many at Las Salinas.

Great Egret, *Ardea alba egretta*

A few at Zapata Swamp, many at the marsh east of Bermejas and many at Las Salinas.

Tricolored Heron, *Egretta tricolor ruficollis*

Two at Zapata Swamp and several at Las Salinas.

Little Blue Heron, *Egretta caerulea*

One at Zapata Swamp, one at the marsh east of Bermejas and several at Las Salinas.

Snowy Egret, *Egretta thula brewsteri*

Many in the Zapata area.

Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis ibis*

Commonly seen in suitable habbo.

Green Heron, *Butorides virescens virescens*

One at Zapata Swamp and one at the marsh east of Bermejas.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, *Nyctanassa violacea brancrofti*

Many at Playa Giron. Several unidentified Night-Herons seen along the road north of Playa Giron in the dark.

White Ibis, *Eudocimus albus*

Three at Playa Giron, five at Playa Larga and 20 at Las Salinas.

Caribbean Flamingo, *Phoenicopterus ruber*

41 at Las Salinas.



Caribbean Flamingos

Turkey Vulture, *Cathartes aura aura*

Common.

Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus (ridgwayi?)*

Two north of Playa Larga and one at Las Salinas.

Snail Kite, *Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus*

One at Zapata Swamp.

Northern Harrier, *Circus cyaneus hudsonius*

One male along the autopista between La Habana and Playa Larga.

Common (Cuban) Black-Hawk, *Buteogallus anthracinus gundlachii*

One pair at Las Salinas. This taxon is sometimes treated as an endemic species based on morphology and vocalizations.



Common or Cuban Black Hawk

Crested Caracara, *Caracara cheriway audubonii*

One at the marsh east of Bermejas and one pair at Las Salinas.

American Kestrel, *Falco sparverius sparverioides*

A common roadside bird.

Limpkin, *Aramus guarauna pictus*

One at Zapata Swamp.

Sora, *Porzana carolina*

One heard at Zapata Swamp.

Purple Gallinule, *Porphyrio martinica*

One at Zapata Swamp and one at Palpita.

Common Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus cerceris*

One at Zapata Swamp.

American Coot, *Fulica Americana americana*

One pair at Las Salinas.

Northern Jacana, *Jacana spinosa violacea*

One at the marsh east of Bermejas.

Killdeer, *Charadrius vociferous ternominatus*

10-15 at Playa Giron.

Greater Yellowlegs, *Tringa melanoleuca*

One at Las Salinas.

American Herring Gull, *Larus smithsonianus*

One at La Habana. Here treated as a species separate from Herring Gull based on differences in morphology and genetics.

Laughing Gull, *Larus atricilla atricilla*

One at La Habana.

Caspian Tern, *Sterna caspia*

20 at Las Salinas.



Caspian Terns

Royal Tern, *Sterna maxima maxima*

One at La Habana, two at Playa Giron and two at Las Salinas.



Royal Terns

White-crowned Pigeon, *Patagioenas leucocephala*

One north of Playa Larga.

Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto decaocto*

Many at La Habana.

Mourning Dove, *Zenaida macroura macroura*

Common.

Zenaida Dove, *Zenaida aurita zenaida*

Many at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

White-winged Dove, *Zenaida asiatica asiatica*

Three around Playa Giron.

Common Ground-Dove, *Columbina passerine insularis*

Two near Playa Larga, several at Playa Giron and five at Palpita.

Gray-fronted Quail-Dove, *Geotrygon caniceps*

One heard deep inside the forest near Zapata Swamp and when we walked in we came very close, but eventually we spooked it and saw it flying off. Then we had good views of several birds at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas, with a total of seven sightings and heard a few times.

Key West Quail-Dove, *Geotrygon chrysis*

Eventually, on the third attempt, we saw one feeding in the open along a trail at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Ruddy Quail-Dove, *Geotrygon montana montana*

One flyby at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas and then one seen nicely at a waterhole in the forest at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Blue-headed Quail-Dove, *Starnoenas cyanocephala*

One pair came in along a track at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas, just as predicted by the guide. Eventually they were only some ten meters away. Wow!



Blue-headed Quail-Doves – must be the most stunning of all the QDs

Cuban Parakeet, *Aratinga euops*

Two small flocks at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas in the every late afternoon and a flock of 20 the next afternoon.

Cuban Parrot, *Amazona leucocephala leucocephala*

Six perched together in the late afternoon between Playa Larga and Playa Giron.



Cuban Parrot – a chance sighting along the road was the only one

Great Lizard-Cuckoo, *Saurothera merlini merlini*

Two in Zapata Swamp and several at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Great Lizard-Cuckoo – as usual this genus dislikes photographers

Smooth-billed Ani, *Crotophaga ani*

Small flocks frequently seen.



Smooth-billed Ani – not the most beautiful bird, but here captured in nice light

Barn Owl, *Tyto alba furcata*

One heard at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas in the early morning.

Bare-legged Owl, *Gymnoglaux lawrencii* ssp

One pair at their nest-hole near Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas, provided excellent views. The morning after, we heard it calling.



Bare-legged Owl – one of a pair thanks to Orlando

Cuban Pygmy-Owl, *Glaucidium siju siju*

One heard and seen very well north of Playa Larga and several heard and a few seen at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Cuban Pygmy-Owl – being a tiny mouse and stare into those eyes means No good

Stygian Owl, *Asio stygius siguapa*

One seen perched in the dark just outside our bungalow at Playa Giron.



Stygian Owl – more the stare of the clever old owl, or is it astonishment?

Greater Antillean Nightjar, *Caprimulgus cubanensis cubanensis*

One bird seen on the deck at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas just after dusk.

Antillean Palm-Swift, *Tachornis phoenicobia iradii*

One near Playa Giron.

Cuban Emerald, *Chlorostilbon ricordii*

Two seen north of Playa Larga, and a few seen briefly at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Bee Hummingbird, *Mellisuga helenae*

One male seen well when singing from an exposed perch north of Playa Larga. This world's smallest bird was just about as tiny as a bird can get.



Bee Hummingbird – it does need some cropping to come out

Cuban Trogon, *Priotelus temnurus temnurus*

One between Playa Larga and Playa Giron, one north of Playa Larga and a total of four at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Cuban Trogon – competing with Ward's Trogon in being the best-looking

Belted Kingfisher, *Ceryle alcyon*

Many seen on wires near Zapata Swamp, a few seen around Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas and the marsh east of Bermejas.

Cuban Tody, *Todus multicolor*

A few heard and one seen very well near Zapata Swamp. Many heard and a few seen at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Cuban Tody – giving the color “electric green” a name

West Indian Woodpecker, *Melanerpes superciliaris superciliaris*

Two at Palpita and a few at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Cuban Green Woodpecker, *Xiphidiopicus percussus percussus*

One at Zapata Swamp, one north of Playa Larga and several at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Cuban Green Woodpecker

Northern Flicker, *Colaptes auratus chrysocaulosus*

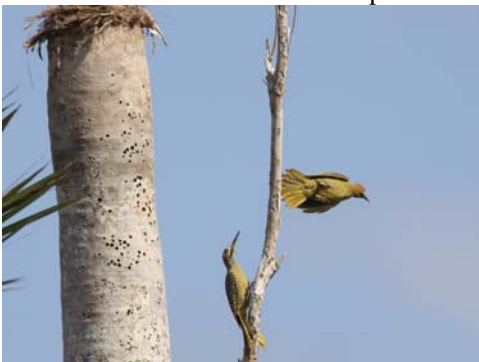
Two at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Northern Flicker

Fernandina's Flicker, *Colaptes fernandinae*

Two males near at nest-hole at Palpita and a couple of sightings at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Fernandina's Flickers

Cuban Pewee, *Contopus caribaeus morenoi*

Two near Zapata Swamp, several at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas and several at Las Salinas.

La Sagra's Flycatcher, *Myiarchus sagrae sagrae*

One at Palpita.

Loggerhead Kingbird, *Tyrannus caudifasciatus caudifasciatus*

Common along the roads south of Playa Larga and around Bermejas.



Loggerhead Kingbird

Cuban Martin, *Progne cryptoleuca*

Two males and a female along the road between Playa Giron and Playa Larga on 24th and a few at Old La Habana on 25th.

Tree Swallow, *Tachycineta bicolor*

Commonly seen over villages and swamps.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica erythrogaster*

One north of Playa Larga.

Zapata Wren, *Ferminia cerverai*

A few heard and a pair seen very nicely at Zapata Swamp.



Zapata Wren – one of a tiny population

Gray Catbird, *Dumetella carolinensis*

A few at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Northern Mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottos orpheus*

Common.

Red-legged Thrush, *Turdus plumbeus rubripes*

Many seen at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, *Polioptila caerulea caerulea*

One north of Playa Larga and one at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Cuban Crow, *Corvus nasicus*

One seen on a phone pole in Playa Larga was a last minute lifer while stopping the car when exiting the gate from Las Salinas.

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus ssp*

Many seen in villages.

Cuban Vireo, *Vireo gundlachii*

Two north of Playa Larga and a few heard at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Northern Parula, *Parula Americana*

Several at Zapata Swamp and at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Cape May Warbler, *Dendroica tigrina*

One at Palpita.

Black-throated Blue Warbler, *Dendroica caerulescens* ssp

Several at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Black-throated Green Warbler, *Dendroica virens*

Several at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Yellow-throated Warbler, *Dendroica dominica* ssp

One at Playa Giron.

Prairie Warbler, *Dendroica discolor* ssp

One at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Palm Warbler, *Dendroica palmarum palmarum*

Common, especially at Zapata Swamp.

Black-and-white Warbler, *Mniotilta varia*

Two at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

American Redstart, *Setophaga ruticilla*

Common in woodlands in the Zapata area.

Ovenbird, *Seiurus aurocapilla furvivor*

Many seen in Zapata Swamp and at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Common Yellowthroat, *Geothlypis trichas trichas*

Several at Zapata Swamp.

Yellow-headed Warbler, *Teretistris fernandinae*

A few at Zapata Swamp and many at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.

Western Spindalis, *Spindalis zena pretrei*

Two at Zapata Swamp.



Western Spindalis

Cuban Bullfinch, *Melopyrrha nigra nigra*

One pair feeding in low bushes near the houses near the entrance at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Cuban Bullfinch

Yellow-faced Grassquit, *Tiaris olivacea olivacea*

Pairs and small flocks seen several times in the Zapata area.

Zapata Sparrow, *Torreornis inexpectata inexpectata*

One pair showing nicely at Zapata Swamp.



Zapata Sparrow

Red-shouldered Blackbird, *Agelaius assimilis assimilis*

One pair north of Palpita and one male at the marsh east of Bermejas.

Tawny-shouldered Blackbird, *Agelaius humeralis humeralis*

Individuals and small flocks seen around Playa Larga, Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas and the marsh east of Bermejas.



Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds

Eastern Meadowlark, *Sturnella magna hippocrepis*

One heard at Zapata Swamp and one seen along the autopista near La Habana.

Cuban Blackbird, *Dives atrovioacea*

Several in La Habana and many seen around Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.



Cuban Blackbird

Greater Antillean Grackle, *Quiscalus niger gundlachii*

Locally common, especially at Playa Giron.

Greater Antillean Oriole, *Icterus dominicensi melanopsis*

Two at Zapata Swamp and a few at Refugio de Fauna at Bermejas.