



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 1/2014

CUBA: THE COMPLETE TOUR

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Cuba, the largest island of Greater Antilles, has recently become the favorite tourism destination in the Caribbean. One of the main attractions of the island has been a political one, a chance to see a socialist state, a rarity in today's world. In addition, comfortable climate, various cultural features and, for nature-lovers, high degree of avian endemism have at times made it difficult to find vacant seats to Cuba during the high season, in the middle of northern hemisphere winter. In winter 2013-2014, I finally managed to visit the island for nine days, between 19th and 28th December. The journey was the classical circular tour, designed to maximize one's chances to see the special birds of Cuba: from Havana to Pinar del Rio, from there to Zapata Swamp, from Zapata to Sierra de Najasa in the east, northwest to Cayo Coco, back to Zapata Swamp and finally, again to Havana.



Fig. 1. Welcome to Cuba! (A Cuban Screech Owl peeks out of her home at Zapata Swamp).

In regard to timing, mid-winter appeared to be an ideal time to find the endemic bird species. The migratory Cuban Martins may not be there, but for example at Zapata Swamp, the accessibility was excellent and all my target species were available. Till November, some parts of Soplillar, for example, may well be too wet to be accessed. In December, it was sunshine and moderate to no wind throughout the visit, with short periods of rain on a single afternoon, while driving between Cayo Coco and Playa Larga.

To me, everything appeared relaxed in Cuba. When entering Cuba at José Martí airport, I tried to go the red lane in the customs, to declare some imported food items, but was told to walk the green lane. This happened despite my field gear, the looks which might have suggested that I was a late arrival for the invasion at the Bay of Pigs! When leaving the country, there were alternative services at the airport to exchange the CUCs to US dollars, for a better rate.

Thanks to the socialist system, no abject poverty was observed. People seemed content with their situation, being supported by various governmental and communal structures which make life tolerable despite the relatively low income levels and shortage of imported goods. In terms of health care and education, the system apparently works and produces outcomes superior to most of its neighbors. In nine days, I was approached only once with a request for money, even though it was obvious to everybody that my daily spending equaled the average Cuban salary of more than three months.

It is a society in a controlled transition. People seemed to expect the 'tourist peso' (CUC, which may be exchanged to foreign currencies) era to end in the near future. In the television, US entertainment media dominated, the speeches of 'Uncle Raul' being a treat of the national channel. On the highways, half of the cars were new (mostly made in China), a quarter Soviet, and another quarter 1950s US vehicles, often skilfully tuned with new paint and audio equipment. A few of them, such as 1958 Ford Fairlane 500 convertibles, would be real collector's items in the USA, with a price tag around USD 50.000. Some American cars were from the 1920s, soon reaching a century on the road. They must have produced more durable cars in the 'good old days'!

Surprisingly, some U.S. travelers, with whom I chatted at airports on the way, asked about security in Cuba. This was somewhat amusing, considering the very high crime rates in the States, in comparison with the docile Caribbean island. I never felt threatened in Cuba in any way, just momentarily annoyed with some street 'guides' in Camagüey, when looking for my hotel at an incorrect location close to the center (misleading Google Maps information; more below). According to traveler Internet reports, some nuisance occurs in large cities such as Havana and Camagüey, but in general, Cuba is an exceptionally easy-going travel destination. People are very polite, helpful and welcoming. As practically all the land is public, there is a freedom to move around, much like in Scandinavia.

Even the domestic animals were unusually accommodating. No barking dogs, to start with. Also horses, cows, sheep and pigs were completely relaxed when one entered their territories, and provided a lot of entertainment with their antics during the birdwatching trips. The same applied to several birds. There were significantly better photography opportunities in Cuba than in some other Caribbean destinations, because of the tameness of the wild birds. Apparently, hunting is not common there. Even an amateur photographer such as me could consequently take close portraits of passerines, as some of the photographs in this report witness.



Fig. 2. 1950s Chevys need regular maintenance to stay on roads, especially if serving as taxis.



Fig. 3. The elites of Cuba often drive new Chinese cars: a ZX Grand Tiger 4x4 with a Che Guevara sticker.

In the following text, only the main bird records will be mentioned. As an example, wintering North American warblers are not mentioned, unless the species was a rare sight. All in all, I recorded 141 bird species during the nine day visit. Dozens of them were endemic to Cuba or shared only by Cuba and the Bahamas. In addition, there are some distinctive subspecies on the island, with potential for future splits. Whenever one visits a tropical island, it pays to try to see as many species as possible, because 'armchair ticks' will follow, sometimes after decades. I wish I had gone after the Grey Nightjars of Palau, declared Palau Nightjars only months after the once-in-a-lifetime visit!



Fig. 4. A Cuban Emerald at its guard post, by a flowering bush. The hummer is common in Cuba.

FLIGHT CONNECTIONS

The José Martí International Airport in Havana is well connected to international destinations by air. From Europe, there are two main options to choose from: 1) Direct flight between Europe and Cuba, or 2) a multi-leg route involving a transit in Canada or the USA, or both. The first option tends to be the more expensive one, requiring very early booking. Neither does it allow birdwatching on other Caribbean islands, unless one buys return flights locally. This may not be as straightforward as one might expect, because of the infrequency of connections and visa requirements. The second option, on the other hand, takes more time and is more open for delays and other disappointments.

I chose the second option, and learned to regret it. Yes, vacant seats were scarce on direct flights and the prices were double the indirect rates when I started to make the reservations six months ahead of the journey. Nevertheless, the budget option eventually became as expensive, and immensely more stressful, than a direct flight would have been. The Air Canada connections via Toronto, Miami and Montreal were all late, 47 hours altogether, and each of them for controllable reasons (= lax management of operations). Going in, US customs and immigration in Toronto worked in slow motion and delayed hundreds of passengers. Make sure to reserve three hours for a transit if you fly this way!

The quality of Air Canada services was altogether among the worst I have ever experienced, having flown with 100+ companies. As a one illuminating example in a long list, what was I able to buy with an Air Canada lunch voucher? A cup of Pepsi and a small bottle of water! None of their meal vouchers actually covered the promised meals. Airline customer rights apparently do not exist in Canada, as far as I have been able to find out. I had to stay 28 hours in Montreal, without proper food and without Canadian dollars, the weather being -25C, a bit cool for a person dressed in sandals and summer clothes. Well, I saw a Bald Eagle and American Crows, when standing there in snow and scanning the sky, in front of Holiday Inn.



Fig. 5. A lunch, according to Air Canada standards... Equally nourishing dinner and breakfast followed.

The other flights were with Cayman Airways and Bahamasair, two airlines never on time despite their exceptionally easy to manage operational environment. The latter does not serve anything on board, including the 'business seat' I had between Nassau and Miami. Altogether, I had ten (!) delayed flights in a row, none of them caused by weather. It is a record I certainly wish not break in the future! The four flights on time were operated by Lufthansa and Finnair. On the other hand, I have once had 34 flights on time in a row on a round-a-world trip, and two of them actually departing 15 to 30 minutes early.

When traveling via the USA the US trade embargo against Cuba needs to be taken into consideration. A dinosaur of the cold war era, it has somehow survived till today. Even though the relations are warmer now, certain customs regulations continue to be enforced. Personally, I lost two bottles of Ron Havana Club, 7 years old, in Nassau, where US Customs check all passengers flying to Miami and other US destinations, including everybody who only plans to transit there. On the other hand, my cans of Piñita, a vitamin enriched Cuban soft drink, had been left in the suitcase. I had declared both these drinks at the customs, as one should do. Fortunately, Havana Club was very cheap in Cuba, and is also widely available in Europe, including Finland.

CAR RENTAL

A birdwatching journey in Cuba is best done by driving a rented car. Whatever the name of the car rental company may be, the business is going to be a government monopoly: reliable, but expensive. Expect to pay the rent in advance, the extras being charged on the spot. Personally, I reserved my sedan with Rex, in the Internet. The nine days cost €626 in total, without a PAI which I declined. In my case, Cuba Travel Network acted as a mediator in the contract, which was good, because Rex initially failed to email its supplier confirmation document. I phoned the CTN service center in Europe, toll free, and they solved the issue in six hours. One needs to bring a valid driver's license, a credit card, passport, invoice/receipt, car rental booking confirmation and supplier confirmation to the rental agency at the airport.

At the José Martí Airport, Terminal 2 (domestic), the Rex office was located outside, in front of the arrivals. After the documents had been checked, I was given a choice of a Seat Ibiza (my original selection) or a MG, a sportier Chinese made car. Not yet quite ready to trust in the quality of Chinese cars (they are almost there), I gave the macho option to my fellow customers from Mexico, both of us being happy with the end result. The Seat was more than adequate for my needs in Cuba and performed without any problems. It was new, and with new tires. I drove about 2.600 km in Cuba.



Fig. 6. José Martí Airport, domestic departures at Terminal 2.

The price of petrol was around CUC 1.20 (€0.90) per liter in Cuba, with slight variation according to location. Rex requested me to return the car with an empty tank even though I had received it with a full tank. The first tank of petrol is paid to the rental company at the time of pick up. The opposite, a full tank return requirement, had according to them resulted in people filling the tank with water or other harmful liquids (use your imagination). Therefore, be prepared for the art of running one's tank empty just before parking at the rental car return area. Some empty the tank and sell the petrol at the airport parking lot! Well, most of us end up donating Rex a few liters of petrol, just like I did. Better to lose few CUCs in the game than to get stranded along the highway just before the airport! Especially, if there is a danger of missing one's departure flight.

ROADS

Cuba is an easy destination to drive around, with good roads, light traffic and adequate signage. Driving around Havana was also relatively straightforward, leaving the airport for the right direction being the main challenge. Make sure to find out your arrival terminal (some international flights arrive at the domestic T2) and print Google maps; they were accurate enough for me. From T2 it was best to first drive to T3 (international), and then cross the road to the right, by an overpass, and continue to the easy to identify José Antonio Echeverría Polytechnic (JAEP) roundabout (an oval). In there, one may turn either left or right.



Fig. 7 The four-lane Pinar del Rio highway attracts cyclists, too. The speed limit is 100 km/h.

Turning left and driving straight, one soon arrives at the Pinar del Rio highway, the exit ramp (signposted) being on the right after the overpass. It is four lanes and 60-100 km/h all the way to Soroa and San Diego de los Baños junctions. The Soroa access ramp was a bit obscure, starting as a village track behind a petrol station. Both the smaller roads were fine and paved, all the way to the hotels (Villa Soroa and Mirador). There was a Cuban Meadowlark territory right at the Soroa junction, in the southeast corner.

Arriving Havana from the Pinar del Rio direction, I took a ramp with a sign 'Ujae' to enter the bypass. There probably was a second, main ramp soon afterwards, but the first one took me straight to the right direction. At the first crossroads to the east, there were reassuring 'Costa a Costa' and airport signs above the road. Thereafter, the JAEP roundabout was soon discovered.

Driving east at the roundabout, one only needs to follow the road, veering left at one point (see Google Maps), until there is a sign to Santa Clara on the right. The ramp descends to Autopista Nacional A-1, to the east (Playa Larga, Cayo Coco, Camagüey). If the ramp was missed, it is easy to make a u-turn soon after crossing the six-lane highway. On the way to the right spot, there are a few signs to A-1 and Autopista Nacional. There are also signs to tunnels (Tuneles), which are located in the same direction, some distance after the A-1 junction.

Playa Larga crossing was well signposted opposite of the town of Jagüey Grande. Turn right there to drive south, first through the village of Australia. In the village, there is a sharp right turn towards Playa Larga (no sign). At the border of the Zapata Swamp, there is a gate but no entrance fees are collected. The tarmac road continues through the swamp, first to La Boca and then to Palpite (left to Soplillar), before entering

Playa Larga, by the Bay of Pigs. Veer right, towards the barrio of Batey Caletón, to find accommodation. Angel Martínez García, one of the local bird guides, lives close to the main junction, on the right as one enters the town, a stone's throw from a bank where currencies may be exchanged, if needed.



Fig. 8. The Ujae ramp, at the end of Pinar del Río Highway, a starting point of the Havana bypass.

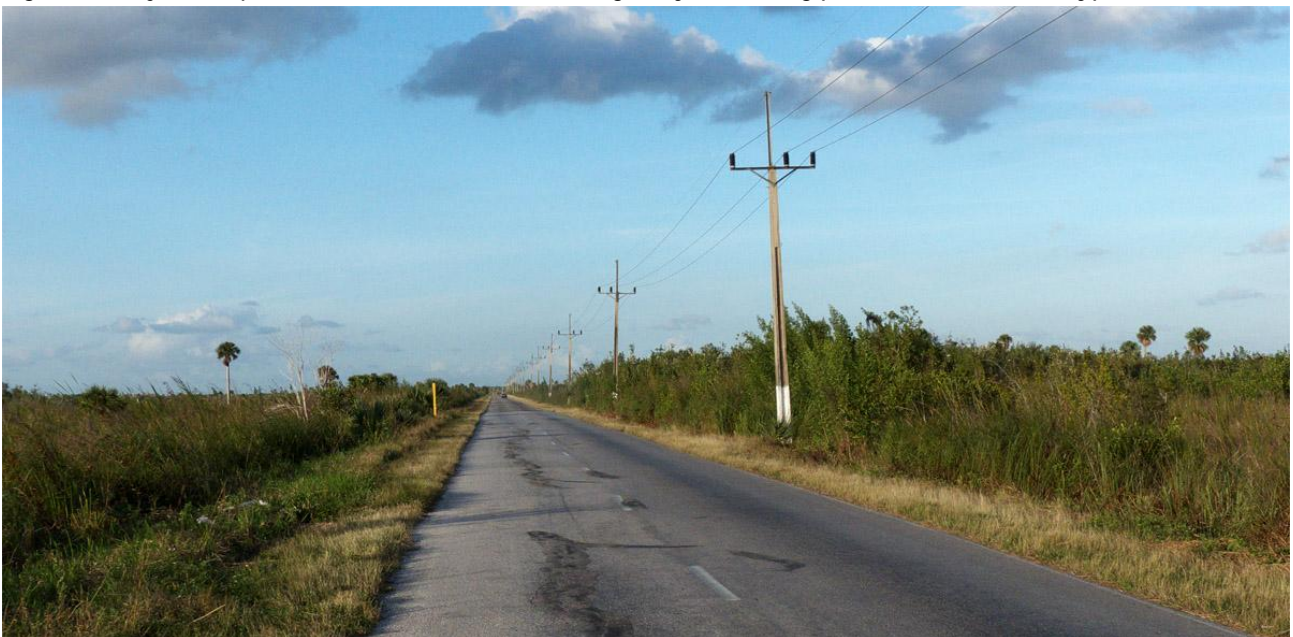


Fig. 9. The road to Playa Larga, north of La Boca. The open swamp stretch is good for Red-winged Starlings.

Autopista Nacional remains fast and fine beyond Santa Clara. At Sancti Spiritus, however, it abruptly ends and one needs to drive through the town (A-1 signposted), to continue to the east. The highway soon becomes a three lane one (center lane is for overtaking), and then a two lane road, and is particularly congested between Ciego de Avila and Camagüey. There are horse carriages and bicycles on it, and cars are supposed to either overtake or drive according to their speed. Expect this section to be slower than the rest, also because of potholes.



Fig. 10. Autopista Nacional east of Ciego de Avila; narrow with traffic, including horse carts and bicycles.

Approaching Camagüey, it is important to identify the northern bypass and turn left at the correct junction. The 17 km long bypass is a fast way around the city and to its eastern suburbs, with accommodations and access to Najasa. Turning left (east) again at km 17, to the main highway, it is difficult to miss the Najasa road, 11 km later, signposted right after a petrol station on a small hill on the right. The road has only patches of deteriorated tarmac and requires careful driving to spare the tires. After Najasa, it is a short drive to La Pilar, where a sharp left turn by houses indicates an access to a cemetery (straight in the curve, on a rather eroded track, for a kilometer) and the Belén National Park (follow the main road left, the gate will be on the left after few hundred meters).



Fig. 11. The pastoral La Pilar cemetery and my already dusty Seat Ibiza.

Going in to the national park, beyond the control gate, there is a short (4.5 km?) road to Finca Belén, with accommodation, and good birding on the way there (e.g. a pond). Passing the national park entrance on the main road, on the other hand, takes one to the fields of Belén village, after a few kilometer drive.

Driving west from Camagüey, towards Cayo Coco, one should turn right in an obvious four-way junction at the edge of Ciego de Avila, to be able to proceed to Morón. Morón is not signposted at the junction itself, but the signs are located 300 meters after turning to that direction. From there on, it is straightforward to Morón. At the southern edge of the town, there is a four-way roundabout. The first road on the right goes to Cayo Coco, bypassing Morón. The second goes into the town center, to accommodations.

Taking the first road to the right, one enters a four-way crossing with a petrol station across the road on the right, after passing some farmland. Turn left there, and keep on going straight, until a barrier with passport control and a causeway fee (CUC 2 both ways) is discovered. The formalities will take only few minutes. Entering Cayo Coco is only allowed for tourists and people who have a work permit there. The causeway is 27 km long. All in all, one needs about an hour to reach the birdwatching sites from the center of Morón.

A word of warning: Even though the vast majority of the Cubans are honest, it pays to keep one's eyes open. Along the Autopista Nacional (A-1), there was a petrol station attendant at La Paz (Kilometro 79 station), who cheated tourists by not zeroing the meter between customers and by giving the change out of his own pocket, without receipts. He pretended to fill up the tanks, even though he was careful to not do so, to avoid alerting the tourists' attention to the discrepancy between the liters on the meter and petrol in the tank. Normally in Cuba, one either pays beforehand or asks the person in charge to activate a certain pump, and the payments are made indoors. Sometimes an attendant arrives to help in the process.

In some travel reports, people have complained about police asking for free rides in their car. I also saw a few policemen hitchhiking along the highways, but did not stop for them. Even if stopped at control stations, it is up to you to accept the request or not. There is no obligation to give a ride for a police.



Fig. 12. A dark phase *sparveriioides* American Kestrel at Hotel Mirador, San Diego de los Baños.

ACCOMMODATIONS

My experiences of renting a room in Cuba agreed well with previous trip reports. Perhaps not surprisingly, the government run chain hotels (e.g. Islazul, Horizontes) invariably had lower quality of comfort and food than the privately run *casas particulares*. The former were not bad, and the majority of their staff were very professional, but the hotels were clearly not adequately maintained. In the rooms some of the lights were out of order, there was not necessarily enough toilet paper and only fraction of the items on the hotel restaurant menus was actually available. The food was also not as fresh as in the private guesthouses. It is difficult to run a hotel if there is a shortage of cooking ingredients, light bulbs and paper.

The government hotels cost between CUC 42 and 50 (€29 – 37) per night, depending on the package. In Soroa, my CUC 42 deal included half board. In Camagüey, the food was not included in the CUC 50, with the exception of breakfasts, which were too difficult to get (more below). In winter 2013-2014, the regular *casa particular* rate was CUC 25 (€18) for the high season, breakfast included. In the low season, they charge CUC 5 less. Some places charged few pesos more or less.

There are several working options to do the accommodation reservations beforehand. Government hotels were reserved with Umbrellatravel (Villa Soroa) and Cubatism (Islazul Camagüey). Playa Larga accommodation arrangements were made directly with El Chino de Zapata (see guides). Hostal Belkis was reserved by at BBInnVinales.com. Some bookings required a credit card and prepayment, some phone confirmation in Cuba and payment on the spot. All these middlemen proved to be prompt and reliable. It apparently is a high priority for Cuba to look after the interests of incoming tourists. They do, after all, bring major amounts of hard foreign currencies into the economy, thereby supporting many of its vital functions.

Hotel Villa Soroa, Soroa: The cottages were reasonably comfortable, even though somewhat worn out and inconveniently located on a small hill next to a huge swimming pool and a pool bar, on top of stone stairs about 100 meters behind the main hotel reception building. Dragging the luggage up and down was no joy, especially because the location provided no advantages for a birdwatching visitor.



Fig. 13. The reception building of Hotel Villa Soroa.

My room rate included half board, breakfasts and dinners, the former being a lavish buffet (even hot food) at an inconvenient time between 7 to 9 AM (could attend only once, for a take-away pick up) and the latter

starting at 7 PM. The dinners were three course, drinks excluded (2 liter bottle of water CUC 2 (€1.50), small bottles 0.70 (€0.50), and with a live music band. It paid to ask for the recommendation of the waitress, who suggested beef instead of chicken, fish or seafood, the first being the freshest option. Personally, I had one not so tasty plate of chicken and one great plate of well-seasoned beef stew. The food improved a lot after an arrival of a large group of German tourists. For a small number of guests, the kitchen apparently did not bother to make fresh bread, for example.

Having lost my voice because of a sore throat, and not exactly fluent in Spanish, I once requested a female receptionist to call Chino and Hostal Belkis to confirm my arrival in Cuba. She did this gladly, and declined my tip afterwards. The rest of the receptionists were very helpful, too, and spoke fluent English.

Hotel Mirador, San Diego de los Baños: I did not stay at this hotel, but had a lunch at their restaurant. The hotel appeared to be nice, with a good location and a restaurant with people with an amicable service attitude. They made a special take away lunch for me on request. The access is relatively easy: when entering San Diego de los Baños, do not turn left at a Y-street junction, but go forward, through the center, uphill and down on a relatively narrow street, until the hotel complex suddenly appears on the right, on top of a close-by hill. The access is signposted. From there, it would be possible to visit some sites alternative to my route, such as Cueva de los Portales. The site has Cuban Solitaires and even Giant Kingbirds.



Fig. 14. Hostal Bertica, Batey Caletón, Playa Larga.

Hostal Bertica, Batey Caletón, Playa Larga: The one guest room establishment is managed by Ramona Martínez, the hospitable sister of Ángel and Chino (cf. guides). The room cost CUC 53 (€39) per day, including an extensive half board and limitless drinks for the day, e.g. various cold juices which Ramona

made of fresh tropical fruit. There was a large fridge in the dining and tv area, and quality meals were served according to the wishes of the customer. There was no need to explain the pre-dawn breakfasts, as birders frequently stay there. Across the narrow street, Chino has erected Birdwatcher's House, a larger guesthouse serving up to small groups of visiting birders, with a view to the sea. There is space for parking right in front of the *hostal*. Car wash may be arranged by the family, for CUC 3 (€2.20). With Ramona I spoke a mixture of Spanish and English. The brothers do both speak good English.

Entering Batey Caletón (a barrio of Playa Larga), drive the main street till the end of a row of houses on the left, and turn left before a row of palms. The narrow gravel street will soon lead to the guesthouses. If in doubt, ask for directions. There are always people around, ready to help you.

Hostal Belkis, Morón: My best and most comfortable room in Cuba was at Hostal Belkis. The guesthouse has received a uniform five stars both at bbinnvinales.com and at Tripadvisor, for a good reason. What a great bed, and above all, bathroom! They even had a mini-bar with reasonable rates. Meal times and other services were quite flexible, meeting the needs of a birding visitor; I got a take-away breakfast for my before sunrise departure. Across the street, a neighbor has just enough space for one car behind a gate, away from the street. The lady in charge and her daughter spoke good English. The only slight minus was the location. Locating the guesthouse in a maze of one way streets may take a few minutes. It was a pity that I could stay only for one night, at Christmas. The room was CUC 25, breakfast CUC 3 and dinner around CUC 8 (€5.80), if I remember correctly.



Fig. 15. A stylish bathroom at Hostal Belkis, Morón. The bedroom was equally nice and comfortable.

In Morón, it is best to follow the main street as one enters the town from Ciego de Avila direction, after a roundabout. With Internet maps (also provided by BBInnVinales.com), it is possible to estimate the point

from where to turn left on small one way streets. Knowing that I was already close, I asked for directions from a couple on a sidewalk. They could not help but knocked on a door close by. The lady of the house joined me as a voluntary guide and took me to Belkis, walking back from there. As a bird flies, her home was only two blocks away! Going to Cayo Coco from the town center in the morning, I simply drove a bit further north on the main street, and followed a street to the right, until meeting the bypass.

Islazul Hotel Camagüey, Camagüey: This was a large hotel complex run by government tourism authorities. It had a practical location in the east of the city proper, close to the bypass and the highway junction to the east. It is perhaps best to follow the bypass to the latter junction and turn right there. The hotel will eventually appear on the left, just after a petrol station in one of the street junctions. In Google Maps, the location of the Hotel Camagüey was incorrect. It was placed next to Hotel La Paz, some kilometers towards the busy centre of the city, along another bypass access road.

The room cost CUC 50 per night, with breakfast (more below). There was a guarded parking area at the hotel, with a CUC 1 fee per night. Certain members of the staff spoke good English.

The room was peaceful and comfortable, even though in need of maintenance (e.g. lights). The restaurant of the hotel, on the other hand, was disappointing. Most of the choices on the menu were unavailable. Likewise, they only had a limited selection of drinks. The one dinner I had there was nevertheless tasty. Breakfasts, on the other hand, could not be had because there was no buffet. One had to order in Spanish and wait, and the choices were limited. It was therefore more practical to skip the waiting and rely on snacks bought at petrol stations.

FOOD

I had my dinners at accommodations. Breakfasts were had there, too, whenever available early in the morning. Drinks, snacks, candy and ice cream were bought at petrol station shops. In addition, I had brought some provisions from Finland, especially for the day around La Pilar (Najasa). It is difficult for a Finn to be without bread for prolonged periods of time, and the bread has to be made of rye!

Stock up whenever possible. The selection of bottled and canned drinks and other food items was above the average at the petrol station of Australia, the junction to Playa Larga and the Zapata Swamp. After Santa Clara, it became difficult to find bottled water along the highway. I tried five stations in vain. The best option in that direction was the station next to Islazul Hotel Camagüey, which had a small shop next door. Otherwise, the petrol stations mainly stocked soft drinks with very high levels of sugar, not a healthy option in a climate which requires constant drinking, especially during the long drives between birding locations.

Overall, I did not need to be hungry in Cuba. What is more, the quality of food was high as practically none of it was frozen, canned or processed in a factory. Thankfully, no trans-fats, hydrogenated palm oil or high fructose corn syrup, or other artificial ingredients seriously harmful to one's health. Instead, honest home-cooked food which would be categorized 'gourmet' in some countries. Not a friend of seafood myself, with the exception of shrimps, I did not try it in Cuba. Lobster-lovers will, however, find the private guesthouses a great chance to enjoy this delicacy for a very low price.

Do not expect to be able to have a meal at the airport restaurant. At T2, they only had sandwiches. Not even mojitos to celebrate a successful Cuba tour!



Fig. 16. Dinner at Hotel Villa Soroa; the main course (beef stew with bean rice and vegetables).

GUIDES

According to my personal experience, bird observations tend to be indefinitely more rewarding when one does it by oneself, being rewarded by self-discovered target species in the end, after initial struggles. Otherwise, birding could after all be done in zoos. There is adequate information in the Internet. There are, however, locations where it is sensible to hire a guide. Some may also hire them for company, to gain more time for photography, or to support the local birdwatching scene. Zapata Swamp belongs to these destinations, in case one is pressed with time. Otherwise, prepare to stay longer than I did.

In this report, I have not described the exact locations of the Zapata sites, just the general directions, partly to support the guiding business there. If interested in doing it solo, which I fully understand, there are maps to some locations in earlier Internet reports. There probably will also be other visiting birders around, to ask for information. I met a few Dutch, Norwegian and US birders in Playa Larga in December 2013. Otherwise, one may explore the suitable habitats. For nests one needs to work hard or really know the area, as the local guides do.

In the Zapata region, two long-standing guides are the brothers Martinez, Angel (angelczcuba@yahoo.es) and Chino (Orestes). I employed Angel. The phone of Chino is 0152539004 and the email chinozapata@gmail.com. Out of the two brothers, Angel is the calmer, more silent type, and Chino the more extrovert character. Both of them are more than capable of delivering the species. A full day charge is CUC 50 (€37) (+CUC 10 as a tip, if you prefer to give one), with morning (6 AM to noon) and afternoon (3 PM to sunset) trips. A half day is CUC 25 (€18). During the +32C midday heat birding was a bit slow and the siestas welcome, even for somebody like me, who normally does not have breaks when birding solo. In the mornings, the temperatures were around +20C, rising to about +26C at noon.

At the other destinations, I saw no need for guides. In Najasa region, I would probably have tried to contact Pedro Regalado Ruiz (signposted with Giant Kingbird before La Pilar, on the left; he has moved), if the target species would not have been found during the first afternoon. His email is martha.regalada@reduc.edu.cu.

BIRDS AND LOCATIONS

Soroa (one day)

The hotel compound had a few birds, especially in the mornings, but I focused on the Mirador Trail and roadside birding further on towards the village proper. The former was easy to locate about 150 meters back towards the Pinar del Rio highway from the hotel entrance, on the left after a bridge and the Orchid Garden access. There is a small kiosk by the trail entrance (signposted). Veer right, and keep on walking uphill, turning right at a T-junction, and continue all the way up to the stone steps of the *mirador*.

The trail is relatively steep in places and eroded by frequent horse traffic (corral by the entrance). Early in the morning there was nobody else on the trail. I started at 6 AM and returned by 11 AM. It was not a long walk but observing the birds took time, especially because I had just arrived in a new destination and new species were encountered on a steady basis. There were more species to really focus on than on the subsequent days.

In the middle section of the trail, Cuban Trogons and Cuban Todies were ubiquitous. This is the best place to photograph the former. Further up, I encountered mixed passerine parties, with a number of Cuban Vireos and Yellow-headed Warblers. They, and Cuban Emeralds, came close, scolding at me when I played the call of Cuban Pygmy Owl (the best way to attract passerines). The owls, on the other hand, were not interested enough of the recording, even though they could be heard in the forest. Great Lizard Cuckoos were noisy but also unusually shy at this spot. Two Crescent-eyed Pewees were recorded, too.



Fig. 17. Cuban Trogons were numerous along the Soroa Mirador Trail.

On top of the trail, the lovely songs of Cuban Solitaires were constantly heard (at least five individuals). One was observed at a close distance from the *mirador* steps, together with La Sagra's Flycatchers and Cuban Green Woodpeckers. A Blue-headed Quail-Dove was frequently calling, together with a few Ruddy Quail-Doves, but as it was impossible to enter the forest, there was no real chance to see the species. The slopes are steep and the forest thick.

Around the Hotel Villa Soroa compound, Cuban Screech-Owls, a Stygian Owl and a Cuban Nightjar were heard calling at night, at some distance on the forested slopes. There were, however, no Cuban Pygmy Owls. I visited the Orchid Garden several times in the hope of Cuban Grassquits (stakeout), observing the garden from the road, but failed to see any. This was, however, the favorite spot for Red-legged Thrushes, which were also recorded at several other sites later on. In the general area, and especially beyond Soroa Village, Cuban Blackbirds, Cuban Orioles and Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds were common. On the western slopes, good for late afternoon trips, Cuban Flickers had their territories, among other species.



Fig. 18. A perky Crescent-eyed Pewee, an endemic of Cuba and the Bahamas. Zapata subspecies *morenoi*.

La Güira (half day)

To reach this mountain area, take the highway junction to San Diego de los Baños. When arriving in the large village, turn down left at a Y-fork. There is good habitat for Cuban Grassquits right there, but I failed to see any, despite checking the site three times. Going forward, and ignoring a paved road to the left in the end, the Hacienda Cortina gate will emerge on the right. It is hard to miss, to say the very least...

Entering through the gate, I proceeded uphill. The Las Cabanas de los Piños site, mentioned in earlier trip reports, could not be found. Perhaps it does not even exist along this road? At the higher levels of the hills, pines were nevertheless discovered, with a few Western Spindalises, Cuban Bullfinches and Yellow-headed Warblers. A play of a recording managed to bring in a territorial Olive-capped Warbler, ready to

fight any intruder to death! I scored despite considerable wind during the hottest hours of the afternoon, the only time I had slight problems with wind in Cuba. Good views of a Scaly-naped Pigeon were also had there. The species occurred around Soroa, too. No luck with Giant Kingbird, though. The road was a bit rough in places but passable with care.



Fig. 19. The impressive gate of Hacienda Cortina, a way up to hill pine forest.



Fig. 20. A male Western Spindalis, one of the colorful birds of Cuba.



Fig. 21. A male Olive-capped Warbler, defending its territory against a mp3 file at La Güira.

Embalses along the Pinar del Rio Highway (half-an-hour)

A few stops were made at artificial lakes along the Pinar del Rio Highway, between Soroa junction and Havana. The most productive one was the *embalse* at Buta. It had 1.200 Lesser Scaups, an adult American White Pelican, two Ring-billed Gulls, about 15 Forster's Terns and two Neotropic Cormorants, among the more widespread species. There was also a Snail Kite, first of the two I spotted in Cuba. The other one was seen close to Morón.

Zapata Swamp (four+ days)

At the famous wetland, the main locations included: La Turba (visited twice), open marshland on the La Boca road (five times passing through), Soplillar backwoods and swamps (four times), Cueva de los Peces, a popular roadside restaurant by the Playa Girona road (twice), and two tracks at the edge of Playa Larga (each once). We never went to Bermejas, because there was no need to do so. It is a long drive. I also skipped Hato de Jicarita, along Autopista Nacional, which apparently can be very productive for Red-shouldered Blackbirds, Zapata Wrens and Cuban Sparrows. Las Salinas would have had an American White Pelican and, possibly, a Snow Goose, but I had no interest for them. Moreover, it would have been best to have a 4x4 to go there (continue on the Batey Caletón road). Otherwise, a sedan was more than sufficient for all the roads, including the bit overgrown final part of the La Turba track. I saw a tiny car with half the clearance of my Seat Ibiza to make it there.

La Turba access track starts soon after the Zapata Swamp gate, south of Australia. In there, there was a Zapata Rail calling on the first morning, as far I am able to judge according to the current understanding of the call. At least three Spotted Rails made noise by the embankment, close but very difficult to spot. There

were three Zapata Wrens singing there, one of which came to inspect us closely on each visit (another (female?) was also seen), just like a territorial Cuban Sparrow of the scarce *inexpectata* subspecies (only 250 left). Other endemics around La Turba included a bold pair of Cuban Pygmy-Owls (second visit only), several Cuban Emeralds and *morenoi* Crescent-eyed Pewees (two).



Fig. 22. A male Cuban Sparrow, subspecies *inexpectata*, at La Turba, Zapata Swamp.



Fig. 23. Zapata Wrens exist only at Zapata Swamp, south coast of Cuba.

On the way to La Turba, Cuban Nightjars may be seen on the road. We did not score. At one spot, there was a Cuban Screech-Owl calling, and it was also briefly seen flying to a tree. Close by, Angel had an active Gundlach's Hawk nest, with great views of this rare, skulking, but noisy species. This was my only record of the species, despite frequent scanning for hawks, which I am relatively good at spotting, after decades of raptor migration observations. My advice: Do not count on seeing one spontaneously!

On the road from Australia to Playa Larga, the Zapata Swamp opens before La Boca. At this stretch, open grassland and low bushes dominate, and Red-shouldered Blackbirds are regularly seen. The car may be parked on the lane, the locals will not mind. Beware, however, of the widespread Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds, whose wing-coverts often look rather red when they fly. They and Cuban Blackbirds, together with Greater Antillean Grackles, were seen almost everywhere around farmlands and settlements, and also at marshy locations. Sora Rails were present, too, just like at La Turba. Earlier along the same road, the ponds of a hydrobiological station had the only Anhinga of the trip.

Another very productive area was along the Soplillar road, a connection between the Palpite village (Playa Larga road) and the coastal Playa Larga – Playa Giron road. At certain points around the village of Soplillar, farm and other tracks leave the road to the north, towards the swamp, and provide access to more side roads with some goodies along them. Some walking tracks lead to good damp forests, which Cuban Screech-Owls and Cuban Pygmy-Owls love (check tree stumps with holes). We also got close views of two Grey-headed Quail-Doves in this habitat. There were a few mosquitoes in the forests.

Some other tracks lead to semi-open habitats with plenty of blooming bushes, guarded by aggressive Cuban Emeralds but in two cases also visited by Bee Hummingbirds. Seeing the smallest bird of the world is of great interest to any birdwatcher. By luck, I got a perfectly sharp close-up photo of one feeding on flowers, the bird filling the frame nicely, and by bad luck, accidentally deleted the file the next day! West Indian Woodpeckers are common in this part of the Zapata Swamp, but not necessarily easy to see.



Fig. 24. A Bee Hummingbird, the smallest bird in the world! 5.5 cm.

In the damp savanna-like habitats, Rose-throated Amazons, Great Lizard Cuckoos, Cuban Flickers and Cuban Orioles were common, together with Northern Jacanas, a lone Wood Stork, the odd Cuban Crows and Plain Pigeons, and, most importantly, Fernandina's Flickers. The last species spent a long period of time on top of a large leafless tree at the edge of a savanna in Soplillar, enjoying the warmth of late afternoon sun.

In December 2013, the spot to see a Blue-headed Quail-Dove, arguably the prettiest species in its family, was La Cueva de los Peces, 17 km east of Playa Larga, towards Playa Giron. Up to seven individuals were present, feeding together at the edge of the forest, close to the restaurant's toilet block. They were not always there, but thankfully our first visit was a success. The site also had a Crescent-eyed Pewee, Yellow-headed Warblers, relatively tame Red-legged Thrushes and Cuban Orioles. On the way there, a small roadside swamp, soon after leaving Playa Larga, had ducks and shorebirds, and West Indian Woodpeckers. We stopped there three times.



Fig. 25. The smart Blue-headed Quail-Doves; the more, the better!

Once, a party of Cuban Parakeets, the second most difficult species to find in December 2013, was heard flying over us! We were driving on the Playa Girona road and did therefore not see them, being pressed by a 1950s Pontiac right behind my bumper. On the seashore side, a Cuban Black Hawk was resting in a palm. Around Hotel Playa Larga, parties of Rose-throated Amazons were often seen, feeding in roadside trees. The government hotel has recently struggled to survive in competition with private guesthouses, which keep on increasing their share of the business in Cuba.

Close to Playa Larga, around the La Boca – Australia road access, were two interesting side tracks. The first went to a small refuse dump and had an obliging Cuban Nightjar at night. The second one went into a lush forest, with Cuban Trogons, Cuban Todies, Cuban Vireos, a White-eyed Vireo, a Tennessee Warbler, Western Spindalises, and with great luck, a party of seven Cuban Lorikeets. The last species has become increasingly endangered and there was no reliable site for it at the time of my visit. Small parties wander around in their search for food and can therefore be difficult to locate. Zapata Swamp and Sierra de Najasa are two likely areas, but the species is not guaranteed anywhere. Even Najasa may fail to meet the expectations (more below).

(I did not look for Stygian Owl. Also, there was no reliable stake-out for it at Playa Larga in December 2013. There probably will be, soon enough.)



Fig. 26. A Cuban Parakeet, hiding high in the canopy.

Najasa (one and half days)

Around Sierra de Najasa, most of the time was spent in search for Cuban Grassquit, the most difficult Cuban endemic to locate, if one excludes the apparently extinct Ivory-billed Woodpecker and Cuban Kite. Only one female was seen, despite extensive searches in good habitats. This happened at the edge of the Belem village field. As one enters the large fields from La Pilar, there is a more shrubby section on the left, also favored by the common Yellow-faced Grassquits. Dozens of Cuban Palm Crows were on the road there and the shrubbery also had Great Lizard Cuckoos. Rose-throated Amazons flew across the site, on their way to and from roosting sites, just like at La Pilar.

I was quite lucky during the first late afternoon visit on the 23rd December, spotting a Giant Kingbird on top of a large tree across the road at the La Pilar cemetery, one minute after arrival. It stayed there at least for an hour. Later on, I went to the small cemetery five times but never saw the bird again. The cemetery track and the La Pilar junction had many Cuban Palm Crows. Cuban Crows were also ubiquitous and conspicuous in the area. Their bubbly songs were a pleasure to listen, and reminded me of the White-necked Crows of Hispaniola. Plain Pigeons and West Indian Woodpeckers were much easier to admire than in the wooded Zapata Swamp. Cuban Meadowlarks occurred throughout, just like between Camagüey and Morón.



Fig. 27. A Giant Kingbird by the La Pilar cemetery; not close but I had great scope views!

Along the Finca Belén access road, a pair of Cuban Pygmy Owls could be photographed. Close to the *finca*, various forest birds were seen, including the endemic Cuban Green Woodpeckers. In there, I also once heard the calls of Cuban Parakeets, the only record in one and half days! The species is supposed to be common around Sierra de Najasa but they were almost completely absent at the time of my visit.

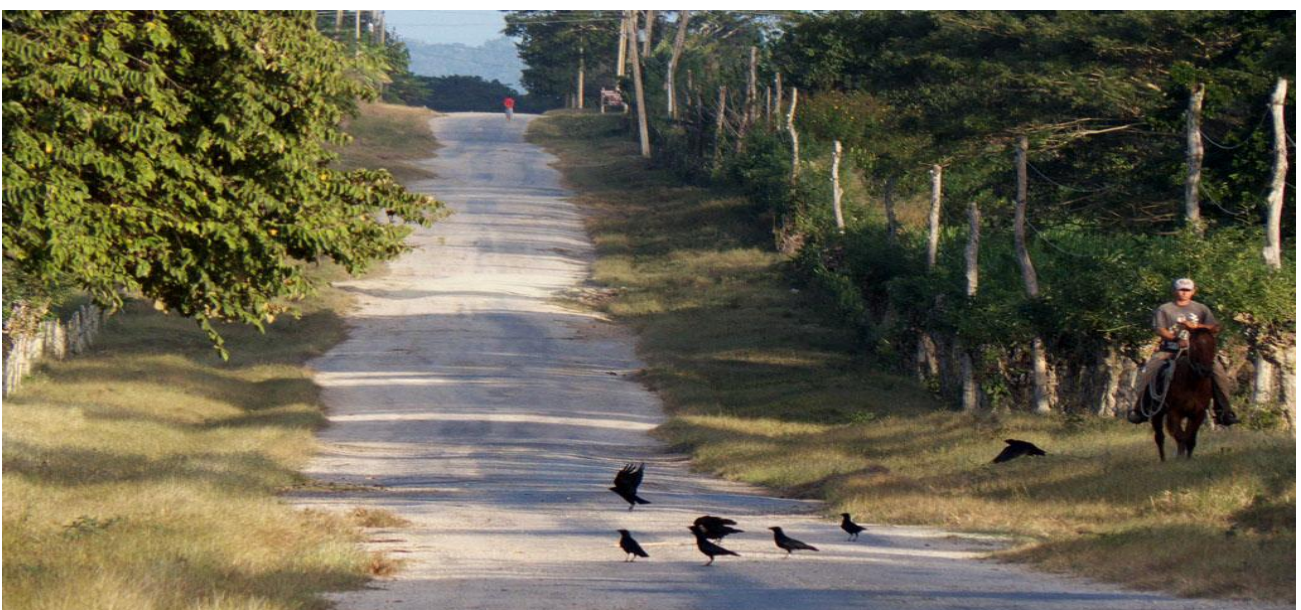


Fig. 28. Belén village road, and a small party of the range restricted Cuban Palm Crows.



Fig. 29. West Indian Woodpeckers were common at La Pilar and Finca Belén.

Cayo Coco (one day)

Only one afternoon and one morning were budgeted for birding at Cayo Coco. It was not enough, but I rather spent more time at the Zapata Swamp, having only a short and relatively easy target list for the islands. The destination is constituted by Cayo Coco itself, Cayo Guillermo and Cayo Paredon Grande, with sites within each island, which are interconnected by causeways. In the future, there probably will be a drivable connection to other cays further in the east, with their tourism developments. I did not visit Cayo Guillermo, having already seen Bahama Mockingbirds in Jamaica.

When entering the island, one soon arrives at a large roundabout with a petrol station on the left. The road on the right goes to Cayo Paredon Grande, the forward road to package tourism resorts, and the left one to Cayo Guillermo, with side roads to more hotels, Cueva de Jábali and Flamenco Beach. The region is developed for all-inclusive Canadian package tourism, as 'Jardines del Rey', the 'Gardens of a King'. This may become detrimental to Cayo Coco as a nature tourism destination in the long run, but at the moment it is not even necessary to see the resorts to be able to observe birds on the islands. Personally, I preferred the 'real Cuba' of Morón for accommodation, instead of the all-inclusive resorts. The traffic of tour buses and construction vehicles, many of them over-speeding, is however an unavoidable nuisance on the main roads.

Given the limited time available, the focus at Cayo Coco was on Cueva de Jábali access road (one morning, one late morning, two after noon and one evening visit), on Cayo Paredon Grande (one late afternoon visit), on Flamenco Road (one mid-day and one morning visit, both short) and on the causeway. The Flamenco road, to Flamenco Beach, had one moderately promising meadow with bushes about 150 meters after the entrance, on the right. Otherwise, there was too much traffic and the roadside habitat had degraded after road improvement. All in all, it is not a primary site anymore.

At Cayo Paredon Grande, the access road was under heavy development. There were trucks passing me every two minutes and one may expect a wide tarmac road to the lighthouse at the end of the road (and all-inclusive resorts?) in the near future. The site and its birds may therefore eventually be gone, too, I fear. In December 2013, the track to the right, just before the lighthouse, was however still productive. I drove in (drivable for 500 meters by a sedan) and played my recordings briefly, and soon met resident pairs of both Cuban Gnatcatchers and Thick-billed Vireos, the latter of the very endangered subspecies *cubensis*. An immature Cuban Black Hawk frequented the track, together with an adult earlier along the lighthouse access road. A variety of nearctic shorebirds and a *ridgwayi* Osprey were also seen by the latter road.



Fig. 30. Nice to meet you! One of the scarce *cubensis* Thick-billed Vireos at Cayo Paredon Grande.



Fig. 31 In the neighborhood, Cuban Gnatcatchers were seen, too.

At Cueva de Jábali, the best spots were the parking area at the end of the road, with dripping water for birds, and an obvious opening with diverse vegetation and limited view to a nearby lake, also towards the end of the track. They had Zenaida Doves, White-crowned Pigeons, Great Lizard Cuckoos, Cuban Vireos, Western Spindalises, several Cuban Bullfinches and Oriente Warblers (rather common and tame). The small lake, on the other hand, had an Elegant Rail, a variety of ducks, Least Grebes and, surprisingly, a vagrant Caribbean Coot, among the many American Coots.



Fig. 32. Oriente Warblers are common at Cayo Coco.



Fig. 33. Wintering *rubida* Sanderlings on the Cayo Coco causeway, at high tide.

The supposedly common *varonai* Cuban Sparrows were surprisingly difficult to spot, despite an extensive and focused search, with help of a recording. One was heard singing along the tarmac access to the Cueva

de Jábali road, and two were seen flying across the road, chasing one another, at the above-mentioned opening. The breeding habitat appeared to share certain features with the one at Zapata Swamp, the cays also being rather wet, after all. A lone Cuban Crow flew past the site.

The tarmac road to Jardines del Rey Airport, southeast at Cayo Coco, had the best concentrations of wildfowl, on the left of the road. I was not looking for West Indian Whistling Ducks at Cayo Coco, having already got ample views of the species in Jamaica. Neither was I looking for a Key West Quail-Dove, even though one was seen crossing the main causeway road close to the airport road junction. The causeway had a lone Caribbean Flamingo, several Common Mergansers, a party of 50 Brown Noddies at a distance and two hundred photogenic Sanderlings during the high tide, in addition to various ibises, egrets, terns, gulls, shorebirds and others.

FINAL WORDS

All in all, Cuba was a pleasant surprise for me. With former experience of travelling in the socialist Eastern Europe, once as a tour leader to Soviet Georgia, I had expected at least some problems with bureaucracy. Furthermore, I had anticipated problems in finding food with my CUCs, delays in various services, cigar smoke everywhere, and people who might be suspicious of a camera and binocular-toting foreigner in a field gear. With the exception of the minor shortcomings at government run hotels and restaurants, none of these occurred. Things worked smoothly and efficiently, with hospitable flexibility towards the needs of a visitor. The Cubans also seemed more content with their lives than some recent television documentaries had indicated. In general, there was a hopeful attitude towards the future. With its relaxed atmosphere and interesting birdlife, Cuba certainly is among the more rewarding destinations for bird tourism.

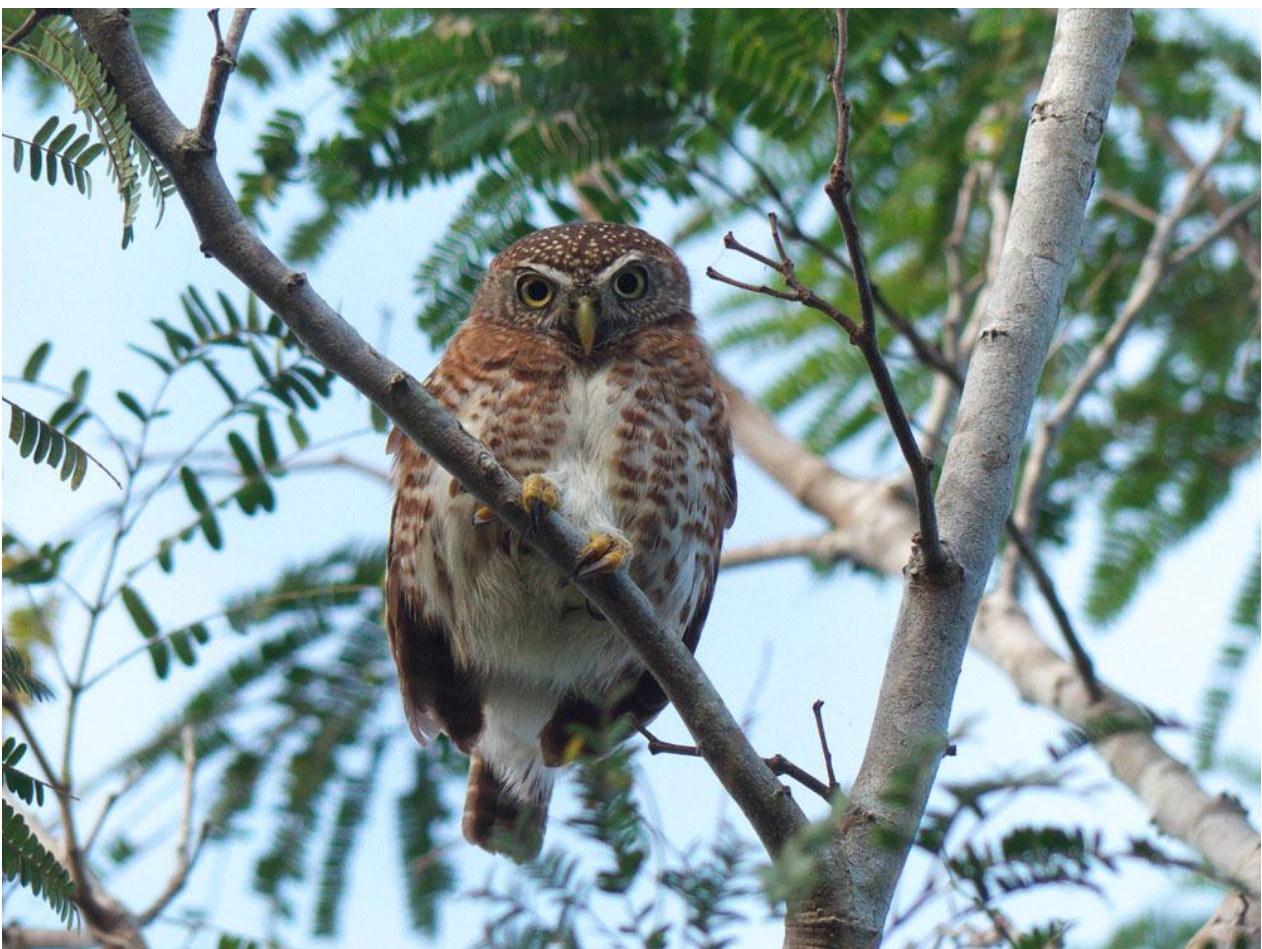


Fig. 34. Respect my authority, stranger! (A Cuban Pygmy Owl confronts an intruder at Zapata Swamp).