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GRAND CAYMAN, CAYMAN ISLANDS



Fig. 1. An **Antillean Nighthawk**, one of the birds seen during the short Grand Cayman visit.

In 2016, June 18th to 20th, I made a brief visit to the island of Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands. The visit was not without its problems, notably those with American Airlines delays and cancellations. Moreover, my need to save money on this exceedingly expensive (accommodation) island resulted in a program not everybody would consider their piece of cake. Nevertheless, some of the mistakes and successes of this trip might be informative or inspiring to other birders who intend to visit Grand Cayman. The target birds were seen, after all. I therefore decided to write a few lines in the form of the following report.

This was actually my second visit in Grand Cayman. In 2013, on my way to Cuba, I was in transit in George Town, with Cayman Airways flights. The plan was to look for the near-endemic **Vitelline Warbler** in a promising spot next to the airport. Unfortunately, nobody was able to confirm our departure time. It could be delayed or early, and I therefore had to check in at once, not being able to leave the building, as planned. Cayman Airways, Bahamasair and various other regional airlines operate in their own cultural realm, in which timetables are not followed the way the rest

of the world follows them. It is the so called 'Caribbean Time Zone'. As a result, I needed to return to Grand Cayman in 2016, and overnight there.

My target species included, in addition to the **Vitelline Warbler**, the *caymanensis* subspecies of **Cuban Amazon** and the *taylori* subspecies of **Cuban Bullfinch**. Even though rejected as splits for the moment, they have significant potential to become full endemic species in the future. Additionally, I was going to try to see as many resident bird species as possible, owls, woodpeckers and passerines in particular, as new taxonomic categorizations may one day involve also them. Our knowledge of these and many subspecies is limited and it will take a lot of work until all the question marks have been erased. In fact, they 'never' will be. It is an evolving issue.

ACCOMMODATION

The key problem in Cayman Islands, with their room rates which tend to be three to five times higher than on the neighboring islands, is to locate a reasonably priced bed for the night. For a short visit, an airbnb would have been the most affordable choice. I was, however, too late when attempting to make reservation in February, only five months before the planned arrival. The only choices available were mostly extraordinarily expensive or at 'party houses'. As a result, I made a reservation at the only remaining 'budget' choice, **Riviera Grand Cayman Hotel**, which has also been favored by a number of other visiting birders. Even they charged USD 136 per night; way too much for the service. I guess that in an economy based on tax evasion and money laundry (e.g. 600 banks; assets over USD 500 billion) and tourism, room rates tend to move up.



Fig. 2. My room at Riviera Grand Cayman Hotel; the bed after some serious sleeping.

There was, however, one remaining way to economize. I would not sleep in the first night but would occupy the room as early as possible the next day, and sleep as much as possible afterwards, before my next day flight back to Miami, with a transit to Lima, and eventually, Piura. Doing that, my accommodation costs in Grand Cayman would be a more reasonable USD 68 per night.

As a result, I napped one or two bad hours on the seat of my rental car, at the peaceful access road of Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park (QEBP). Air conditioning had to be on for the most of the time, as it was +31C outdoors. Opening windows was not a good idea, because of mosquitoes. The next day, I arrived at Riviera Grand Cayman Hotel at 12.30 and could immediately check in, in a vacant suite. Unfortunately, the keys of the room needed to be delivered by a Jamaican employee, who followed the 'Caribbean time', delaying my shower and sleep by an hour. That is how long it took to deliver the keys 40 meters to the room. I first slept 8.5 hours, waking up for an hour, and slept again for another 5.5 hours. Starting my arrival day in Chicago, with a transit in Miami, I had not had proper sleep for 37 hours.

CAR RENTAL

Fortunately, car rental was not overpriced like the rooms were. What is more, small and economical vehicles are the most suitable ones on the small island. My choice was Andy's Car Rental. They have an office right next to the Grand Cayman airport terminal, across its large parking lot, and have competitive rates. My new Kia Picanto cost USD 49.50 per day, with zero deductible, unlimited kilometers and a surprise USD 20 driver's license fee.



Fig. 3. The Kia Picanto was in perfect condition and had a full tank of gasoline.

The practice of charging extras from tourists, in the form of locally issued 'temporary driving licenses' appears to be endemic to the small islands of the Caribbean and some parts of the South Pacific.

Thanks to American Airlines, I almost got stranded at the airport. In Miami, we were already on board at the departure gate. Then, two small cells of potential thunder passed the airport and the ground staff stopped their work for an hour, even though they had only three (!) suitcases left (according to our pilot), to lift up into the cargo compartment. As a result of the overall delay, the runways could not handle the departing traffic anymore. The total delay was two hours. In the end, we landed in Grand Cayman at 20.25, on the 18th of June. The car rental was supposed to close at 20.00. Fortunately, a local American Airlines representative let me phone Andy's while waiting for the suitcase. As a result, I found out that the car rental people would wait for me and some other customers, who also arrived late because of a flight delay.

After a sigh of relief, the late arrival ceased to be a problem. I had to wait till next morning anyway, and the period of darkness lasted 10.5 hours. After some disoriented driving in circles, I was able to locate the main route to Bodden Town and continue towards Old Man's Town, before turning right to the Queen Elisabeth II Botanic Park. There was plenty of traffic, predominantly young people zooming around in their 'Saturday night fever'.

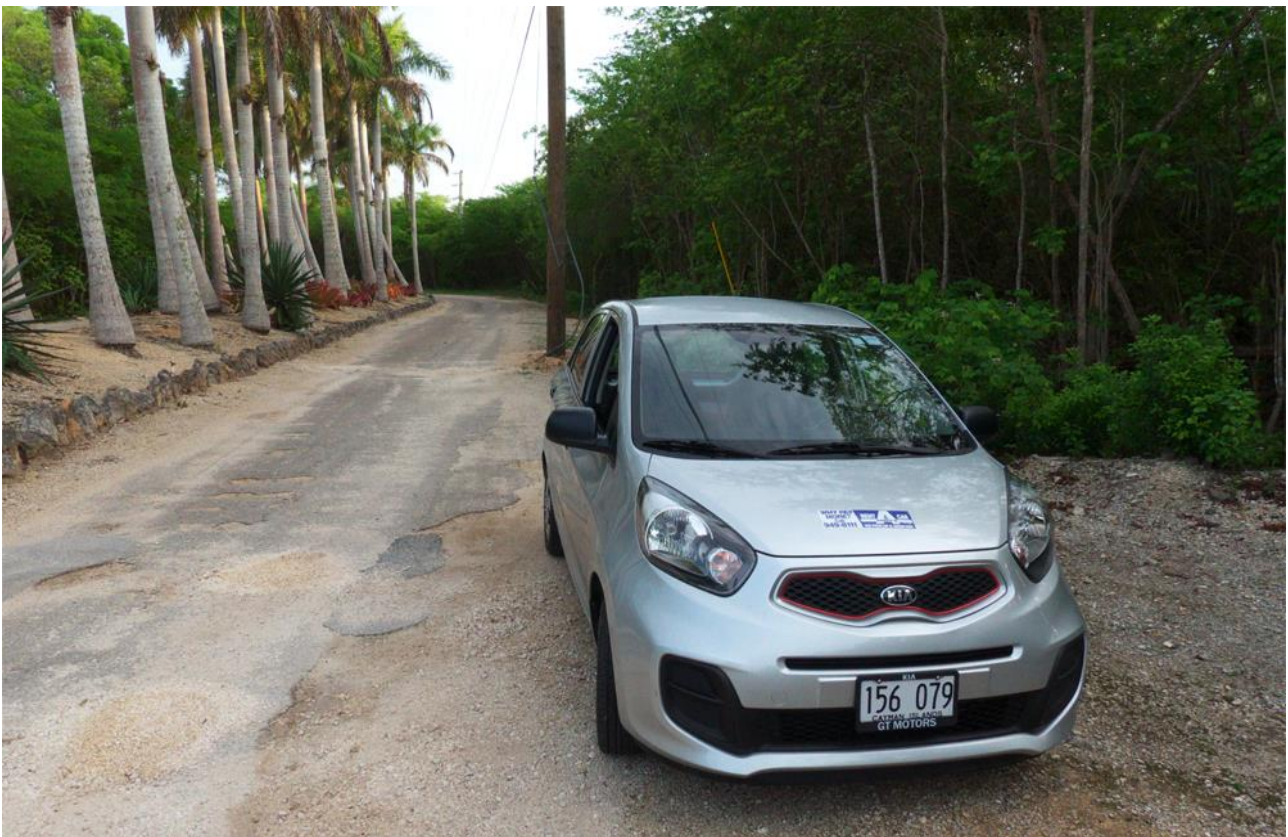


Fig. 4. My Andy's Car Rental Kia in front of the Queen Elisabeth II Botanic Park entrance. The spot proved to be very productive for passerines, including a breeding pair of **Vitelline Warblers**.

FOOD

My arrival was on Saturday and late in the evening, because of the American Airlines delay. This created another problem to be solved. In some Caribbean Islands, extremist Christian missionaries have established customs which used to be followed thousand years ago in the Middle East. I mean the Sunday Sabbath, causing the closure of almost all the services, by law. Aware of the potential problem, I had brought some food with me, bought at Piggly Wiggly's at Waupun, Wisconsin, but could not bring enough drinks because of airline security restrictions. Luckily, Domino's Pizza was open by the Bodden Town Road. I had to choose Diet Coke, because bottled water was three times more expensive.

Driving back towards my hotel, the next day, I saw an open gas station just before George Town. They had food, snacks and drinks for sale, in addition to a full tank of fuel. The Riviera Grand Cayman room, on the other hand, had a fridge. In Grand Cayman, US dollar is an accepted form of payment, in addition to the Cayman Islands dollar.



Fig. 5. An amusingly 'welcoming' sign by the High Rock Drive, Grand Cayman.

BIRDS AND BIRDING

At night, I looked around the well-lit QEBP access road and made a trip to Old Man Bay and Barefoot Beach. The seat of the small car was a bit uncomfortable one in the long run, and I needed an **American Barn Owl** on my Cayman Islands list. There were crushed and live crabs and a number of dead cats on the roads at night. Otherwise, it was very peaceful after the locals had gone to the bed.

In the morning of 19th June, the birds started to sing at 05.00. At 05.45, it was possible to start observing them. I stayed at the access road and especially at the QEBP entrance gate, till 07.45, before leaving the place. The staff started to arrive at 07.00 and one of them invited me in before the official opening time, telling me that birders are welcome early. I thanked him for the privilege but did not enter, as everything I needed had already been discovered at the access road. There is a fee for the entrance, too, and we birders with limited funds need to think how to economize as much as possible.

Instead, I drove around the East End of the island, making a circular side tour on the High Rock Drive. The trip continued to North Side and eventually to Rhum Point, a rather uninspiring tourist area. Attempts to access some coastal ponds (e.g. Malportas Pond) not visible from the main road were made, but I could not locate any tracks which would go all the way to the shore. The sea was almost devoid of birds, just like it tends to be in this part of the Caribbean, in summer.

In addition to 31 species of birds, listed below, a **Central American Agouti** was seen at the QEBP access road. The lizards included one **Grand Cayman Anole** and two **Blue Iguanas**, both endemic to the island.



Fig. 6. Vitelline Warblers at their nest, in front of the QEBP entrance. The nest was hidden between the leaves of a palm, at about 1.20 m height. The male kept on bringing insects to the female, the latter being occupied by brooding. Both birds were quite bold at the nest, even though they clearly tried to avoid being seen to enter the nest. Otherwise, the active and a bit skulking species was not that easy to see well in the thick forest undergrowth, along the QEBP access road.

BIRD LIST

Magnificent Frigatebird	2, North Side.
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	2, on the road at night, chasing crabs, at Barefoot Beach.
Common Gallinule	1, at a nest, North Side.
Black-necked Stilt	1, at a nest, North Side.
White-crowned Pigeon	>40, common in the mangroves.
Mourning Dove	about 10, here and there, breeding range is expanding?
Zenaida Dove	>20, here and there.
White-winged Dove	>100, very common.
Common Ground Dove	>120, <i>insularis</i> , very common.
Rock Dove	2, George Town airport.
Caribbean Dove	1, <i>collaris</i> , North Side.
Cuban Amazon	4 at High Rock Road, 2 at East End, 2 at Old Man's Bay; <i>caymanensis</i> is a proposed split as Grand Cayman Amazon .
Smooth-billed Ani	>25, here and there.
American Barn Owl	1, <i>furcata</i> , Old Man's Bay, at night.
Antillean Nighthawk	2, George Town airport (night) and North Side (day).
West Indian Woodpecker	5; <i>caymanensis</i> , here and there.
Northern Flicker	6; here and there. <i>Gundlachi</i> has split potential.
Caribbean Elaenia	>30; <i>caymanensis</i> , most common at QEBP.
La Sagra's Flycatcher	6; <i>sagrae</i> , QEBP.
Grey Kingbird	>10; here and there.
Loggerhead Kingbird	2; QEBP and George Town.
Grey Catbird	4; here and there.
Northern Mockingbird	>100; <i>orpheus</i> , very common.
Red-legged Thrush	1; <i>coryi</i> , at QEBP.
Yucatan Vireo	3; <i>caymanensis</i> , QEBP.
Vitelline Warbler	5; including a nest, at QEBP.
Bananaquit	3; <i>sharpei</i> , QEBP.
Western Spindalis	6; <i>salvini</i> , QEBP.
Cuban Bullfinch	3; QEBP, <i>taylori</i> is a proposed split as Cayman Bullfinch .
Yellow-faced Grassquit	5; <i>olivaceus</i> , here and there.
Greater Antillean Grackle	>50; <i>caymanensis</i> , widespread and common.



Fig. 7. Juvenile **Cuban Amazons** at High Rock Road, two out of a party of four.

DEPARTING THOUGHTS

On the 20th, I returned my Kia without any problems. At 09.00, at American Airlines check in, I was told that they had canceled the morning flight from Miami. As a result, there was no plane to return to Miami, either. Instead, I would need to wait at Grand Cayman for 8 hours, plus another 8 hours in Miami, before a night flight to Lima and a 6 hour transit there, and arrival in Piura at 16.40, one day later than scheduled, **IF** everything went well. Unfortunately, things do not go well with American Airlines anymore. Its field operations are dangerously close to a breaking point and a bankrupt is looming in the horizon...

Their second suggestion involved less waiting on the hard benches of the Grand Cayman airport check in area. After five hours, I could fly to Charlotte and then to New York, and with a more or less similar timetable to Lima and Piura. Plenty of additional flight miles but no joy, really.

At that point, realizing that I had a more detailed understanding of their routes and timetables, I suggested the Dallas-Ft. Worth connection, which was shorter and therefore faster: 5.5 hours in Grand Cayman, four hour transit in Dallas-Ft.Worth, in Lima already at 05.28 and arrival in Piura at 08.55. After some information searching, the American Airlines counter staff agreed and thanked me for the idea.

There would not be much difference to the original timetable and the alternative was feasible in every way, if American Airlines would make special arrangements for my luggage in Dallas and in Lima. This they agreed to do and also phoned to my car rental company in Piura, informing about the delay. Fortunately, one of the employees spoke fluent Spanish.

As we finally walked to the jet airliner, a tornado was spotted approaching the coast, towards us. In Grand Cayman, that was not a reason to delay the flight. The first leg was 25 minutes early in Dallas-Ft.Worth and everything appeared to work out just fine. With my I.T.I .status, there was no need to visit customs with my luggage. Then, the American Airlines unfortunately repeated its departure gate trick (lack of maintenance, once again), at the time when we were rolling towards the runway! The air-conditioning system had no pressure and we had to return to the gate, for repairs and lengthy paperwork.



Fig. 8. A tornado approaches the Grand Cayman airport, just when we are boarding.

As a result of another delay, I missed the last morning flight to Piura. The next one would depart in the afternoon, meaning that I would need to pick my rental car, do my shopping and drive after sunset, which is not a very good idea in Peru, with its high crime and traffic accident rates.

Readily accepting its responsibility for the chaos, American Airlines gave me cafeteria meal vouchers and a room at an USD 380 Lima airport hotel, where I could sleep for three hours (!), before a need to prepare myself for a departure. The Latam flight to Piura was, however, further delayed by an hour, as result of a small plane crashing on the runway. It took some time to clear the debris...

At night I drove 100 km/h from Piura to Talara, to find a bed as early as possible. Thereafter, everything went reasonably well. Nevertheless, hard core birding and air travel such as this is not something I look for with pleasure. During the recent years, the increasing unreliability of airline services has made birdwatching tourism less attractive, not only in Grand Cayman, but in various parts of the world, including the United States.

During the five day period, I managed to sleep only 24 hours, less than five hours per night, only because the American Airlines has cut down its airport operations to a level which has become a major source of cancellations and delays. What a downfall in just a few years, for this used-to-be-reliable company.

I hope your flights to and from Grand Cayman will work out better than mine did. Also, the problem with accommodation may perhaps be solved by a very early reservation, a good package deal or by sharing a room. A brief visit without sleep is also an option, if the next destination is not too far away and has reasonably priced rooms. Birding the island is easy enough and one may rest assured that the key bird species are seen with ease, in few morning hours.



Fig. 9. Life can be nice and relaxed in the 'Caribbean Time Zone', where people still have ample time to socialize during their working hours.