



Birdwatching Holidays in Spain, Morocco & more...

BOLETAS Birdwatching centre
22192 Loporzano (Huesca) – Spain
tel/fax 00 34 974 262027 or 01162 889318
e.mail: josele@boletas.org // www.boletas.org
Esther Diago Millán - NIF 38493051K

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NEW HORIZONS UK

BIRD HIGHLIGHT

TOUR	DATES
CUBA , Birds & Music	Feb 3rd to 12th 2011

Party: M. Cheesborough, Gwyneth Wild, Nigel Watson Daryl Watson, Adrian Blagden, Christine Blagden, Trevor Skipper, Carol Skypper, Dick Flynn , Leonor Flynn.

Tour Leader : Josele J Saiz and Chris Hall from NEW HORIZONS , Orestes Martinez

Introduction.

On this fascinating island, we saw almost all the endemics, including the stunning Cuban Tody, rarities like Cuban Solitaire and Zapata Sparrow and the amazing Bee Hummingbird, which at just 2.25 inches and a fly weight one twelfth of an ounce, is the smallest bird in the world! But, as well as all the wonderful birds, we enjoyed time in Havana, where bronchitic classic cars chug along like tanks, spluttering clouds of black smoke, amid crumbled Spanish colonial streets, as if on a film set from a fifties movie.

Our Cuabn experience day by day

Feb 3rd .- While waiting for our minicoach, we tick off House Sparrow, Collared Dove, Northern Mockingbird, Red-legged Thrush and a tiny nest-building Cuban Emerald. An unusual combination, but this is Havana, where bronchitic classic cars chug along like tanks, spluttering clouds of black smoke, amid crumbled Spanish colonial streets, as if on a film set from a fifties movie. Heading west with Turkey Vultures everywhere, our first real birding stop requires a U turn across the central reservation of the motorway! From the lake side, we can see American Coot, Pied-billed Grebe, Great Egret, Great Blue and Green Herons, Belted Kingfisher and Forster's Tern, plus a mixed raft of hundreds of Lesser Scaup and Ruddy and Ring-necked Ducks, with a couple of Eastern Meadowlarks strutting along the grassy shore. Further along the motorway, we pull over on a bridge, which quakes each time a lorry rumbles by, for a Spotted Sandpiper in immaculate non-breeding plumage, followed by Snail Kite and Killdeer.

By late morning we arrive at an Orquideario up in the Cordillera de Guaniguanico, where a frenzy of activity begins with glossy blue-black Greater Antillean Grackles and a Louisiana Waterthrush, looking like a miniature Redwing, quickly followed by a stream of exciting new birds including Common Yellowthroat, Cuban Green Woodpecker, the superbly marked Western Spindalis, a magnificent Cuban Trogon in patriotic red, white and blue, with an ornately sculpted tail end, and a Cuban Solitaire, with a clear far carrying song, like the sound produced from a ringing crystal goblet. All this on the car park! Following a path into the forest a mixed flock of colourful small birds includes Red-eyed Vireo, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Yellow-headed, Black-throated Blue, and Black-throated Green Warblers,

Northern Parula and American Redstart, followed by the tiny Cuban Tody, an absolute jewel, which sparkles green, blue, yellow, orange and red. Further on, other gems include a stonking Great Lizard-cuckoo, almost two feet long, with thick red eye rings and the jizz of a squirrel, and the 7 inch Cuban Pygmy-owl, with 'eyes' in the back of its head.

Back on the road to Viñales, a lagoon has Great and Snowy Egrets, Little Blue Herons, including a white morph, seven Caspian Terns and a Snail Kite, along with whistling Smooth-billed Anis, a distant Crested Caracara and an Osprey. In the spectacular Viñales Valley National Park, a stroll adds more quality birds to the list, starting with a pair of West Indian Woodpeckers, gorging on palm fruits, followed by posing Loggerhead Kingbird and Cuban Pewee and then a mixed group of Tawny-shouldered and Cuban Blackbirds along with black and yellow Greater Antillean Orioles. Smart Scaly-naped Pigeons also give good views, and as the light begins to fade, Antillean Palm Swifts are swooping into thatched hut rooves to roost, and a couple of American Kestrels move in for the kill outside the mouth of a cave as thousands of ultra-light Butterfly Bats suddenly emerge with an audible rush of wings against air, flowing above and below the small bridge like a sudden torrential flash flood. An amazing spectacle.

Feb 4th .- Next morning in the same valley, we are soon seeing Olive-capped and Black-and-white Warblers, Cuban Bullfinch and Yellow-faced Grassquit, and in the excitement, some also briefly see Cuban Grassquit. Further on Yellow-headed Warbler and Western Spindalis show exceedingly well in the bright morning sunshine, along with a Cuban Vireo. On the road back east to La Guira National Park, our local guide Orestes, spots something special up ahead and so we all pile out for the elusive, rare and endemic Gundlach's Hawk. Once in La Guira National Park, we begin 'Operation Cuban Grassquit take II' and straight away we are onto these endemic Grassquits feeding alongside their more widely spread Yellow-faced relatives, thanks again to the excellent knowledge of our local guide. After lunch at a restaurant with free range chickens living dangerously, we continue the journey east to Cuba's top birding spot, the famous Cienaga de Zapata National Park.

Feb 5th.- It's 7.30am in the hotel grounds with a lovely rosy-throated Cuban Parrot feeding on fruit in one of the trees. Tiptoeing along a forest trail pays off with great views of numerous noisy West Indian Woodpeckers, plus Black-and-white, Prairie and Magnolia Warblers, La Sagra's Flycatcher, strutting Ovenbirds, a Bare-legged Owl playing eye spy from its tree trunk nest hole, and for the lucky ones, Grey-fronted Quail-dove.

After a morning in the trees, we spend the afternoon at the Salinas for a totally different set of birds. This RAMSAR site produces many 'shorebirds' such as Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers, Spotted, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt and Willet, with Knot, Short-billed Dowitcher and Stilt Sandpiper together in the same scope view for a nice comparison. Besides all the 'peeps', we see Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants, Anhinga, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, both Brown and White Pelicans, deep pink Greater Flamingoes, normal and white versions of Reddish Egret, Royal and Caspian Terns and Laughing Gull, all under the watchful eyes of perching Cuban Black-hawk and Northern Harrier, while a Magnificent Frigatebird patrols the sky above.

Feb 6th.- At 7am a Black-crowned Night-heron flies home to roost through the early morning mist as the musical canary-like dawn chorus of Zapata Wrens, hidden deep in the sawgrass, gets going. As we wait in the hope of glimpsing this exceedingly rare endemic, we pass the time watching a male Cuban Emerald perched close by and full frame in the scope, but within forty minutes of our arrival, the wren is singing from a sapling in full view at the edge of the swamp! Our next target is the endemic Bee Hummingbird and so after a short drive, we explore the forest in search of the favoured tree top perch of this remarkable bird, which at 2.25 inches and a flyweight one twelfth of an ounce, is the smallest bird in the world! Thanks to Orestes, today joined by his brother Angel, we scope a male 'Bee' perched high in a dead tree, and in the brilliant sunshine it is a scintillating sight, with its iridescent petrol blue back and tail and a long plumed moustache which glitters like gold and rubies, depending on the angle of reflection. Although perched, the whole body throbs constantly, as this feisty little bird turns its head quickly from side to side, as if looking for a fight, despite its tiny build, and when hovering, the tail flicks while the wings are invisible. This must surely be one of the most memorable highlights of any birder's life list. On the walk back, we add White-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos to the trip list, along with Cuban Vireo for the day list. In the afternoon, we concentrate on quail-doves and eventually get rewarded with nice views of a pair of Grey-fronted Quail-doves walking along the trail among the leaf

litter. After dinner a stroll around the hotel grounds produces a calling Stygian Owl, which eventually shows itself in flight against the starry sky.

Feb 7th.-Today we have a long drive east, but first we have an appointment with Fernandina's Flicker and soon we have a pair of these big endemic woodpeckers, with dagger-like bills, displaying on a branch by stretching their necks and fanning out their stiff tail feathers. Meanwhile, a flock of Tree Swallows passes overhead on their journey north. The other new bird for today is a Limpkin spotted during a brief stop on the motorway!

A morning's birding in the grounds of the Rancho La Belen is quite productive with views of Cuban Parrots and Parakeets, followed by Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Giant Kingbird, with a bill like that of a crow, Zenaida Dove and the understated Plain Pigeon, while noisy Cuban Crows are gargling constantly. At one point we can see Fernandina's Flicker and both West Indian and Cuban Green Woodpeckers at the same time, while a mixed flock of warblers in the tree above includes Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, American Redstart and Northern Parula with Black-throated Blue, Yellow-throated and Palm Warblers. Orestes strikes again, calling not one, not two, but seven Cuban Palm Crows, with a distinctly harsh call unlike the varied turkey and parrot-like vocab of the more numerous Cuban Crows. In the afternoon, a lake near the ranch produces more Anhingas, Blue-winged Teal and Ring-necked Ducks, but also Purple Gallinule and the stunning Northern Jacana, with a black and tan body, enormous lily-trotting feet, and a deep yellow bill with matching head shield.

Feb 8th.-Back at the ranch, a pre-breakfast stroll produces a red-ripe male Summer Tanager and a fall of the usual warblers along with Blackpoll and Cape May Warblers, which are newcomers for the trip list. Leaving the ranch, we say "adios" to a single Solitary Sandpiper and a noisy flock of hundreds of Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds, calling together like an orchestra of wind chimes. By late afternoon, on the causeway across to Cayo Coco on the north coast, we are watching a sizeable gathering of Reddish Egrets, although about half must be white ones. On the other side of the causeway, Orestes suggests we check the trees for Oriente Warbler, and within a minute we are enjoying plum views of this endemic at eye level, although things soon get even better when a stripy headed berry-pecking Worm-eating Warbler appears in the same view as the Oriente!

Feb 9th.- One of the rarest birds in Cuba is the Thick-billed Vireo, with a distribution in the Fieldguide to the Birds of Cuba represented by a single dot on the map centred on Cayo Paredon Grande, and yet by 9am, we have it in our bins, at eye level barely twenty feet in front of us, thanks again to Orestes. Barely fifteen minutes later, we get gob-smacking views of a pair of delightful little Cuban Gnatcatchers. Back in the hotel grounds, with Northern Mockingbird singing very much like a British Song Thrush, we find White-winged Dove, along with West Indian Whistling-duck on the lake across the road.

Feb 10th.- It's our last full day in the field and we are still missing Zapata Sparrow, so we pull out all the stops with a dawn raid on an area selected by Orestes. As if by magic, this handsome sparrow appears and shows superbly well in a small bush at the side of the track, followed by a second bird, so that everyone gets brilliant views by 7am. Shortly after, we glimpse the distinctive face pattern of a Key West Quail-dove, spotted by our driver, just a few yards inside the dense bushes. After breakfast, we have one target left before returning to Havana, and this is the Bahama Mockingbird. By 9.30am, there it is singing less than ten yards in front of us, with Northern Mockingbird nearby, to compare plumages, concluding a great tour of this fascinating island.

All we have to do now is get the flight back to Havana, which is an adventure in itself. Our destination is Playa Baracoa, not far from Havana, but there is no airport marked on the map! Boarding the Air Gaviota decommissioned military aircraft is via a ramp in the plane's rear, which originally would have been the exit for parachutists. Inside the grey metal hulk there are few windows, no air vents or reading lights and "an individual life jacket" according to the safety card. The engine noise is deafening, the ride bumpy, and best of all, the toilet is a hole in the floor! This is a no frills flight par excellence. As we come in to land, the thick clouds outside leak in through the ceiling as if the plane is on fire! Overall, the experience is even more exciting than a ride at Alton Towers. Now that's Cuba for you.

By Chris Hall – NEW HORIZONS - www.newhorizonsonline.co.uk

Total Number of Species : 147

Weather & Sites:

Day 1 –	Nice and sunny La Habana – El Parador - Viñales
Day 2 –	Nice and sunny – Storm in the afternoon San Vicente – San Miguel de los Baños (La Guaira)
Day 3 –	Nice and sunny Molina – Las Salinas – Zapata National Park
Day 4 –	Nice and sunny Playa Larga – Las Bermejas - Molina
Day 5 –	Nice and sunny Playa Larga – La Pijota – Finca la Belen
Day 6 –	Nice and sunny Finca La Belen – Najasa Nature reserve
Day 7 –	Nice and sunny Najasa Nature reserve - Cayo Coco
Day 8 –	Nice cloudy and sunny Cayo Paredon Grande – Cueva Jabali – Playa Flamenco
Day 9 –	Cloudy and sunny Cayo Guillermo – Cayo Coco – Flight to Havana
Day 10 –	Cloudy and sunny Lennin Park and Havana Botanical Garden

Money for conservation has gone to : Orestes Martinez for his educational work the with local children at Zapata nature reserve

#	0	Species	Scientific Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	1	Least Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus dominicus</i>		x								
	2	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	x		x			x				
	3	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>						x	x	x	x	
	4	Neotropic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>			x				x			
	5	Anhinga	<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>			x			x				
	6	Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>			x				x	x	x	x
	7	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
	8	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x
	9	Reddish Egret	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>			x						x	
	10	Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>		x	x		x			x	x	
	11	Black crwon Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>			x			x				
	12	Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x
	13	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	
	14	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
	15	Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	
	16	American Bittern											
	17	White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>			x	x	x			x	x	
	18	Roseate Spoonbill	<i>Platalea ajaja</i>			x						x	
	19	Caribbean Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>			x						x	

20	West Indian Whistling -Duck	<i>Dendrocygna arborea</i>									X	X	
21	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>			X			X				X	
22	Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>	X					X					
23	Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>	X										X
24	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	X										
25	Brown Pelican		X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X
26	White Pelican												
27	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
28	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	X		X		X	X					
29	Northern Harrier												
30	Snail Kite	<i>Rostrhamus sociabilis</i>	X	X									
31	Gundlach's Hawk +	<i>Accipiter gundlachi</i>		X									
32	Cuban Black-Hawk	<i>Buteogallus gundlachii</i>			X						X	X	
33	Broad-winged Hawk	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>		X	X	X	X						
34	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>		X									
35	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
36	Merlin												
37	Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>	X	X	X			X	X	X	X		
38	Limpkin	<i>Aramus guarana</i>					X	X	X				
39	Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio martinica</i>	X				X	X					X
40	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X					X
41	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	X	X	X			X				X	X
42	Northern Jacana	<i>Jacana spinosa</i>					X	X				X	
43	Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>			X							X	
44	American Avocet				X								
45	Semi-palmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>			X								
46	Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			X							X	
47	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			X								
48	Red Knot				X								
49	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	X		X			X				X	
50	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>	X		X				X				
51	Solitary Sandpiper	<i>Tringa solitaria</i>			X								
52	Still Sandpiper				X								
53	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>			X							X	
54	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>			X							X	
55	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>			X								
56	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			X						X	X	
57	Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>			X								
58	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>			X								
59	Short billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>			X							X	
60	Lesser black-Back Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>									X		
61	Ring Billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>											X
62	Laughing Gull	<i>Larus atricilla</i>			X						X	X	
63	Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>	X		X						X		
64	Gull billed Tern	<i>Sterna nilotica</i>	X										
65	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	X	X							X	X	
66	Foster Tern	<i>Sterna</i>											
67	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>										X	
68	Scaly napped		X										
69	White-crowned Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas leucocephala</i>			X	X							
70	Plain Pigeon ++	<i>Patagioenas inornata</i>						X	X				
71	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			
72	Zenaida Dove	<i>Zenaida aurita</i>			X	X				X		X	
73	White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>									X	X	
74	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Sterptopelia decaocto</i>	X									X	X
75	Common Ground-Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X

132	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
133	Yellow-headed Warbler	<i>Teretistris fernandinae</i>	x	x	x	x							
134	Oriente Warbler	<i>Teretistris fornsi</i>							x	x	x		
135	Western Spindalis	<i>Spindalis zena</i>	x	x		x			x	x	x		
136	Red-legged Honeycreeper	<i>Cyanerpes cyaneus</i>	x										x
137	Cuban Bullfinch	<i>Melopyrrha nigra</i>		x	x				x	x			
138	Cuban Grassquit	<i>Tiaris canorus</i>		x									x
139	Yellow-faced Grassquit	<i>Tiaris olivaceus</i>		x	x				x	x	x	x	
140	House Sparrow	<i>Paser domesticus</i>	x	x	x	x	x					x	x
141	Zapata Sparrow +	<i>Torreornis inexpectata</i>											x
142	Tawny-shouldered Blackbird	<i>Agelaius humeralis</i>	x	x				x	x				
143	Red-shouldered Blackbird	<i>Agelaius assimilis</i>			x								
144	Eastern Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella magna</i>	x	x				x					x
145	Cuban Blackbird	<i>Dives atroviolaceus</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
146	Greater Antillean Grackle	<i>Quiscalus niger</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
147	Greater Antillean Oriole	<i>Icterus dominicensis</i>	x			x			x	x			
	Endemics												
	Status												
	+++ critically endangered												
	++ endangered												
	+ vulnerable												
#	Other Sightings	Scientific Name											
	Reptiles												
	Tortoise	<i>Trachemys decussata</i>											
	Frog	<i>Eleutherodactylus melacara</i>											
	Frog	<i>Eleutherodactylus simulans</i>											
	Snake	<i>Alshophis Catherigerus</i>											

Poictures by Chris Hall and Josele J Saiz





Bird of the tour

M. Cheesborough, **Cuban Tody**

Gwyneth Wild,

Nigel Watson, **Cuban Tody**

Daryl Watson, **Cuban Tody**

Adrian Blagden, **Bee Hummingbird**

Christine Blagden,

Trevor Skipper, **Cuban Tody**

Carol Skypper, **Cuban Tody**

Dick Flynn , **Bee Hummingbird**

Leonor Flynn, **Bee Hummingbird**

Josele J Saiz , **Zapata Sparrow**

Chris Hall , **Cuban Tody**