

Cuba but not as we planned it

28th December 2020 – 12th January 2021

2020 was our worst year birding since 1987, I had only 10 lifers in Jordan in January and Sarah added just one additional bird to her list after that Jordan trip, a Black-bellied Sandgrouse in Fuerteventura in November. So a trip to Cuba with 30+ lifers on offer was very attractive.



However, we had three attempts at Cuba cancelled in the last year; try one when Thomas Cook went bust (we were to fly into Caya Coco then 3 nights birding on our own in Playa Larga; attempt two, a tour with 3 nights in Havana and then time on both coasts; and then finally attempt 3 after Cuba had partly reopened, fly into Varadero but spend first 3 nights in Havana then time in Playa Larga before finishing at Varadero, these last two were cancelled due to lockdowns the last one just a few weeks ago in late November.

So when the when the last lockdown ended and we thought very wisely we probably had until January before our post-Christmas English lockdown began; we booked two weeks in Varadero with TUI. If we went on an organised tour we could avoid quarantine and just stay the first two days in the resort, if we went independently we had to do 5 days quarantine confined to a Hotel or Casa and then possibly have another test before being released. We had tentative plans to do some birding in Zapata with Ernesto Reyes who we had arranged to use on previous failed attempts and then just do whatever trips we could to Havana, etc.

Having booked to leave Manchester on 28/12 we were pretty concerned about the new Covid variant as countries around the world banned UK flights but Cuba with its testing on arrival regime just added the need for a PCR test before departure and then only from 1st January – result. As we have been on a vaccine trial since October (over 80% efficacy and lots of regular tests) we were pretty confident we would not test positive on arrival although 8 people on our flight did and were removed from the resort to a medical facility until they tested negative.

Our target birds were the usually endemics but particularly the Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Trogon and the Owls plus some West Indian species we hadn't seen on Jamaica or in Dominican Republic but we knew that we would probably not even try for some of the Eastern species as a few areas were still closed in Cuba.

Rather than a day by day account I'll just set out what we saw around the resort; the Iberostar Selection Bella Vista and the peninsula on foot or by Hop-on Hop-off bus, our trip to Havana and then a bit more detail for Zapata, Playa Larga and Play Giron areas where people might be going independently when the situation improves.

Varadero area

There were pretty good grounds in the hotel with lots of wintering warblers, a couple of easy endemics and some seabirds and herons.

The main birds in the hotel were **Cuban Emerald** our first endemic, **Cuban (crescent-eyed) Pewee**, **Yellow-fronted Vireo**, **Black-throated Blue Warbler**, **Palm Warbler**, **Ovenbird**, **Blackburnian Warbler**, **Northern Parula**, **Yellow-throated Warbler**, **Antillean Palm Swift** and **Northern Mockingbird**.



There were some mangroves only about 1KM away and then a pretty nice patch of woodland near the closed Pirates Cove restaurant and bar. The best birds here were **Cuban Black Hawk**, a surprise **Key West Quail Dove** (only seen once – it was just after we arrived and there had been 3 days of strong wind and rain so not sure if it is regular here or had just been moved by the weather), we also saw a **Bahamas Mockingbird** the same day which we also couldn't relocate and then **Cuban Vireo**, **Yellow Warbler**, **Cuban Blackbird**, **Loggerhead Kingbird**, **Smooth-billed Ani** and **American Redstart**.



There is a small nature reserve up towards the Marina but it is now half the size it was due to Hotel developments and we actually found more in the various deserted hotels (around 80% are still closed) and in the area near the ancient Cactus natural monument rather than on the trails.

Birds by the shore and mangroves included, **Little Blue Heron**, **Green Heron**, **Great White Egret**, **Brown Pelican**, **Magnificent Frigatebird**, **Killdeer**, **Sanderling** and **Wilson's Plover**

Apart from some **Laughing Gulls**, **Brown Pelican** and **Belted Kingfisher** the Marina area seemed lacking in bird life.

For those just going to the beach like some people we spoke to, even if we had not left the resort we would have found at least 6 lifers.



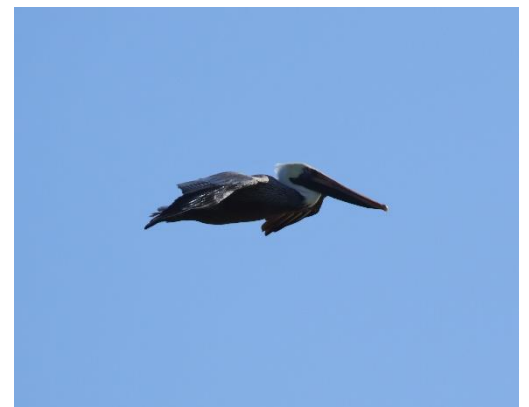
Havana



It was not possible for foreigners to stay in hotels in Havana while we were here and in fact they stopped all tours to Havana from 10th January as they had a spike in cases following the reported high number of cases brought into Cuba from expats returning to Cuba for their Christmas Holiday, in the article I read “over 50% of all new cases were linked to cases from Florida who were staying with family or friends” rather than tourists in resorts. It also caused the Cuban government to stop a number of flights to neighbouring islands as well as the US pretty much scuppering some thoughts we had of doing some island hopping to avoid lock down and staying away until the end of February.

Our trip to Havana was not really a birding trip but we did see two **Cuban Parakeets** fly over when we stopped just after Jibacoa and there were plenty of distinctive **Red-legged Thrushes** (Cuban sub species which might be split) and **Greater Antillean Grackle** and **Prairie Warbler** at the Fortress.

Like most people who go to Havana we couldn't resist the lure of a drive in a 1950's open top car. In our case Sarah chose a pink 1952 Ford and we added a **Royal Tern**, **Magnificent Frigatebird** and **Brown Pelican** when we were driving along the promenade past all the old mafia hotels.



Zapata Swamp

Organising the trip was tricky due to Covid but also the fact that Cuba was changing currency with the Cuban Convertible Pesos being phased out from 1st Jan through to 30th June but even in January people were refusing it.

We had three plans; 1) I would hire a car and drive down to Playa Larga for a couple of nights picking Ernesto up on the way, he lives just North of Zapata; 2) if overnights were still not allowed Ernesto would hire a car and driver picking us up each day at 5.30 and we would do a couple of long days returning to Varadero each evening, 3) if car hire was still similar in cost - Cuban v US and we could overnight then he would hire the car and driver and pick us up early and drop off late but we could get away with just one night in Playa Larga.

After much communicating on WhatsApp, beginning after we had been cleared on the Covid test and then once the new currency was introduced on 1/1/21 (credit cards and ATM were all out for 4 days) thus made making booking and paying for things impossible; we went for option 3 with Ernesto picking us up just before 5.30 on 7th January.



I don't want to give detailed locations because GPS in Cuba is officially illegal although I didn't switch mine off and I did track where we were with Maps.me as we were keeping the possibility open of a drive back if we missed anything we deemed essential. However Ernesto uses ebird extensively (he is proud to be the top ebirder in Cuba ahead of his wife who is also a guide. His sighting and locations are on there, I've just given names of main place as I picked them up.

It was light just before 7am but before we started birding we stopped by Ernesto's family home to pick up his scope (he thought it would be useful and it did help with one bird), we enjoyed some fresh coffee before getting to the first key site (La Turba) for a few select birds as activity was getting going. Neither, Ernesto or his wife have done any guiding since March, we were his first clients since a lady from Taiwan who had to abandon her trip as the world locked down.

Ernesto had been building himself a place near Playa Larga but neither he nor any other guide had staked out anything in the swamp. So we went into the swamp driving along a narrow donkey track stopping regularly and looking for Wren, Sparrow and other birds more in hope than expectation. However things started brightly with a few **Yellow-headed Warblers**, a **Cuban Vireo** and then we heard a **Zapata Sparrow**. The bird responded immediately to play back and we had our first tricky species, we actually saw 10 birds over the morning. The Wren wasn't for giving itself up, we tried about 8 places without success and it was only when we went to a less than ideal viewing point that we actually got a response from the **Zapata Wren**, it did seem to be coming closer but after about 45 minutes of trying we decided it was heard only and my new "not getting obsessive about single birds" resolution was tested for the first time, luckily a pair of **Cuban Tody** either side of the track got me quickly focused on what I did see and not what I had missed. We also added **Cuban Bullfinch** and **Great Blue Heron** before we decided to go to a flooded Savannah and Woodland area (El Bosque), Ernesto said farmers are quite happy to provide access to their land.

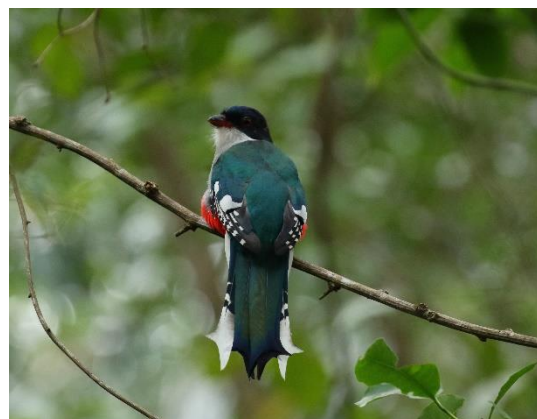




The main target was Fernandina's Flicker but despite lots of searching and calling we missed it but we did get two new lifers in **Cuban (Great) Lizard Cuckoo** and **La Sagra's Flycatcher**. We then went into the wood to look for Quail Doves, We split up slightly and I found an immature **Grey-fronted Quail Dove**, it didn't look like the plates I had studied so I called the others and showed Ernesto the photo I had taken and he confirmed it was a young bird and played the call and it wasn't long before the young bird was joined by two adults, sods law they skulked deeper in the forest but we did eventually get good looks. Frustratingly for Sarah

we had been hearing Trogon's call for a large part of the morning but ignoring them as Ernesto said they are easy but having seen our main targets we now went into the forest and found three beautiful **Cuban Trogons** calling to each other, so that was Sarah's main target for the trip achieved.

I didn't mention earlier that we drove through Playa Caletón on the way to the farm and woods. We had planned to stay at Casa Ana run by an ex-poacher with its famous garden and were going to order lunch for our return, however on arrival there were huge handwritten signs saying – "No Visitors". It turned out a German couple had gone there directly from the airport and the whole premises including the family had to isolate for 5 days until their Covid test result came through. Fortunately the house next door was owned by relatives and they were just awaiting the last permit to come through then they could open up for tourists and take us. They hoped to have it by 13.00. If that didn't work out Ernesto knew a friend who could possibly put us up although he said it was a bit basic. It was with some trepidation we arrived back at the Casa at 13.30 but everything was OK we could stay at Casa Gleybi (casagleybi@nauta.cu +53 45987544). Lunch wasn't quite ready as they were still preparing but we were able to spend time in the two gardens. Where we saw my main target really well the smallest bird in the world the **Bee Hummingbird**, I now appreciated why Ernesto wasn't too bothered about chasing after a call in the forest edge when a couple of birds were regularly zapping into the garden and even feeding on a tiny syringe of sugar water. We also added **Cuban Oriole** and **Cuban Crow** to the trip list as well as getting great views of **Prairie warbler**, **Northern Parula** and **Grey Catbird**.



Over a lovely home cooked Cuban lunch we confirmed the other main attraction of the garden a rare owl was seen most evenings, so something to look forward to for later. Afternoon was going to be around the area where Ernesto had built a new house with garden and pool to attract wildlife. We just sat around in the heat of the afternoon drinking coffee harvested from Ernesto's own coffee plants and watching **Grey Catbird**, **Black-throated Blue Warbler**, **Cuban Emerald**, **Cuban Blackbird**, **American Redstart**, **Prairie Warbler** and **Curly-tailed Lizard** while we hoped that some Blue-headed Quail Dove Ernesto had been trying to habituate would come out into a shady area – they didn't.



Still we didn't have too long before the next major find, we heard a **Cuban Pygmy Owl** calling and soon found this little cracker in daylight, we then headed onto neighbours land and saw 4 **Cuban Parrots** fly in, by sunset almost 40 Parrots had arrived.



Ernesto then took us into another garden, he explained that **Cuban Grassquit** had been pretty much trapped to extinction for the cage-bird trade in the area but him and some fellow biologists had introduced 12 birds a few years ago and there was now a sustainable population between Playa Larga and Playa Giron, we were glad to see these endemics which we hadn't really expected here.

It was still not pitch black so we went back to Ernesto's place where he made us cocktails with fruit straight from the tree. After our drinks we still couldn't hear any Owls calling, we did though find probably the same **Cuban Pygmy Owl** we had seen earlier.



We started calling widely and spotlighting various owl boxes to see if we could find the main target, no success though and we were heading back to the car when Ernesto saw movement and there in the torchlight we had **Bare-legged Screech Owl** perched above us what a great end to a fabulous days birding. It was time to get back to our digs for dinner.



We were on a real high but for some reason I left my camera and binoculars in the room when we freshened up before we went into the garden for dinner. Half way through dinner I heard the unmistakeable squeaky toy sound of Stygian Owl. I played the call on my phone and shone the torch into the tree they were said to frequent; there was a huge object sitting there – obviously the Owl but we couldn't study it properly.

I went and got the Camera and our bins but despite hearing the bird nearby it didn't return to the trees we could see from the garden before we retired to the room. We had just done our bird list and were heading to bed all stripped off when there was a knock and the lady of the house was telling us the bird was back. We quickly

dressed and got out – but before we got to the open area the bird flew off; however after a bit of calling two huge **Stygian Owls** flew over our heads and landed across the road perching out of sight but then they responded again to the calls and did another circuit to let us see them in the spotlight, no photos but what a brilliant last moment and the German Couple isolating next door were also able to see the birds even seeing one perched from their vantage point that we couldn't see.

Second Day – heading east from Playa Larga

Breakfast was arranged for 6.15 but it is really tough for Cubans at the moment with the guy of the house having to queue at the bakers and the shop from 5.00am to get provisions for us, basic goods are also very expensive e.g. Cuban Coffee per Kg US\$15 and he was a little late getting back, so

breakfast slipped a little. While we had breakfast we saw two **Cuban Black Hawks** and a couple of **Wood Storks**.

We had decided yesterday not to try again for Zapata Wren as that would require all our available time as the only other place Ernesto was sure of required a boat trip. Instead would try for the Parakeets (better views), the Flicker, Quail Dove and two other birds we had mentioned to him.

The place for the Quail Dove was in a restaurant complex and diving place with some Cenotes linking to snorkelling and diving spots across the road in the sea. I don't know what the name of this place is but it is about 10 minutes east of Playa Larga on the Bay of Pigs. The guy at the restaurant confirmed the Quail-Doves still come but nearer lunchtime. So we headed to San Blas via Playa Giron where we added 20 **Cuban Parakeets**.



At San Blas we tried for the Flicker, it was a bit of a woodpecker bonanza, we had **Northern Flicker (Cuban Yellow-shafted)**, **Cuban Green Woodpecker**, **West Indian Woodpecker** a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** before we finally got **Fernandina's Flicker** but sods law all the other Woodies came close whereas the Fernandina's stayed distant and into the sun. Ernesto had Aganz (our driver who was actually a carpenter but was training to be a bird guide) run back to the car and get the scope and we were able to get tickable views of this endemic but no usable photographs, in this area we also added **Mourning Dove**, **Zenaida Dove**, **Belted Kingfisher**, **Great Lizard Cuckoo**, **Indigo Bunting** and **Smooth-billed Ani** before we called in a couple of **Red-shouldered Blackbirds**.

The morning had flown by and it was back to the diving resort. In the cenote we could see a multitude of colourful fish what a pity we hadn't brought our snorkel but then Ernesto called us, he could hear a Spindalis the last of the birds on my list I had given him, we found one of the colourful **Western Stripe-headed Tanager** (Spindalis) feeding I managed a quick shot before we heard the Quail-Dove calling.

We positioned ourselves where the restaurant guy pointed and saw and photographed 4 of the beautiful and normally pretty secretive **Blue-headed Quail-Dove**. Success. We got three beers to sit and enjoy the birds with but just like home we couldn't sit down unless we ordered food so we just had the beers to take away and stood watching the birds while we sipped from the can enjoying life.

On the way back to the car we saw a **Cuban Green Woodpecker** by a nest hole and then a **White Ibis**.



Ernesto and Aganz had to get us back to Varadero by 18.00 so they could drop the car off back near the highway before 20.00. That gave us time for a leisurely lunch, a period of relaxation in our room at the Casa and time in the garden before a leisurely drive back. We saw most of the birds we saw yesterday, including **Cuban Crow**, **Bee Hummingbird**, **Cuban Vireo**, **Cuban Oriole**, **Northern Parula** and **Cuban Emerald**.

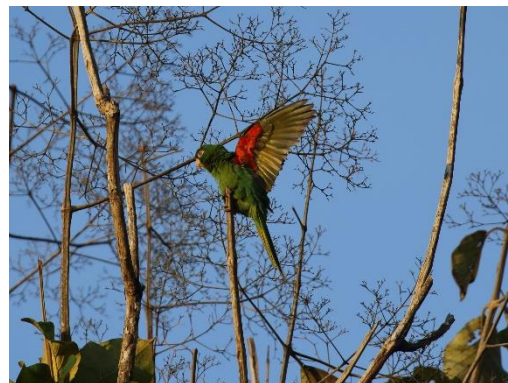
Our time with Ernesto had pretty much gone perfectly except for the Zapata Wren we had seen all of our targets, so we decided not to hire a car and do the area ourselves. We did wonder if we hadn't been able to make the trip with Ernesto work how many birds we would have missed. Although I had downloaded the calls and had rough spots for a few of the major birds I think I would have missed at least 6 or 7 assuming we could have still have stayed at one of the two Casas (details for Casa Ana are adrian@gmail.com +53 45987544) but even that wouldn't have been certain as our rudimentary Spanish might have failed to get us accommodated.

Just before we were due to return to the UK, the Government announced that anyone entering the UK needed to have a negative PCR test but they didn't set a date. When I looked in to it the SMC medical centre in the Hotel and in other major resort hotels could do a test 2 to 3 days before departure for only US \$30 but we didn't need it because the government moved back the date. However worth knowing after the lockdown if the UK stills require a negative test before arrival (even for countries with proportionately less than 1% of active cases of the UK).

Conclusion

After nearly a year devoid of new birds it was great to add 31 new bird species in a really friendly country and to tick off country 94 (surely we can add 6 more in 2021 as the world emerges from the pandemic).

Our last bird of 2020 was Cuban Pewee and our first of 2021 a Cuban Parakeet.



A selection of Cuban Endemics mentioned in the report. **Parrot, Bullfinch and Vireo**



Some more birds: Cuban (great) Lizard Cuckoo, Cuban Crow, Cuban Oriole, West Indian Woodpecker Red-shoulder Blackbird, Western Stripe-headed Tanager, Yellow-headed Warbler and Cuban Blackbird.

