

Puerto Rico



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This trip report covers our birding adventure to the island of Puerto Rico. Our primary goals were to see the island's endemic bird species, but we were also interested in finding many other Caribbean birds and non-avian endemics, as well as enjoying the culture and scenery of the island. In our five and a half days of birding, we recorded all of Puerto Rico's accessible endemic birds among over 100 total bird species, saw and heard many endemic reptiles and amphibians, visited dozens of unique habitats and met many great people across this beautiful island.

Notes on birding and tourism in Puerto Rico

Being part of the US, and reachable by direct flights from much of the continent, Puerto Rico's status as one of the only Neotropical destinations with no visa requirements for American residents makes it a highly attractive and accessible birding spot. For an island almost identical in size to Connecticut, Puerto Rico boasts an impressive 17 endemic birds, 39 endemic reptiles and amphibians, dozens of endemic plants, and a general suite of flora and fauna emblematic of the Caribbean basin. Its location between the Greater and Lesser Antilles also means that Puerto Rico hosts several species typically only associated with one or the other archipelago, and its small size means any point on the island can be easily reached within a day. Together, this makes Puerto Rico the clear starting point for American birders interested in an introduction to the Caribbean's avifauna.

One concern we had while discussing this trip was the ethics of traveling to Puerto Rico as American tourists in light of the devastating consequences of recent natural disasters, particularly 2017's Hurricane Maria, and the US federal government's severely inadequate responses to these crises. After doing some research, we felt reassured that tourism to the island was ethical, provided we make a deliberate and concerted effort to spend our money locally whenever possible. We strived to stay in local lodges when available, eat and buy food from local sources, and avoid chain stores as much as we could. In addition to assuaging our colonial guilt, this plan had the added benefit of giving us a much more intimate, authentic, and overall enjoyable tourist experience with the island, its people, and its culture - the license plates don't say "La Isla del Encanto " for nothing!

Weather & habitat considerations

Located well south of the Tropic of Cancer, it's no surprise that Puerto Rico is warm year-round. Temperatures averaged in the high 80s F/30°C for most of our trip. We all wore shorts and short-sleeved shirts throughout the trip, except for a couple early mornings in the highlands which sometimes required a light coat or windbreaker. Sunscreen is a must - don't underestimate the intensity of the tropical sun! Though late winter is firmly in the dry season, rain clouds can appear anywhere on the island (we got our heaviest dose of rain while birding the island's driest habitat), and the wetter mountainous areas can get upwards of 3000 mm of rain annually, so it's a good idea to always have a raincoat handy. Despite its small size, the island boasts many diverse habitats, including steamy rainforests, cool montane woods, dry thorn forests in the southwest, and mangroves along much of the coasts. The island has no venomous or poisonous animals, but biting insects including chiggers are common in the wetter parts of the island, so bug spray is recommended.

Birding resources & planning

Being familiar with all the expected Nearctic and many Neotropical species, our main identification needs for Caribbean and Puerto Rican specialty species were met by eBird's species accounts and *Birds of the West Indies* by Raffaele et al. (2003, ISBN 978-0691113197). The upcoming second edition of this book, scheduled for release in May 2020, promises several important improvements and more detailed information on taxonomy and endemism, but the first edition was nonetheless a suitable identification resource when called upon. Raffaele also has a more specialized *Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands* (1989, ISBN 0-691-02424-3) that delivers more detailed information on local distributions despite being outdated in places. *Birds of the West Indies* by Kiwan et al. (2019, ISBN 978-8416728176) seems a more complete and impressive field guide, though it is considerably bulkier, harder to find, and more expensive. To prepare for songs and calls (many

endemics are heard from the dense forest long before they are seen), Severin also downloaded a suite of recordings for relevant species from xeno-canto, which proved to be an indispensable resource. We consulted several trip reports to find good birding spots and the best spots at those spots, but post-hurricane Maria trip reports are still scarce. Pre-Maria reports we used were written by R. & M. Gallardy, I. Merrill, and post-Maria reports were by M. & D. Hunter and by Field Guides Birding guide T. Johnson.

Puerto Rico's avifauna and birding locations were devastated by Hurricane Maria in 2017, and though many species have shown encouraging recoveries in the past year or so, both bird populations and habitats are still greatly changed. When considering resources like eBird and past trip reports, it is important to recognize that many birding spots recommended prior to 2017 are no longer nearly as productive, and may indeed no longer exist at all. Frequent visits from American birders mean that eBird can still be a reliable resource for recent sightings and good birding spots: we recommend limiting searches for eBird sightings and new trip reports in order to avoid misleading pre-Maria data.



Puerto Rican Tanager, the sole member of Puerto Rico's only endemic bird family, Neospingidae. ©Severin Uebbing

Logistics & accommodations

Despite the devastation of Hurricane Maria, and the recent earthquakes in the southwest, infrastructure is largely well-maintained and similar to that of the mainland US, making for safe and convenient travel by car throughout the island. That said, we ran into some closed road signs, which should be followed - an impassable roadblock may follow far down a narrow, winding mountain road, difficult to escape. American cellular providers are everywhere and virtually the entire island is well covered, barring the backsides of some mountains, which means getting directions, browsing the internet, submitting mobile eBird checklists, etc. is usually very easy no matter your location. US Dollars are of course the currency and are accepted everywhere, and most places are also able to take cards. Spanish is the primary language, and while most people in the San Juan area and at tourist-oriented businesses are fluent in English, in the more remote parts of the island at least a passing knowledge of Spanish is certainly very helpful, though it is probably possible to get by without. Though crime in Puerto Rico is reported (perhaps sensationalized) on the mainland, like most places in the rest of the US it is generally restricted to rough neighborhoods in cities, and by taking normal precautions, we at no point felt unsafe or experienced anything suspicious.

We rented a car through Thrifty at the airport. Pickup went smoothly despite our flight's delay, and we were able to upgrade to a 4WD Jeep at little extra cost. A high-clearance 4WD is recommended

for reaching some of the bumpier and more remote birding areas, particularly in the southwest, though having such a large vehicle did make navigating the narrow mountain roads a bit more complicated.

We used Airbnb for several places we stayed, both in Viejo San Juan for three nights at the start of our trip, and Mayagüez for a night afterwards. Though not the most local way to get accommodations, this proved very convenient for short-notice bookings, especially since a hotel in the southwest of the island that we had been eying had to be co-opted by FEMA to aid in recovery following the serious earthquakes in the weeks before our arrival. Parking on the streets in Viejo San Juan is reserved for residents, so we paid to keep our car overnight in one of the large lots near the cruise ship terminal on the south side of the neighborhood, a convenient two-minute walk from our Airbnb. For our final two nights, we booked a small room at Hacienda Juanita just outside Maricao. The total cost for a two-bedroom for two nights (their minimum) was \$185. The rooms were very nice, but meals were not provided (they do have breakfast starting at 8 AM, but that was of course long after we were out in the field). The big appeal of this spot is bird-related, as it's very close to the first trailheads in Bosque Estatal de Maricao, and the Hacienda's private grounds themselves, a forested coffee plantation, are also very birdy. Several Puerto Rican Screech-Owls call nightly, and there are opportunities for otherwise scarce or challenging species like Antillean Euphonia.

Itinerary

While Puerto Rico is small enough to be birded from one location only, we recommend spending time in the northeast and southwest of the islands to minimize driving and ensure early arrivals at the different birding sites. With Hurricane Maria's most devastating damage occurring mostly in the east, many endemic species are currently much easier to find in the western half of the island. A few of our target species are only found in the east of the island: Green-throated Carib, Antillean Crested Hummingbird and Plain Pigeon, and we prioritized our eastern island birding around finding these targets rather than on general Puerto Rican endemics. The recent earthquake series mainly impacted the south of the island around the town of Guánica; areas more than a 30-minute drive away were less affected. Emergency accommodation is needed for earthquake-affected people in the main impact areas, so visitors should stay elsewhere at this time.

Overview

Prior to arriving, we had come up with a schedule which generally included the main spots to visit on each day, and the main birding targets in each of these spots. For eventualities such as a miss or the need to see the beach or get ice cream, we had also left some wiggle room. Below is a list of the final itinerary of our trip including all additional stops.

Feb 27: RN Humacao and Pterocarpus forest in Palmas del Mar (targets: Green-throated Carib, Antillean Crested Hummingbird); kayak tour into the bioluminescent lagoon in Río Fajardo.

Feb 28: RN Humacao (Yellow-breasted Crake); Fajardo Inn and Pterocarpus forest (eastern hummingbirds); Villa Borinquen in Caguas (Plain Pigeon); Viejo San Juan.

Feb 29: BE Río Abajo (Puerto Rican Parrot, Broad-winged Hawk, other endemics); farm field ponds SE of Arecibo (West Indian Whistling-Duck); BE Cambalache (Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, other endemics); Flamingo pond in Yeguada (American Flamingo); Merendero de Guajataca (White-tailed Tropicbird); Faro de Rincón (Red-footed Booby); BE Guánica (Puerto Rican Nightjar).

Mar 1: Laguna Cartagena NWR (West Indian Whistling-Duck, Yellow-breasted Crake, wetland birds); Lajas Valley (Masked Duck); La Parguera (Yellow-shouldered Blackbird).

Mar 2: BE Maricao (Elfin-woods Warbler, Puerto Rican Tanager, Lesser Antillean Pewee, Puerto Rican Emerald, other endemics); Hacienda Juanita (Antillean Euphonia); Cabo Rojo (Caribbean Elaenia, White-tailed Tropicbird, shorebirds).

Mar 3: PN Monte del Estado (Sharp-shinned Hawk); Villa Borinquen (Plain Pigeon).

Detailed itinerary

Below follows a list with short descriptions of our highlights at the spots we visited each day. Links in the text lead to our eBird checklists.

February 27: Humacao and the east coast

Major delays to our flight meant we didn't arrive in San Juan until nearly 4 AM, well after the car rental center had closed. Instead of an early first morning of birding, we caught up on sleep and had breakfast at Cafetería Mallorca across from [Plaza Salvador Brau](#). From the café window we excitedly recorded our first Caribbean species: **Zenaida Dove**, **Greater Antillean Grackle**, **Red-legged Thrush**, **Pearly-eyed Thrasher**, a flyover **Caribbean Martin**, and the ubiquitous **Bananaquit**, here of the distinctive *portoricensis* subspecies.

After picking up our rental car, we drove straight to [Reserva Natural de Humacao](#). Our focus was on Green-throated Carib and Antillean Crested Hummingbird, two Lesser Antillean species with small populations in eastern Puerto Rico. Unfortunately we struck out on the hummingbirds, which are still quite scarce in eastern Puerto Rico post-Maria: a ranger at the reserve told us she had only seen a single hummingbird at the reserve in the >2 years since the hurricane. Instead we rejoiced in our first island endemics at this coastal forest spot: **Puerto Rican Flycatcher**, **PR Tody**, **PR Woodpecker** and **PR Spindalis**. A short hike out to the coast provided beautiful panoramas of the sea, and some more typical Caribbean lowland species.

In search of hummingbirds we followed some recent eBird reports to the [Pterocarpus forest in Palmas del Mar](#). At the entry gate to this closed community off PR-906, we told the guard we wanted to visit the bosque pterocarpus, and were promptly given a visitors pass (and a hilariously unhelpful map - but don't worry, directions to the forest are findable on google maps). Once again we dipped on hummingbirds, but did find a **Mangrove Cuckoo** just past the parking lot. This small park has a boardwalk through dense lowland jungle, which was not very birdy, but was still interesting to explore.

Our evening was centered around a kayaking trip to Laguna Grande in the far northeast corner of the island to see the bioluminescent algae. The [meeting spot](#) for this tour in Las Croabas was a roosting site for Greater Antillean Grackle, with a few **Shiny Cowbirds** mixed in. During our [kayak trip to the lagoon](#), we saw several small herons and **White-crowned Pigeon**, among other species, though we weren't able to see a manatee. Patches of dead mangroves destroyed by Maria were still grimly evident, but much of the forest and hillside behind it were intact - a testament to the critical importance of mangroves not only as wildlife habitat, but as protection for people against storms. The bioluminescent show itself was nothing short of incredible, and we would highly recommend making this side trip if time permits. Afterwards we returned to Viejo San Juan for the night, which included our first (and worst) taste of mofongo at a tourist restaurant near the cruise ship terminal.

Feb 28: more east coast birding in Humacao and Fajardo; Borinquen and Viejo San Juan

We started the day early and headed again for Humacao, this time to try and get eyes or ears on calling Yellow-breasted Crane, which nests in wetlands along [the north end of RN Humacao](#). This area of RN Humacao is not very accessible and we did not see the birds we were hoping for. The long, wet grasses in this spot were full of chiggers, so tuck your pants into your socks to avoid their intensely itchy bites. If you're wearing shorts, or staunchly refuse to be caught in such a fashion faux pas, make sure to liberally apply bug repellent to your legs before exploring this habitat. Our first looks at **Black-faced Grassquit** and a family group of **Smooth-billed Anis** were a nice sight.

The main trails of RN Humacao were still closed at this hour so we decided to instead try for hummingbirds at [Fajardo Inn](#), a stronghold for both Antillean Crested Hummingbird and Green-throated Carib pre-Maria, and a site where the latter had been seen in recent days. Shortly after our arrival, we spotted two **Green-throated Caribs** chasing each other. The dominant individual later returned to give great looks while sitting in the big tree north of the parking lot. Other highlights included our first **Scaly-naped Pigeons**, a small flock of Caribbean Martins and a pair of **American Kestrels**. The local *caribaeorum* subspecies looks quite distinct from the mainland North American

kestrels with heavy, black spotting on the breast and black barring on the undertail. We obtained close looks from birds perched right in front of the seaview cafe, plus some much-needed coffee!

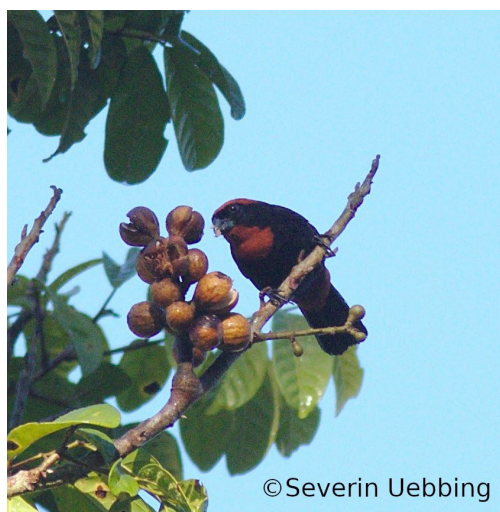
The other main target for the day was to try for Plain Pigeon at Villa Borinquen in Caguas. Looking at the map, a second visit to the [Pterocarpus forest](#) was not far out of the way. Despite having some hummingbirds fly by quickly, we did not see an Antillean Crested Hummingbird. It would be seen on later days by other visitors, but we were short of luck. Highlights of this second visit included some rarer wintering warblers at the entrance to the boardwalk (Hooded Warbler and Louisiana Waterthrush) and Severin had a brief and unexpected look at a **Puerto Rican Tanager**, unusual in the lowlands. At the observation tower we discovered that Pearly-eyed Thrashers have little patience for pishing, and will not hesitate to swoop at offending birders.

[Villa Borinquen](#) in Caguas municipality has been the most reliable spot for Plain Pigeon in recent years, so we drove to the village to try our luck. We parked in the parking lot of the Eco Plaza and walked down the road next to the river. Behind the river is a thick bamboo stand, a favored breeding habitat for this scarce and highly local species. The village is surrounded by mountain ridges on either side; on the slopes we found some Scaly-naped Pigeons, but no convincing candidates for Plain. The quartet of Red-tailed Hawks soaring up and down the valley probably didn't help our chances. The village itself was stuffed with domestic pigeons and wild doves of many species, as well as our first **Loggerhead Kingbirds** and a small flock of introduced **Bronze Mannikins**. We decided not to count the peacock standing in someone's front yard.

Discouraged by our triple dip, and still tired from our flight's delay, we returned to Viejo San Juan and spent the afternoon relaxing at the beach and in town. A sunset walk along the [shore next to El Morro castle](#) produced dozens of **Brown Boobies**, Royal Terns and Brown Pelicans coming in to roost in the harbor, while several **Caribbean Martins** kited in the wind [over the castle](#). Landbirds were nonexistent as this area is also the site of a TNR (trap-neuter-return) cat colony. Rounding out the evening with a very tasty dinner at the vegetarian-friendly St. Germain Bistro and local craft beers at La Taberna Lúpulo did much to soothe the day's earlier birding disappointments.

Feb 29: moving west via Río Abajo, Cambalache, Merendero de Guajataca and Faro de Rincón

Another early wake up had us on the road to [Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo](#) well before sunrise, in search of more of Puerto Rico's forest endemics, but especially the slim possibility of free-flying Puerto Rican Parrots. A small population of this critically endangered endemic has been released in this reserve, which also houses their main captive breeding facility. From other trip reports, we had learnt that one comes to a first road closure beyond which one can walk until coming to a closed gate. However, signage at the road closure clearly prohibited foot passage, so we did not walk in, and instead birded the entrance road up to the roadblock and nearby camping area. Despite not encountering any parrots, we did rack up a respectable list of island and Caribbean endemics, including **Puerto Rican Bullfinch** (photo), **PR** and **Black-whiskered Vireo**, **PR Oriole**, **Green Mango**, and the resident, endemic *brunnescens* subspecies of **Broad-winged Hawk** (post-Maria, the forests around Río Abajo are the only reliable spot for this raptor). We also heard the faint *hoo*-ing of a Quail-Dove, which with the help of recordings later proved to be a **Ruddy Quail-Dove**.



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One of our trip targets was West Indian Whistling-Duck. It is endemic to the West Indies and Puerto Rico is one of the easier places to see one - but that does not mean that it actually is easy! With negative reports from the previous days at their more regular spots, we decided to follow up on

some recent sightings of the species from a couple of *charcas* (shallow, grassy ponds) among farm fields south of the town of Sabana Hoyos. We did not find any whistling-ducks, but [the only Limpkin of our trip](#), our first **Yellow-faced Grassquit**, a Little Blue Heron and [a flock of five White-cheeked Pintail](#) were good pickups.

Our next stop was the nearby [Bosque Estatal de Cambalache](#). This smaller state forest shows high return rates for some of the endemics on eBird, and it did not disappoint. We had good looks at a couple confiding **Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo**, Mangrove Cuckoo and found our first **Antillean Mango**. **Puerto Rican Bullfinch** is particularly common here. Plenty of **Adelaide's Warblers** were heard singing, but frustratingly we weren't able to get eyes on any. Although it was getting close to noon the place was still pretty birdy, but with a long drive to Guánica ahead, and multiple birding stops on the way, we decided to hit the road.

Ther first stop on our drive west along the coast was unplanned, when we came across a shallow pond, [Charca Salobre Los Amadores](#). It held plenty of shorebirds, among others Ruddy Turnstones and Black-necked Stilts. A pond a little further along the way was a planned [stop for "the world's loneliest flamingo"](#) who at this time wasn't home. We saw a few Blue-winged Teal, White-cheeked Pintail and Black-necked Stilt. When a pair of Peregrine Falcons suddenly showed up and flushed the birds in this tiny pond, we realized that we had massively underestimated just how many birds were hidden in the tall grass. The pond and the surrounding fields also held high numbers of Glossy Ibis and Cattle Egret, and several Eurasian and "African" Collared-Doves flew past.

Not far from this pond was another target site, [El Merendero de Guajataca](#), a known breeding site for **White-tailed Tropicbird**, a new species for two of us. When we arrived, we first heard another Adelaide's Warbler sing from a big, isolated tree but maddeningly still could not lay eyes on it. Scanning the water offshore, we quickly spotted two tropicbirds: one individual zipping away from the cliffs straight out to sea, and then a second bird flying up and down the bay to the west. White-tailed Tropicbirds in the Caribbean belong to the *catesbyi* subspecies, which differs from other subspecies by having yellowish tail feathers. The second bird had no tail feathers, but photos of the first bird do show the yellow color.

Continuing on our route along the north and then west coast (spotting our first **Venezuelan Troupial** from the car along the way), we arrived at [Faro de Rincón](#) for another seawatch. Red-footed Boobies are sometimes seen from this point, the westernmost spot on the main island. Scanning the water, we found plenty of distant Brown Boobies following small fishing vessels and resting on the sea but couldn't turn any into a Red-footed Booby. This spot also had plenty of displaying Greater Antillean Grackles. At the parking lot of a nearby restaurant, a piña colada and good views of a cooperative [Antillean Mango](#) were good consolations.

After checking in to our apartment in Mayagüez and having dinner at the excellent Umami in Guánica, we headed for the dry forest of [Bosque Estatal de Guánica](#), the last remaining stronghold of the endangered **Puerto Rican Nightjar**. We parked at the barrier closing PR-334 just east of the neighborhood of María Antonio, and after walking past the gate immediately heard our first **Puerto Rican Screech-Owl**. Barely 100 meters up the road, we soon also heard two nightjars calling somewhat distantly from either side of the trail. Given that the species is endangered and that a lot of birders seek out the nightjar at this spot, we were not inclined to go off trail to see one or call it in by playback. This species is virtually indistinguishable from the continental Whip-poor-wills; its call is what actually counts to nail the ID. Rain began to fall and we headed back to Mayagüez with two new life birds bagged late this day. With 65 species recorded, including 14 Puerto Rican endemic species and subspecies, we made the most of our Leap Day!



March 1: Laguna Cartagena, Lajas Valley and La Parguera

We started the day early, driving out to [Laguna Cartagena National Wildlife Refuge](#), leaving the car at the southwest end and walking to the observation tower. Early morning is the best time to listen for rails, and Yellow-breasted Crake was still on our target list. It is also the best time of day to find West Indian Whistling-Duck before they disperse for the day. And indeed, one of the first birds we saw in the pre-dawn light was a **West Indian Whistling-Duck** bathing and preening not far from the trail. Another one was hidden well in the reeds behind, and we got prolonged looks at this normally shy species. Scanning the ponds from the tower, we found another distant Whistling-Duck, plenty of Ruddy Ducks, several pairs of Blue-winged Teals, three Ring-necked Ducks, some **Purple Gallinules** working the water hyacinth, and several species of egrets. At least a dozen **Sora** were heard whinnying around the lagoon, and a couple were seen chasing each other through the reeds. Despite our best efforts, we couldn't pick out a Masked Duck from the thick vegetation around the water's edge, nor were we able to hear the chirpy call of Yellow-breasted Crake among the cacophony of coquí and other frog species. Land birds seen from the tower included the expected open habitat doves, several family groups of Smooth-billed Ani, and a pair of American Kestrels trying repeatedly to increase the local population. Walking back, we flushed three Wilson's Snipes from the close marsh. On our way out, we stopped at a small group of trees where we heard several small birds chipping and an **Adelaide's Warbler** singing. This time we finally managed to see one of these handsome, yellow-gray songsters that had eluded our eyes so many times before! The trees in this drier habitat were much less densely foliated than in the areas we had visited before, which certainly helped. Photos were taken and high-fives exchanged. A short walk up [the causeway just north of the southwest corner](#) of the preserve produced similar birds but at different ratios. We saw many more Anis and Green Herons, two Least Bitterns and two Magnificent Frigatebirds surprisingly far inland, circling amongst Turkey Vultures. A Venezuelan Troupial and our first **Orange-cheeked Waxbills** were also seen here.

After coming up empty for Masked Duck at Laguna Cartagena, we drove through the [fields in the Lajas Valley](#), which contain some farm ponds that have hosted them in the past. A lack of vegetation covering these agricultural ponds meant we wouldn't find any Masked Ducks, but we did still tally some nice finds. One pond held White-cheeked Pintails, another one Spotted Sandpiper and one of the few Tricolored Herons of our trip. We recorded a singing Yellow-faced Grassquit and had great looks at a confiding **Grasshopper Sparrow** of the endemic *boriquensis* subspecies. Smooth-billed Ani were particularly abundant, and we saw many active family groups throughout the valley.

With our Masked Duck options exhausted, we drove to the coastal town of La Parguera in search of Yellow-shouldered Blackbird, one of Puerto Rico's most endangered endemics. Once common throughout the lowlands, on the main island Yellow-shouldered Blackbird is now almost exclusively restricted to the far southwest corner. Their decline is largely blamed on the arrival and expansion of Shiny Cowbird in Puerto Rico: Yellow-shouldered Blackbird is a primary host of this brood parasite, which rapidly colonized the island following extensive land clearing and human development. In spite of this, the most reliable place for this critically endangered blackbird is the town of La Parguera itself, where flocks are reported from shoreline mangroves or moving through residential areas.

Details on eBird were vague for how to find this species, which is mostly entered to the town-wide hotspot without comments on location or habits. We first stopped at the famous “hardware store” at the intersection of Camino Real and Calle 1, which formerly put out food to attract the blackbirds, but apparently no longer does so; after picking up some much-needed cold drinks, the cashier only told us that the *mariquitas* sometimes fly past the shop. Not seeing any Blackbirds on the surrounding premises, we drove through the village, walked downtown past the mangrove-covered shore and had lunch. No Blackbird. A couple pin drops pointed us to [a trail through the mangroves](#) west of town, which produced several singing “**Golden” Yellow Warblers** and an Adelaide’s, mixed in with a multi-species flock of wintering Nearctic warblers (Northern Parula, Northern Waterthrush, Black-and-white, and Prairie). A Smooth-billed Ani was seen sitting on its nest right over the trail, but still no Blackbird. Sweaty, bug-bitten and defeated, we left the trail, and were discussing our options when suddenly a **Yellow-shouldered Blackbird** flew over! We jumped out of the car and saw five more birds fly in, lemon-yellow epaulets on full display, and even managed to snap a couple flight shots. The flock made a quick circle over the trailhead before flying towards town, and were not seen again, but after such an effort we were happy for even these short views, and we decided to move on and check in to Hacienda Juanita, our base for the next two nights. With a good combination of mangroves and open habitat, we wonder if the corner around the trailhead is now the best place in town to see the Blackbirds. It would certainly be appreciated if future visitors gave specific directions to where they found the birds in their eBird comments.



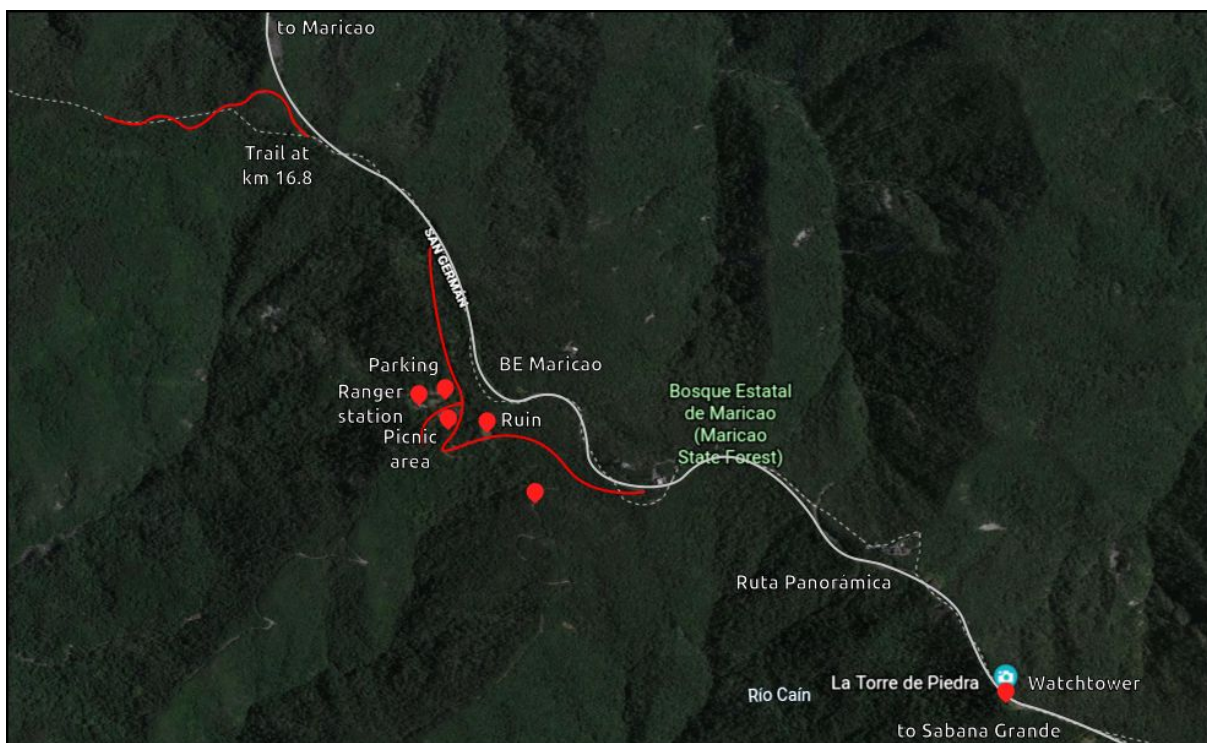
Puerto Rican Vireos are widely spread around the island but more often heard than seen. ©Severin Uebbing

After picking up groceries for the next couple mornings (Hacienda Juanita offers breakfast, but only starting at 8 AM), we headed up into the mountains, intending to pass through Bosque Estatal de Maricao on the way to the Hacienda. True to the weather statistics, the mountains were quite wet, and the ascent was made slower by intermittent rain. Halfway up the mountain, we were warned by a friendly guy on the roadside that our planned route ahead (PR-361) was closed; whether this was due to the recent earthquake or another issue was unclear. After a short backtrack and a not-so-short detour in the rain, we finally arrived at the Hacienda and checked in. A Green Mango was feeding in the tree right in the courtyard, and several other endemics, including PR Bullfinch and a PR Oriole were seen on the grounds as we settled in and relaxed with a much-needed dip in their slightly heated pool (the highlands can get a bit chilly once clouds roll in). Dinner in the nearby town of Maricao was at the no-frills but nonetheless tasty Lee Mary’s Pizza. By the time we finished up and returned to the Hacienda, the intermittent rain had become a downpour, preventing us from walking the grounds in

search of Puerto Rican Screech-Owl, but we were more than happy to take advantage of the chance for a full night's sleep in preparation for our final complete day of birding.

March 2: Bosque Estatal de Maricao, Hacienda Juanita and Cabo Rojo

Our final full day was focused on clinching the remaining gettable Puerto Rican endemics: two highland specialties and a few other, more widespread species that had thus far eluded us. Being so close to our first birding spots in Bosque Estatal de Maricao, we had the luxury of sleeping in until 6AM before making the short drive to our first stop, [the trail at km 16.8](#) on PR-120. The trail itself is a slightly overgrown and gated-off mountain road through the forest, but it has a small parking area and an unlocked door in the gate for pedestrians. Quite literally the first birds we saw after passing through the gate were an adult and a juvenile **Elfin-woods Warbler**, our primary target in these stunted highland woods. Not described to science until 1972, these warblers were quite common in this habitat, and we found at least three more on our hike down this trail. Moments after our first warbler sighting, a **Puerto Rican Tanager** appeared in a nearby tree. We rushed to see it, but this urgency turned out not to be necessary, since we spent ten minutes with another Tanager as we started walking down the trail; in total we encountered six individuals of this charming and confiding bird, the only representative of Puerto Rico's only endemic bird family. Numerous other endemics serenaded us and flitted about as we followed the trail downhill, and about half a mile in, we found a **Lesser Antillean Pewee**, which spent several minutes feeding from perches over our heads. The Puerto Rican *blancoi* subspecies of this endearing little flycatcher is warmer caramel-brown than its grayish relatives on the Lesser Antilles, and has long been considered a strong candidate for elevation to species status.



The areas we visited around Bosque Estatal de Maricao.

With three of our day's primary targets in the bag before 8:30, we made the short drive to the main entrance of the [Bosque Estatal de Maricao](#). At this point in the trip, our only needed Puerto Rican endemic (besides the parrot) was the Puerto Rican Emerald, and we hoped to find one in the flowering plants along the entrance road at this taller, more open forest. The parking lot and picnic area here are a nice open area to look for birds, including hummingbirds, and almost immediately we did see a small hummingbird zipping by, frustratingly too quickly to identify. One can usually walk the

grounds of the ranger station, but the gate was closed this morning for American Citizenship Day, so instead we walked up the hill to a ruined stone building, where we found more Elfin-woods Warblers foraging, including several close to eye level that provided great views. Puerto Rican Vireos were abundant and in full song, and we spotted a Green Mango perched cooperatively atop a tree in a clearing - a nice find but not the hummingbird we wanted. After two hours, we had seen an amazing nine of the Puerto Rican endemics just at this spot. We decided to head back to Hacienda Juanita and explore the grounds in search of the Emerald. Just as we arrived back at the car in the parking lot, a small hummingbird zipped by again. This



time it perched on a tree branch at eye level at the edge of the path, and we had great looks at a female **Puerto Rican Emerald**. It collected some spiderweb (presumably to build a nest), then zipped off again, bringing our list of endemics on the trip to 16 and our list for this spot alone to 10!

Our other good fortune from this stop was to run into Tom Hudson from the Peregrine Fund, which is working to conserve the endangered Puerto Rican subspecies of Sharp-shinned Hawk. Even before the hurricanes Irma and Maria, the population of the endemic *venator* subspecies of this tiny hawk was estimated at only around 75 individuals, but after those devastating storms the count was down to a mere nineteen. Through concerted efforts, that number has climbed to around 30 birds islandwide in 2020. Tom explained in detail the efforts and conservation plans in place to protect and expand this fragile subspecies, and though tenuous, the outlook seems optimistic.

The few remaining hawks in Maricao establish territories, and with courtship and mating peaking in late winter and early spring, our visit was well-timed to catch males' courtship displays above the canopy. Tom suggested that we visit a nearby watchtower the following morning at dawn to hopefully see these displays, though it was probably too late in the day to catch them at this point.

Pleased with clinching our last gettable Puerto Rican endemic, we returned to [Hacienda Juanita](#) to regroup and briefly walk the grounds in hopes of finding Antillean Euphonia, a beautiful highland finch with distinct subspecies on Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and the Lesser Antilles. This species was heavily impacted by Hurricane Maria, and has gone from a regular sighting at Bosque Estatal de Maricao to one of the island's toughest species. However, a few recent tour groups had reported a small flock of Euphonias from the Hacienda grounds, and sure enough, after a bit of searching we got quick looks at a male and female **Antillean Euphonia** feeding on mistletoe berries, their preferred food, on the trail just below the lodge. This was certainly a lucky encounter and hopefully the population will continue to recover.

Having found our last mountain targets, and hoping to evade some dark storm clouds brewing in the mountains, we decided to spend our final afternoon on the island back down at the coast in Cabo Rojo. We stopped several times [along the road](#) out to the point to observe Lesser Yellowlegs, Black-necked Stilts, and Stilt Sandpipers wading in the salt flats. Venezuelan Troupials and American Kestrels were common in the dry forest along this road. [One of these stops](#) produced our first **Caribbean Elaenia** of the trip in the trees on the west side of the road. Once we reached the parking lot at the end, we took a [short walk through the mangroves](#) and had very close views of more Caribbean Elaenias and more looks at wading shorebirds in the [salt flats](#) at the tip. We [walked out to the lighthouse](#) and found Brown Boobies resting on a rock just offshore, but did not find Tropicbirds although they have been reported here. While debating whether to search the mangroves for some recently-reported Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds, or relax at the beach, the heavy storm clouds we had thus far avoided finally caught up to us, and we were forced to beat a hasty retreat off the cape under torrential rain.

After some grocery shopping and an early dinner at a vegetarian-friendly place in the town of Cabo Rojo, we returned to Hacienda Juanita. Once the rain let up, we walked [the \(slippery\) grounds](#) below the lodge in hopes of finding **Puerto Rican Screech-Owl**. After a little searching we heard two birds duetting in the thick jungle, but they were too far away and behind too much vegetation for us to see. On our way back we ran into Victor Feliciano, a local nature and birding guide who happened to be staying at the Hacienda. Together we drove back up to the 16.8km trailhead in Maricao to try again for Screech-Owls, but with no luck; the drenched forest and strong winds may have kept them tucked into the deeper woods. During our search, Victor was nice enough to tell us lots about Puerto Rico's natural history, and identified the lizard we had seen in the morning as *Anolis cuvieri*, a large anole and island endemic!

March 3: Maricao and Villa Borinquen

Our 3 PM return flight left plenty of time in the morning to bird, and as instructed, we arrived at [the watch tower overlooking the forest](#) before dawn in the hopes of seeing Puerto Rican Sharp-shinned Hawk. We were advised that hawks usually appear any time from dawn to around 8:30, so we positioned ourselves on top of the tower as dawn broke, serenaded by many species whose songs had become familiar over the past five days: Bananaquits, PR Bullfinches, Bananaquits, PR Lizard-Cuckoo, more Bananaquits, and Scaly-naped Pigeons. A trio of PR Screech-Owls seemed determined not to give in to the oncoming daylight. A lingering Red-tailed Hawk made us worry whether any smaller raptors would show, but after about an hour of waiting, Acadia spotted a small bird circling up from a valley to the north - it was a **Sharp-shinned!** This little, square-tailed *Accipiter*, more brightly colored than our birds on the mainland, circled on a thermal for a few seconds before it tucked and made a dramatic dive, recovered, and disappeared from view on the other side of a mountain ridge. Despite the distance and brevity of the sighting, we were nonetheless thrilled with such a rare experience.

Buzzing from our successful hawk sighting, we decided to take a slightly longer route along the south coast back to San Juan that passed through Villa Borinquen, where Plain Pigeons had again been reported in the days since we had last tried for them. We arrived in [Villa Borinquen](#) amid intermittent rain, and began scanning hillsides and exposed perches for pigeons. Several distant Scaly-naped Pigeons provided some ID challenges, but after a couple hours, we had to once again leave the town empty-handed and make our way to the airport. The rental car return gave us our last looks at the little Greater Antillean Grackles, and we had time for final beers and *tostones* before boarding our flight back home, thrilled with the species we found on this trip (Puerto Rican endemics and otherwise) and happy to have spent the week exploring this beautiful island.



White-cheeked Pintail on a farm pond in Valle de Lajas. ©Severin Uebbing

Complete Trip List - 110 species

Bold = Puerto Rican endemic species

Italic = Caribbean island endemic species

* = endemic subspecies or notable sighting

gray text = exotic or introduced species

West Indian Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna arborea*)

We were lucky to get close looks at a pair of these shy and local Caribbean ducks at Laguna Cartagena NWR in Lajas, shortly before sunrise. Another individual was later scoped from the tower accessible from the southwest entrance to the reserve. We had previously searched ponds and puddles in the agricultural fields south of Arecibo for this species, where they had recently been reported, but without success.

Blue-winged Teal (*Spatula discors*)

A large flock was at the traditional American Flamingo spot in Yeguada, Camuy Municipality, and pairs were seen at Laguna Cartagena NWR.

White-cheeked Pintail (*Anas bahamensis*)

We first ran into a small flock of these handsome ducks while looking for the whistling-ducks in the agricultural ponds south of Arecibo. They were also seen in Yeguada and the Lajas Valley.

Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*)

This mostly continental duck is scarce in PR. We had a trio of birds at Laguna Cartagena NWR.

Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

The most common duck at Laguna Cartagena NWR, our count of 40 was probably conservative.

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

Seen individually or in small groups in most wetland areas throughout the island.

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*)

Typically ubiquitous around all human settlements across the island.

Scaly-naped Pigeon (*Patagioenas squamosa*)

After surprisingly not seeing any on the first day, we found a pair at the Fajardo Inn, and continued to see them across the island for the rest of the trip, particularly at higher elevations and in forested areas. These large pigeons are very handsome and deserve prolonged looks!

White-crowned Pigeon (*Patagioenas leucocephala*)

A few individuals were seen as we kayaked through the mangroves from Las Croabas to Laguna Grande to see the bioluminescent plankton. A single bird was also seen as a flyby at Río Abajo.

Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

We encountered this introduced species regularly around human settlements and open areas, particularly in the southwest of the island.

"African Collared-Dove" (*Streptopelia* sp.)

Pale *Streptopelia* doves are widely reported as African Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*) in places where they have been introduced. However, the general consensus is that introduced populations of this bird, often alternatively called "Ringed Turtle Dove", are feral descendants of the Barbary Dove, a domesticated dove of questionable origin that is given species status by ICZN (*S. risoria*). Whether these doves are descended from Eurasian or African Collared-Doves (or both, or something else), they readily hybridize with either wild species and create headaches where they co-occur, including Puerto Rico. We saw these pale birds essentially everywhere EUCD were found, often paired or associating directly with EUCD, particularly in Camuy and Lajas municipalities, but decided not to list them as African Collared-Dove, given their dubious origin and current admixture conundrum.

Common Ground Dove (*Columbina passerina portoricensis*)



Common and cute across the island.

Ruddy Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon montana*)

A single bird at Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo was heard-only from a stand of extremely thick undergrowth, as is typical for the Quail-Doves.

White-winged Dove (*Zenaida asiatica*)

Widespread and abundant in all habitats.

Zenaida Dove (*Zenaida aurita*)

This Caribbean species was common across the island except in the drier southwest, where Mourning Doves seemed to partially replace them. Despite their superficial similarity to MODO, they were easy to identify by their larger size, shorter tail, prominent white trailing edge to the wing in flight, and generally much deeper, more reddish body.

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)

Very common in the drier southern lowlands, where they seemed to partially replace Zenaida Dove. Not as abundant but still present on the rest of the island.

Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*)

Seen in small flocks and family groups throughout the lowlands but especially in the drier, more open areas on the southern coast. An endlessly entertaining bird to watch!

Mangrove Cuckoo (*Coccyzus minor*)

Single birds seen at the Pterocarpus Forest in Humacao, BE Cambalache in Arecibo, and Laguna Cartagena NWR in Lajas.

Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo - pájaro bobo mayor (*Coccyzus vieilloti*)

One of the priority targets, we saw (and more often heard) this large and charismatic cuckoo at Río Abajo, Cambalache and Maricao. Despite their typical cuckoo behavior of sitting very still in thick vegetation, we had several close and prolonged looks at this awesome species, which more than once seemed attracted to and curious about our presence.



Puerto Rican Nightjar - guabairo (*Antrostomus noctitherus*)

This highly endangered nightjar is restricted to the dry forests in the southwest corner of the island. Two birds were heard calling at about 8:30PM off PR-334 just past the village of María Antonia east of Guánica, where the closed gate blocks the road. Based on other reports it unfortunately seems that some birders may be going off-road or taping these birds in order to get looks, but given this species' particularly fragile status we *strongly* discourage this behavior (the call is the interesting part anyway)!

Antillean Mango* (*Anthracothorax dominicus aurulentus*)

Seen at several lowland and coastal sites, including Bosque Estatal Cambalache, Faro de Rincón, and Cabo Rojo. Separating this species from other hummingbirds on the island can be lighting-dependent and annoying with what are often all-too brief flyby looks, but in males the dark belly extending up through the gorget separates it from Green Mango or Green-throated Carib, and in females the large size and decurved bill separate it from Puerto Rican Emerald. This Caribbean endemic is restricted to Puerto Rico, the US and British Virgin Islands, and Hispaniola. The Puerto Rican/Virgin Islands subspecies is split by HBW, who call it Puerto Rican Mango.

Green Mango - zumbador verde (*Anthracothorax viridis*)

Seen in several mountainous forest sites, including Río Abajo and BE Maricao. The combination of large size, gently decurved bill, and all-green underparts in all plumages are distinctive for this handsome Puerto Rican endemic.

Green-throated Carib (*Eulampis holosericeus*)

One of two mostly Lesser Antillean hummingbird species found in Puerto Rico, this species is generally restricted to the eastern coast of the island, though it is also sometimes seen in parks in the San Juan area. We found two birds in the parking lot of the Fajardo Inn, which seems to be one of the main places tour groups go to see this species. This

species' purple belly and almost complete lack of a forehead separate it from Green or Antillean Mangos. Like many other species, this hummingbird's population on PR took a major hit from Hurricane María, but appears to be on the rebound, at least in their more regular spots.

Puerto Rican Emerald - zumbadorcito de Puerto Rico (*Chlorostilbon maugaeus*)

Ostensibly the most common hummingbird on the island, this species made us sweat until our last full day, when we found a female collecting spider webs in the parking lot at the Bosque Estatal de Maricao picnic area. Small size, straight bill and (in males) a long, forked tail make its identification relatively straightforward.

Sora (*Porzana carolina*)

The reeds at Laguna Cartagena were packed with calling birds.

Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*)

Common in wetland areas around the island.

American Coot (*Fulica americana*)

Not as abundant as Common Gallinule, but still seen in most wetland areas. All birds were of the white-shielded variety, formerly considered their own species, Caribbean Coot.

Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinica*)

A couple birds moving through the water hyacinth at Laguna Cartagena NWR.

Limpkin (*Aramus guarauna elucus*)

A relatively recent colonist of Puerto Rico, presumably from Hispaniola, this species is most frequently encountered in wetlands in the southwest corner of the island, but we found a single bird (our only one of the trip) in the agricultural ponds south of Arecibo while looking for whistling-ducks.

Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*)

Common in wetlands and coastal pannes throughout the island. We had several large flocks in Camuy and Cabo Rojo municipalities.

American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*)

Year-round, exclusively coastal residents. One flyby pair on the beach in Viejo San Juan.

Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

Individual birds mixed in with sandpipers in the salt pannes at Cabo Rojo.

Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Individuals seen and heard around the island, more common wetland sites in the southwest, as expected.

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)

Small flocks seen in salt pannes in Camuy and Cabo Rojo.

Stilt Sandpiper (*Calidris himantopus*)

A large flock in the salt pannes at Cabo Rojo, mixed in with Lesser Yellowlegs.

Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*)

A couple small, flighty flocks at the Cabo Rojo salt pannes.

Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*)

A trio of birds at Laguna Cartagena NWR.

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*)

Single birds seen at several coastal sites around the island.



The salt pannes around Cabo Rojo held large shorebird flocks, with overwintering species like Lesser Yellowlegs and Stilt Sandpiper mingling with resident Black-necked Stilts. ©Alex Lin-Moore

Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

A couple of birds mixed in with the much more abundant Lessers at shorebird spots in Camuy.

Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*)

The most common shorebird we saw, we had large flocks in Camuy and Cabo Rojo.

Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*)

Puerto Rico's default larid, we saw individuals and small groups all around the coast, with the highest numbers around El Morro in Viejo San Juan as they flew in from the open ocean at sunset.

White-tailed Tropicbird* (*Phaethon lepturus catesbyi*)

Two birds seen from the cliffs at Merendero de Guajataca in Quebradillas municipality, a presumed nesting site and the most reliable spot for this species on the island. We also searched for tropicbirds from the seawatch points at Faro de Rincón and Faro de Cabo Rojo without success.

Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*)

Ubiquitous on the coast, and even sometimes in the lowlands away from the sea.

Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster leucogaster*)

We counted nearly fifty birds coming in to roost for the night on the buoys at the mouth of Bahía San Juan. Also seen in small numbers from Faro de Rincón and Cabo Rojo.

Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

Ubiquitous on the coasts.

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*)

One, perhaps two, birds seen darting into the reeds at Laguna Cartagena NWR.

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)

Seen sparingly in various lowland wetlands and coastal spots. Surprisingly uncommon compared to other herons/egrets.

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)

Abundant in all habitats except for highland forests.

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*)

Seen singly throughout the island, though more sparingly than the other white egrets.

Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*)

One or a few birds in the mangroves around Cabezas de San Juan in the northeast corner. Two more individuals in diverse wet spots across the island.

Tricolored Heron (*Egretta tricolor*)

One bird in the Lajas valley, and another along a stream in Villa Borinquen in Caguas municipality.

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)

Abundant in all areas with open space or human development.

Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)

A few in the mangroves on the east coast, and many at Laguna Cartagena NWR.

Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

Laguna Cartagena NWR and the Lajas valley.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*)

Seen sparingly in mangroves along the coast.

Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*)

Always present in freshwater wetlands in Camuy and Laguna Cartagena NWR.

Turkey Vulture (*Carthates aura*)

Seen as usual from the road. Like Mourning Dove, relatively scarce except for the southern parts of the island where they suddenly became abundant. This widespread Neotropical species only became established in Puerto Rico during the mid 20th century. It is not clear if humans actively introduced them or if forest clearing and the introduction of mammals aided the vultures in colonizing.

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Individual birds seen around wetland, coast, and mangrove areas.

Sharp-shinned Hawk* (*Accipiter striatus venator*)

We were extremely lucky to see a single bird flying up a ridge at Bosque Estatal de Maricao. This island endemic resident subspecies is critically endangered, and following hurricanes Irma and Maria, the entire population is estimated at less than 30 individuals. This tiny population is being actively managed by the Peregrine Fund - donate here:

<https://peregrinefund.org/membership>

Broad-winged Hawk* (*Buteo platypterus brunnescens*)

One adult flew in to scope us out at Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo. These days this endangered, resident endemic subspecies is only regularly seen in or above the forests of southern Arecibo municipality.

Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis jamaicensis*)

The nominate Caribbean subspecies of this familiar raptor was on-brand, seen from roadsides and in open areas across the island.

Puerto Rican Screech-Owl - mucarito de Puerto Rico (*Megascops nudipes nudipes*)

Surprisingly common and easy for an owl, we first heard a single bird off PR-334 (the nightjar spot), and had several birds singing simultaneously around Maricao and the grounds of Hacienda Juanita, but frustratingly we never got eyes on this island endemic. *M. n. newtoni* of the Virgin Islands is considered extinct and only the nominate subspecies on mainland PR survives.



A Puerto Rican Tody peeks out from behind the leaves at Bosque Estatal de Cambalache. ©Alex Lin-Moore

Puerto Rican Tody - San Pedrito (*Todus mexicanus*)

This impossibly charming little sprite was common in almost all forested areas from the coast to the highlands. We saw multiple individuals at Humacao, Río Abajo, Cambalache and Maricao State Forests. Often seen in pairs, the easiest way to find them is by listening for their short buzzy chirps at or slightly above eye-level along trail edges.

Belted Kingfisher (*Megasceryle alcyon*)

A couple of individual birds along the northeast coast.

Puerto Rican Woodpecker - carpintero de Puerto Rico (*Melanerpes portoricensis*)

Common and conspicuous in any area with large trees, from protected forests to town parks, frequent calls often announce their presence. Identification of this sleek island endemic is made easier by the fact that no other woodpeckers occur on Puerto Rico.

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius caribaeus*)

Common in lowlands and open areas. This mostly Lesser Antillean subspecies has much spottier breasts than continental North American kestrels, and unlike continental birds, males often have bold black bands on the underside of the tail.

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)

Single birds in Mayagüez and at Laguna Cartagena.

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)

A pair were harassing shorebirds in Camuy, and we had another in the Lajas valley.

Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*)

The more urban of the introduced parakeets we saw, small groups were seen in Viejo San Juan and around Camuy.

White-winged Parakeet (*Brotogeris versicolurus*)

Small groups in Fajardo and Bosque Estatal de Cambalache.

Caribbean Elaenia (*Elaenia martinica riisii*)

This drab but nonetheless charming little flycatcher was common and conspicuous in the mangroves and thorny scrub woods around the tip of Cabo Rojo. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this species is its range: common on Puerto Rico and throughout the Lesser and Dutch Antilles, and on the distant Cayman Islands, San Andrés, and the east coast of the Yucatán Peninsula to the west, it is completely absent from the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Hispaniola, and Jamaica) and the Bahamas in between. The eastern subspecies group is also referred to as Chinchorro Elaenia.

Lesser Antillean Pewee* (*Contopus latirostris blancoi*)

Mainly found on the western half of the island, we had to wait until our last full day to get this endearing pewee: a single bird feeding right over our heads on the trail at km 16.8 in Bosque Estatal de Maricao. The endemic Puerto Rican subspecies, which is much warmer caramel-brown than the Lesser Antillean subspecies (the closest of which occur nearly 500km and several islands away on Guadeloupe), is a strong candidate for elevation to species status.

Puerto Rican Flycatcher - juí de Puerto Rico (*Myiarchus antillarum*)

Common throughout lowland woods, we saw this species well at Humacao, Cambalache, Laguna Cartagena and Cabo Rojo. Often first noted by its call. This pretty generic *Myiarchus* species gets a special note for being the first island endemic we encountered.



Our first of many island endemics, this Puerto Rican Flycatcher gave excellent looks while dustbathing only a few feet in front of us at Reserva Natural de Humacao. ©Alex Lin-Moore

Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*)

One of the most abundant birds on the island - almost guaranteed to be sitting on any available snag, wire, or pole in any given habitat or elevation.

Loggerhead Kingbird* (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus taylori*)

Less common than Gray but still widespread on the island, we saw this impressive kingbird singly or in small groups in Villa Borinquen, Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo, and around Laguna Cartagena. Treatment of the various island populations, including the Puerto Rican endemic subspecies, is unclear. Certain sources recommend lumping into a monotypic species based on the claim that separation is rooted only in distribution, while others advocate for species-status elevation due to subtle differences in plumage, biometrics and vocalizations (per HBW).

Puerto Rican Vireo - bienteveo (*Vireo latimeri*)

Often heard, and less often seen at Río Abajo, Cambalache and Maricao State Forests. A relatively unremarkable-looking vireo, this island endemic gets bonus points for its Pokemon-style colloquial name, an accurate mnemonic for its sweet, whistled song.

Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo altiloquus*)

Seen and heard in small numbers in most protected upper- and mid-elevation forests: Río Abajo, Cambalache and Maricao. Also seen once in the mangroves at Cabezas de San Juan.

Caribbean Martin (*Progne dominicensis*)

Seen singly or in small groups at various sites in lowlands, particularly along the coast. Several birds seemed to be staging over the Castillo San Felipe del Morro in Viejo San Juan.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

One was picked out from a Cave Swallow flock while driving on the highway.

Cave Swallow* (*Petrochelidon fulva puertoricensis*)

The default swallow for PR, these were frequently seen when crossing highway bridges or other suitable nest sites in

lowlands. The subtle plumage differences that define this resident, endemic subspecies from the other resident Caribbean subspecies were not particularly visible while driving past at >50 mph.

Pearly-eyed Thrasher (*Margarops fuscatus*)

Common and conspicuous in woody areas at all elevations, particularly around small clearings at or near buildings or settlements. These charismatic birds are not shy, and were seen several times chasing one another or other species - destruction of nests by Pearly-eyed Thrashers is a significant problem for endemic Sharp-shinned Hawk recovery efforts. Pish near these birds at your own risk.



Attempts to attract warblers at the observation tower in the Pterocarpus Forest did not amuse this Pearly-eyed Thrasher, who was not afraid to make its displeasure known. ©Alex Lin-Moore

Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos orpheus*)

Seen in small numbers around the island, more common in open areas.

Red-legged Thrush (*Turdus plumbeus ardosiaceus*)

This striking thrush was seen on our first morning in Viejo San Juan, and commonly seen thereafter in most forested areas around the island, particularly in Río Abajo and Maricao State Forests. This subspecies, restricted to Hispaniola and Puerto Rico (and granted species status as Eastern Red-legged Thrush by the ever-enthusiastic HBW) primarily differs from other populations by having a slaty gray belly and a boldly streaked (rather than solid black) throat, as well as other more subtle differences in plumage, bare part color, and size.

Orange-cheeked Waxbill (*Estrilda melpoda*)

Flocks of these tiny estrildid finches were common at Laguna Cartagena NWR and nearby grassy or reedy areas. These common cage birds were first sighted in Puerto Rico in the late 19th century, and are abundant and widespread enough on the island to be confident of their established status.

Bronze Mannikin (*Spermestes cucullata*)

We ran into small groups of this sub-saharan African estrildid at Villa Borinquen in Caguas and Bosque Estatal de Cambalache in Arecibo. This species is believed to have arrived in Puerto Rico as early as the sixteenth century, carried over on Spanish slave ships.

Scaly-breasted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*)

A few individuals were seen around La Parguera while looking for the Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)

As always, seen around all major human settlements.

Antillean Euphonia* (*Euphonia musica sclateri*)

We were lucky to spot a male and female stopping briefly at a mistletoe bush (their primary food source) on the

Hacienda Juanita grounds. These beautiful finches were hit very hard by Hurricane Maria and have disappeared from much of their highland forest range to become one of Puerto Rico's more difficult species. Hopefully their populations will recover, as other species are already starting to show, but currently they remain elusive and difficult to find - the Hacienda grounds may indeed be the most reliable spot on the island for the time being. Listening for their calls in highland forests with lots of mistletoe or other epiphytes is probably the best way to find one, short of any recent tips or reports.



Grasshopper Sparrow* (*Ammodramus savannarum boriquensis*)

One cooperative bird in the grassy roadside in the Lajas Valley. The agricultural lowlands around Barceloneta on the central North coast are also reliable for this island endemic subspecies, which differs from continental Grasshopper Sparrows in size and color of the central crown stripe.

Puerto Rican Tanager - llorosa (*Nesospingus speculiferus*)

The sole member of Puerto Rico's only endemic family, this species was easy to find on the trails at BE Maricao and nearby forests. We also had a surprise sighting of one bird in the lowlands around Humacao. Much more charming in person than they appear in photographs or field guides.

Puerto Rican Spindalis - reina mora (*Spindalis portoricensis*)

Widespread but not particularly numerous across habitats and altitudes. Seen at Humacao, Río Abajo, Cambalache and Maricao, as well as a lone male uncharacteristically on a telephone wire the outskirts of La Parguera. This species' song, a pair of extremely high-pitched *seets*, is a good way to find them, as we often saw males in the canopy. They had an annoying habit of darting back and forth between extremely dense patches of leaves.

Puerto Rican Oriole - calandria de Puerto Rico (*Icterus portoricensis*)

This striking, sexually monomorphic endemic oriole was seen sparingly in montane forests, first at Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo, and then around Maricao and the Hacienda Juanita grounds. Their warbling, musical song is a good way to find them, but they also had a good habit of perching conveniently in the open, on bare snags or the ribs of palm fronds.

Venezuelan Troupial (*Icterus icterus*)

This impressive, introduced oriole is most common on the western half of Puerto Rico, especially in the drier southwest corner. We saw several at Laguna Cartagena, around the town of La Parguera, and on the road to the tip of Cabo Rojo.



Yellow-shouldered Blackbird - mariquita (*Agelaius xanthomus xanthomus*)

A critically endangered endemic currently restricted to the mangrove forests in the far southwest corner of Puerto Rico and the xeric forests of Isla de Mona off the western coast (the latter is considered a separate subspecies, *A. x. monensis*). We struggled quite a bit to find these birds in the town of La Parguera, typically the most reliable place to see them. We finally saw a small flock flying past at the trailhead at the intersection of Camino Puerto Viejo x Camino Real on the west side of town (17°58'33.9"N 67°03'38.8"W). The hardware store famous for attracting and feeding these blackbirds appears to no longer do so; the cashier only told me that "they fly past sometimes" when I asked about where to see *mariquitas*. This endemic species has suffered greatly from nest parasitism by Shiny Cowbirds since the latter arrived in Puerto Rico during the 1950s, part of its greater expansion northwards from South America. The remaining population of Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds on Puerto Rico is heavily monitored and, though small, appears to be stable for the time being.

Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*)

Individual birds seen at various sites and habitats across the island, mostly as flyovers. Shiny Cowbird is thought to have colonized Puerto Rico as recently as the 1950s, though it did so only with indirect human assistance via landscape clearing, as part of its huge range expansion from South America northward through the Caribbean to the southernmost United States.

Greater Antillean Grackle (*Quiscalus niger brachypterus*)

Like grackles everywhere, ubiquitous and conspicuous around human settlements. They were much smaller and shorter-tailed than we expected.

Louisiana Waterthrush (*Parkesia motacilla*)

We found one of this rare winter resident at the Pterocarpus forest in Humacao.

Northern Waterthrush (*Parkesia noveboracensis*)

A common winter resident, we had several in the mangroves outside La Parguera while looking for the Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds.

Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*)

Two in the mangroves outside La Parguera, part of a mixed warbler flock.

Elfin-woods Warbler - reinita de bosque enano (*Setophaga angelae*)

One of Puerto Rico's most prized endemics, this recently-discovered and extremely range-restricted warbler was actually quite easy to find once we reached their habitat: high-elevation, stunted (you could even say elfin!) forest. An adult-juvenile pair were literally the first birds we saw at the head of the trail at km 16.8 in Bosque Estatal de Maricao, and several additional birds were seen and heard both on this trail and at the Maricao headquarters and picnic area throughout the morning. Good looks were difficult, given the dense foliage of the montane forests and these birds' typically warblery twitchiness. Their song, a dry, insect-like trill, was helpful to pin them down, but unlike Adelaide's, for us these warblers were more often seen than heard.

Hooded Warbler (*Setophaga citrina*)

One seen in the Pterocarpus forest in Humacao.

American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*)

A few overwintering birds in forested areas around the island.

Northern Parula (*Setophaga americana*)

By far the most common overwintering Nearctic warbler, seen daily in wooded habitats at all elevations.

"Golden" Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia bartholemica*)

Several seen and heard in mangrove forests outside La Parguera and en route to the tip of Cabo Rojo.

Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Setophaga caerulea*)

One female-type mixed in with a group of Elfin-woods Warblers at Bosque Estatal de Maricao.

Prairie Warbler (*Setophaga discolor*)

A few seen in lowland woods in Humacao and Lajas municipalities.

Adelaide's Warbler - reinita mariposera (*Setophaga adelaidae*)

Common in lowlands, particularly in the western half of the island, this endemic was unexpectedly difficult to see, and it took us an entire extra day to get eyes on one after first hearing numerous birds at Bosque Estatal de Cambalache. We got good looks at Laguna Cartagena NWR, and saw and heard additional birds at several coastal sites, including La Parguera, where one bird was associating with a mixed flock of overwintering Nearctic warblers.

Bananaquit* (*Coereba flaveola portoricensis*)

The quintessential Caribbean bird did not disappoint, and was unmissable at virtually every location we birded, from the center of Viejo San Juan to the most remote forested areas in Maricao. More than once we heard their buzzy song from the car while driving on the highway. Puerto Rico's endemic subspecies is visually distinct, with a black cheek, slaty gray throat, and extensive yellow on the belly.

Yellow-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris olivaceus bryanti*)

Common in the drier southwest of the island in open grasslands and field edges. One also seen in the agricultural areas around Arecibo.

Puerto Rican Bullfinch - comeñame de Puerto Rico (*Melopyrrha portoricensis*)

This large, dapper tanager was frequently seen, and even more frequently heard in understories of mid- to high-elevation forests across the island. Particularly common at Río Abajo and Cambalache State Forests, the first part of their song is highly reminiscent of Northern Cardinal.

Black-faced Grassquit (*Melanospiza bicolor omissus*)

Common in various habitats around the island, from wet lowland grasslands to montane forests.

Misses: endemics, Caribbean specialties, and other targets

This incomplete list includes particular species that have been regularly recorded in Puerto Rico in the general season that we were visiting, but that we either searched for unsuccessfully or decided not to pursue.

Masked Duck (*Nomonyx dominicus*)

We searched hard for this secretive species in the water hyacinth and along the edges of Laguna Cartagena, and in several ponds and puddles in the Lajas valley, but to no avail. Masked Duck is scarce in the southwest lowlands, and irregular at other wetland sites, including the coast north of Mayagüez and the lowlands north of Barceloneta and Sabana Hoyos.

Antillean Crested Hummingbird (*Orthorhynchus cristatus*)

The other predominantly Lesser Antillean hummingbird with a presence in eastern half of mainland Puerto Rico, along with Green-throated Carib. According to several people we talked to, ACHU (this is the pinnacle of banding code) were almost completely wiped out on PR by Hurricane Maria, which hit hardest on the eastern coast. Formerly reliable at several spots between Las Cabezas de San Juan and Humacao, this species is currently very scarce, but is starting to show hints of making a comeback. We searched in vain for this small, unique hummingbird at the entrance to the Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve and twice at the Pterocarpus Forest in the Las Palmas del Mar community, where they had been reported prior to our arrival (and most frustratingly after our departure).

*To visit the Pterocarpus forest, drive to the main Las Palmas Del Mar entrance directly off PR-906, and tell the guard at the gate that you want to go to the Bosque Pterocarpus. They will give you a pass to enter the community, and you can drive to and walk around the forest. The ACHU were reported on the edge of the forest feeding on some planted flowering bushes, but the forest itself has a small observation tower and a raised boardwalk through some interesting, dense lowland jungle - presumably what covered this area before it was turned into a manicured housing development.

Plain Pigeon (*Patagioenas inornata*)

Historically widespread in the Puerto Rican highlands, Plain Pigeon was thought extirpated by the early twentieth century, but a few fragmented populations were refound in the 1960s in the mountains around Cidra and Caguas departments. We twice tried for these large but elusive pigeons along the main road of Villa Borinquen south of Caguas, their most reliable site in the past few years. Despite positive reports from this spot in between our attempts, we struck out both times. This part of the island is full of snags for these monotone pigeons to perch, and it seems luck was just not with us during our attempts and the flock was elsewhere, or perhaps hidden in plain sight below the ridges of the many hills in this area.

Bridled Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon mystacea*)

An enigmatic and typically secretive Quail-Dove of the Lesser Antilles. In Puerto Rico, Bridled Quail-Dove is only regularly recorded from Isla Vieques off the east coast of the main island. We decided not to take the full-day trip to this island in search of this difficult species, though perhaps we could have, as Antillean Crested Hummingbird is also more common on Vieques than the main island. Historically this species was an extremely scarce resident in several spots in the limestone karst hills in the north-central part of the island, but no recent reports support their continued presence.

Yellow-breasted Crake (*Porzana flaviventer*)

Very scarce and, as usual for a crake, secretive resident in major wetlands around the island, this species' detection in Puerto Rico is further complicated by the fact that some of its calls have a passing similarity to those of the ubiquitous common coquí (*Eleutherodactylus coqui*). We listened hard for this species around dawn in the wetlands around RN Humacao and Laguna Cartagena NWR, but could not pick out a convincing call among the cacophony of singing frogs.

Red-footed Booby (*Sula sula*)

Red-footed Booby is occasionally reported among flocks of Brown Booby when seawatching off Faro de Rincón, the westernmost point of the main island. We searched through several small, distant flocks of boobies at this spot, but weren't able to turn any into this smaller, scarcer species.

Puerto Rican Parrot (*Amazona vittata*)

The only Puerto Rican endemic that we missed. Following several reports of flyover sightings at Bosque Estatal de Río Abajo, which is also the primary site of this species's captive breeding program, we decided to try our luck. These trip reports from 2018 and 2019 are available here:

https://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=2868

https://www.cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=HUNTER_PuertoRico_12_2019.pdf

Unfortunately entry to the park was closed right at the entrance, even to foot traffic, and we were only able to bird the entry road, which did not produce any perched or flyover parrots. Perhaps a longer stay, even in this area at the edge of the reserve could produce a sighting, but our busy birding schedule did not allow too long of a stay. Puerto Rican Parrots, abundant during the colonial period, crashed in population during the 20th century, due to large-scale habitat destruction: approximately 90% of the island was deforested by the 1950s. From an all-time low of 13 individuals in 1973, the population has rebounded to over 600 birds, the vast majority of which are housed for captive breeding programs. Small flocks have been reintroduced at several large, protected forests including Maricao and El Yunque, but following the destruction of Hurricane Maria in 2017, which particularly devastated El Yunque and almost certainly wiped out its reintroduced parrot flock, most release efforts have been focused in Río Abajo. As far as we know, no wild nesting has been confirmed for this species, which would mean even free-flying reintroduced birds are still not countable by ABA rules - but (for now at least) they are not in the ABA area!