

CUBA

31 MARCH – 14 APRIL 2010

TOUR REPORT

LEADER: DEREK SCOTT

Once again the Birdquest excursion around the intriguing island of Cuba was a great success, thanks to the many great birds, fine weather and excellent help from the friendly locals, not least our 'minder' Ramon and a succession of drivers. Although our tour was a few days later than usual, the onset of the rainy season was even later, and the only rain we encountered was on our last two days in the Zapata Peninsula when afternoon thunderstorms produced some very heavy showers. Our only real problem was with the buses. Our first was too big so we changed it on Day 2, and the air-conditioning soon packed up on our second. Three attempts to fix it failed, but our ground agents were quick to provide us with replacement buses, and by the end of the tour we had travelled in six different buses with six different drivers! The birding was, as always, superb, and we recorded a total of 171 species, including all the endemics except Zapata Rail (rarely seen even by local birders living in Zapata Swamp) and the extremely rare Cuban Kite, which hovers on the edge of extinction. At the same time, we managed to find all of the 52 Caribbean specialities that are realistically possible on this tour. We had two good sightings of Gundlach's Hawk; the three important quail-doves, Key West, Grey-headed and Blue-headed, were all seen well without too much of a struggle, and we had superb views of several Bee Hummingbirds at Zapata. Some perseverance was required for Zapata Wren and Cuban Grassquit, but both eventually showed well, while Zapata Sparrows gave great views on three occasions. Other highlights included some very tame West Indian Whistling-Ducks in the grounds of our hotel on Cayo Coco, no less than five Bare-legged Owls at their nest-sites, wonderful views of dive-bombing Antillean Nighthawks, superb daytime views of a roosting Cuban Nightjar, and a total of 19 species of parulid warbler.

Our Cuban Airlines flight from London did not get into Havana until almost midnight, but progress through the airport was unusually quick and smooth, and we arrived at our hotel in time for a few hours sleep. Our birding began at sunrise the next morning with a short stroll along the seashore east of the old city, and here, in a couple of hours, we found a nice assortment of waders including a dozen Grey Plovers, a dozen Semipalmated Plovers, three Killdeers, a Spotted Sandpiper, 25 Ruddy Turnstones, 15 Sanderling, two Semipalmated Sandpipers, three Western Sandpipers and about 150 Least Sandpipers. Other birds included a few Brown Pelicans, a Great Blue Heron, two Little Blue Herons, a Green Heron, lots of Laughing Gulls, an immature American Herring Gull, a Caspian Tern,

about 12 Royal Terns and 15 Sandwich Terns. On the way back to the hotel, we stopped briefly to admire the splendid view of Old Havana from the fort at the entrance to the harbour, and here we found our first Antillean Palm Swifts, Cuban Martins, Cave Swallows and Cuban Blackbirds. Then, after a hearty breakfast, we headed off towards our first destination, Soroa, in the western hills. Short stops at two large dams en route gave us an opportunity to familiarise ourselves with some of the commoner open-country birds, and produced several Pied-billed Grebes, an Anhinga, six Ring-necked Ducks, five Lesser Scaups, 150 Ruddy Ducks, 100 American Coots, and our first Grey Kingbirds, Palm Warblers, Common Yellowthroats and Eastern Meadowlarks. Later, as we were approaching Soroa, we spotted a Northern Harrier from the bus. After checking in briefly at our very pleasant hotel, we moved down to a riverside café for a short stroll before lunch and here, amongst the many Greater Antillean Grackles and noisy West Indian Woodpeckers, we found our first of many colourful Cuban Trogons, along with our first Loggerhead Kingbirds, Red-legged Thrushes and Black-whiskered Vireos. Back in the extensive grounds of our hotel, we came across our first White-crowned Pigeons, Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds and Greater Antillean Orioles. A short hike up into the forest that afternoon was very productive, and we were soon enjoying our first views of several of Cuba's other commoner endemic forest birds: a Great Lizard-Cuckoo, three amazing little Cuban Todys, four Cuban Green Woodpeckers, a pair of Cuban Vireos, and half a dozen inquisitive Yellow-headed Warblers. Other common woodland birds that we were to see on many more occasions included Cuban Emerald, Crescent-eyed Pewee, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Western Stripe-headed Tanager and Yellow-faced Grassquit. Migrant warblers were still much in evidence and included several Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green Warblers, a Black-and-white Warbler, five American Redstarts and a couple of Ovenbirds. A Northern Flicker of the endemic form *chrysocaulosus* also put in a brief appearance. Scaly-naped Pigeons were calling all around us, but our only views were of very distant birds through the scope.

Our main destination the next day was La Güira National Park in an area of forested limestone hills about 60 km west of Soroa. En route, we stopped briefly at a small pond near the autopista, but this was almost dry and the only birds around were a few egrets. We stopped again to check the river at San Diego de los Baños and here we found a Louisiana Waterthrush and another Spotted Sandpiper. The road up through the national park was in an atrocious condition, but our driver Felix was not deterred and we soon arrived at the top of the pass amongst the pines. It was very disturbing to see that logging was in progress, but a short walk uphill brought us into undisturbed habitat and here our two main targets – the endemic Cuban Solitaire and localized Olive-capped Warbler – both proved easy, responding well to playback and giving excellent views. In the same area, we found our first Zenaida Doves and Cuban Bullfinches, along with several Broad-winged Hawks and a Yellow-throated Warbler. Well satisfied, we made a short excursion into the lowlands to look for Cuban Grassquits at a livestock farm where they regularly come to drink. There were lots of Yellow-faced Grassquits about, and soon after we arrived, a pair of Cuban Grassquits put in a brief appearance, but not everyone saw them and we had to wait another half hour before a lone male appeared. This stayed for only a few seconds before being chased off by a very aggressive male Yellow-faced Grassquit. Hoping for better views, we continued our vigil and half an hour later another male arrived and very obligingly stayed long enough for all of us to get good views through the scopes. Other birds visiting the livestock pens included half a dozen Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds and five Shiny Cowbirds, while a Red-tailed Hawk passed by overhead. We returned to La Güira for our picnic lunch and a short walk in the forest, but by now it was very hot and there was little to be seen other than a few warblers. On the way back to Soroa, we made a short detour to an area of rice-fields near Los Palacios where we hoped to find King Rail, but the rice-fields had been abandoned and there was little wetland habitat remaining. We heard two King Rails calling briefly in response to playback, but the birds gave only a couple of glimpses of themselves and were clearly not in

territorial mode. When flooded, these rice-fields often hold an assortment of waders, but the only other waterbirds about today were a Green Heron, a very sneaky Limpkin and a pair of Killdeers.

We were up early the next morning to try for owls in the grounds of the hotel. The main target was Stygian Owl, but although we heard one calling in the distance, it showed no interest in playback. In desperation, we tried the Cuban Pygmy-Owl recording instead, and this met with instant success, bringing in our first of many of these delightful little owls. After breakfast, we headed off for another walk in the forest and this again proved to be very rewarding. The highlight was an immature Gundlach's Hawk which called back in response to playback and passed by within metres of us, but we also had great scope views of several Scaly-naped Pigeons and found a nice male Summer Tanager. A Ruddy Quail-Dove flew across the trail in front of us but sadly was seen only by the leader! Driving back to Havana in the afternoon, we stopped off at all three dams by the autopista, and found eight Snail Kites at the first and at least one Forster's Tern, four Double-crested Cormorants and a Black-crowned Night-Heron at the third. Back in Havana, we called in at the Plaza de la Revolucion for a bit of sight-seeing, but the tower had already shut down for the day (it closes early on Saturdays!), so after a quick walk round, we continued on to our hotel for dinner and an early night.

A very early start was required the next morning so that we could get to Hato de Jicarita on the northern edge of Zapata Swamp by sunrise. The sun was just rising when we arrived and there was little about other than large numbers of Tree Swallows and Cave Swallows passing overhead. Our main target here was the Zapata Wren, but although we persevered for some time, we did not even hear one. However, two pairs of Red-shouldered Blackbirds appeared in the trees along the track and responded well to playback, and soon after we found a very obliging pair of Zapata Sparrows of the scarce nominate race. A female Indigo Bunting put in a brief appearance, and at the pool at the end of the track we found another two Louisiana Waterthrushes. Two hours were all we could afford here as we had a long drive ahead of us to Camagüey, in east-central Cuba. We broke the journey at a resort hotel on the outskirts of Santa Clara and here, in the extensive grounds, we found nesting Antillean Palm Swifts and a nice assortment of North American migrants including our first Cape May Warblers and some exceptionally tame Grey Catbirds and Ovenbirds. Unfortunately, however, there was no sign of the Stygian Owl that has roosted in the garden of the hotel in the past.

From Camagüey, it was only a short drive to the Sierra de Najasa – a region that is home to two of Cuba's rarest endemic birds, the Giant Kingbird and Cuban Palm Crow. We headed straight there early the next morning and shortly after sunrise made our first stop to check out a small group of crows feeding on the road. These turned out to be Cuban Palm Crows, and as we were watching them, two Plain Pigeons flew in and gave good views from exposed perches, a small flock of Cuban Parakeets flew over, and a noisy pair of Cuban Crows appeared in the trees by the road. We were off to an excellent start, and we had yet to meet up with our local guide Pedro Regalado, a Cuban ornithologist who has been studying the Giant Kingbird for some years. As soon as we had picked up Pedro, we set off immediately in search of the kingbirds. Pedro knew of a nesting pair, and within a few minutes we were enjoying great views of this very rare bird, along with more Plain Pigeons and Cuban Parakeets. We then moved to a farm belonging to a friend of Pedro, and here we had great views of two pairs of Rose-throated Parrots near their nests, a pair of Fernandina's Flickers being chased about by West Indian Woodpeckers, a pair of Cuban Pygmy-Owls at their nest, and another pair of Cuban Palm Crows. This was excellent birding, but more was yet to come as Pedro took us to yet another site where a Bare-legged Owl peered out at us from its nest-hole in a dead palm. By now we had cleaned up on the local specialities and as it was still only late morning, we decided to visit a small freshwater lake a few kilometres away in the hope of finding some interesting waterbirds. Unfortunately, there were lots of fishermen about and few birds of note other than several Purple

Gallinules, two Limpkins, a dozen Northern Jacanas and 10 Black-necked Stilts. Driving back towards Pedro's house, we stopped for a picnic lunch under some tall trees and here a session of 'pishing' attracted a remarkable assemblage of warblers including Northern Parula, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Yellow-throated, Prairie and Black-and-white, as well as a male Baltimore Oriole. Pedro then very kindly invited us back to his house to meet his wife and relax for a while over some excellent Cuban coffee. Well pleased with our morning's work and eager to get the air-conditioning on the bus fixed, we returned to Camagüey in mid-afternoon and had time for a bit of sight-seeing, train-spotting and car-spotting in town.

Leaving Camagüey the next morning, we headed north to the Sierra de Cubitas, where two short stops in the forest produced our first pair of endemic Oriente Warblers, another Broad-winged Hawk, several more Scaly-naped Pigeons, another pair of Cuban Vireos and a selection of migrant warblers. The drive down through the lowlands to the north coast was uninteresting bird-wise, and there was little of note at the freshwater lake near Moron other than a distant Osprey and a distant Greater Yellowlegs. However, we saw our first large flocks of American Flamingos off the causeway out to Cayo Coco along with good numbers of Double-crested Cormorants and about 30 Red-breasted Mergansers, and found our first Yellow Warblers of the resident race 'Golden Warbler' in a small patch of mangroves near the north end of the causeway. We finally arrived at our fancy, all-inclusive resort on Cayo Coco in time for lunch. Birding was quickly resumed after lunch with the discovery of a group eight West Indian Whistling Ducks resting on a mud-bank beneath one of the chalets. These were remarkably tame, as was a very noisy and aggressive Cuban Black-Hawk in the mangroves just outside our rooms. It was difficult to drag ourselves away, but we still had much to do. The drive along Cayo Coco to Cayo Guillermo produced three Northern Crested-Caracaras and a Merlin, and there were lots of waterbirds about as we approached Cayo Guillermo, but our main target, the Bahama Mockingbird, was to be found in the dense coastal scrub near the west end of the island. It was quite breezy and there were lots of Northern Mockingbirds about to distract us, but eventually a Bahama Mockingbird popped up on top of a bush close to the road and gave great views. Well pleased, we returned to the saline lagoons near the east end of the island and here we enjoyed great views of a wide assortment of waterbirds including 15 Tricoloured Herons, five Reddish Egrets, some very close American Flamingos, 15 Blue-winged Teal, eight Northern Shovelers, a Sora, 60 Black-necked Stilts, two Lesser Yellowlegs, two Willets, 16 Red Knots, six Stilt Sandpipers and 30 Short-billed Dowitchers. Across the road, a pair of Clapper Rails responded extremely well to playback, walking out to the edge of the mangroves, while a Northern Waterthrush crept about in the mangroves almost at our feet.

The next morning, we made an early start and headed east towards Cayo Paredon Grande. Our first stop was at a rickety old bridge over one of the main channels between the keys, where we found a party of eight Magnificent Frigatebirds, several Great Blue Herons of the uncommon white phase ('Great White Heron') and intermediate phase ('Würdemann's Heron'), a dozen White Ibises, five Hudsonian Whimbrels, an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull, and our first of several Belted Kingfishers. Our main targets on Cayo Paredon Grande were the very local Thick-billed Vireo and the endemic Cuban Gnatcatcher. The vireo soon put in an appearance in response to playback and showed extremely well at ranges down to a few feet, but the gnatcatcher proved to be much more elusive than usual. As we shuffled back and forth along the track, we found several more Thick-billed Vireos and had great views of another Bahama Mockingbird, a pair of Oriente Warblers and a Cuban Bullfinch, but despair had already begun to set in before we eventually found a pair of pretty little Cuban Gnatcatchers. Thankfully the birds behaved reasonably well and then, as so often happens, just as we were leaving another one popped up and gave fantastic views. Much relieved, we headed out to the lighthouse to look for waders and here, along with a few Grey Plovers, Semipalmated Plovers and Willets, we found a surprise American Oystercatcher – a very scarce and local bird in

Cuba and a 'write-in' for our tour. After a leisurely lunch back at the hotel, we went for a short walk through the forest near Cueva del Jabali to a tiny pool where, to our surprise, there was an immature Roseate Spoonbill. Our aim in coming here was to watch birds visiting the pool to drink, and we were not disappointed. Over the next hour we witnessed a procession of birds coming down to drink. The highlights were a Key West Quail-Dove and a male and a female Painted Bunting, but we also had great views of several Zenaida Doves, at least a dozen Grey Catbirds, two Northern Waterthrushes, and several Oriente Warblers, Western Stripe-headed Tanagers and Cuban Bullfinches. As things began to quieten down, we moved to another patch of forest where after a short search we found a Zapata Sparrow of the local race *varonai*.

We had one last look around the grounds of our hotel the next morning but found nothing new, and then said goodbye to our luxurious resort in the keys, and set off back across the causeway towards the mainland. There were more birds about today, including a huge feeding flock of Double-crested Cormorants and about 1,000 American Flamingos, but these were very far off so we did not dally. It was another long drive to Playa Larga in the Zapata Peninsula, but we made good time and as a result were able to call in again at Los Caneyes Hotel to see if the Stygian Owl was back. Unfortunately it wasn't, but a short walk in the grounds of the hotel produced good views of an adult Gundlach's Hawk soaring overhead, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a male Blue Grosbeak (a rare migrant in Cuba) and a party of four Indigo Buntings. By mid-afternoon we had entered Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, and soon after we came across a wet marsh by the roadside where we found a Sora Rail, several Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and a Solitary Sandpiper. It was then only a short drive to our hotel at the head of the Bay of Pigs, and we ended the day with drinks at the open-air bar overlooking the bay.

We now had four full days in the Zapata Peninsula with Angel Martinez Garcia as our local guide. As usual, Angel had a number of treats in store for us, not least of which was Bee Hummingbird – a very difficult bird to find without local knowledge and the main priority on our first morning in the Zapata Peninsula. Our departure was delayed for 20 minutes by the discovery of an Antillean Nighthawk roosting in a tree within a few yards of our rooms, but it was only a short drive to Los Ondones and it was still relatively cool as we headed off into the forest in search of hummingbirds and quail-doves. The Bee Hummingbird turned out to be easy: we had superb views of a tiny little male singing from the top of a dead tree and found three other birds (two males and a female) in the same area. We came across a female Ruddy Quail-Dove on the trail ahead of us, but this soon flew off, and the only other quail-dove we encountered was a Key West calling way off in the distance. However, there were lots of other birds about including a Broad-winged Hawk (which kept taking over the Bee Hummingbird's perch), a Zenaida Dove, two Great Lizard-Cuckoos, two Cuban Pygmy-Owls, another Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, our first two Magnolia Warblers, an assortment of other warblers, and of course the usual Cuban Trogons and Cuban Todys which we had now come to expect everywhere. After lunch and a short siesta back at the hotel, we tried a patch of forest near Soplillar, and here we found our first two Grey-headed Quail-Doves, although the views were not great. Angel took us to a dead tree with a Bare-legged Owl which peered at us out of its hole, and we came across another two Cuban Pygmy-Owls and another Magnolia Warbler, but a Worm-eating Warbler found by Angel was seen by only one of us before it moved off.

On our second day in the Zapata Peninsula, we focused our attention on Bermejas Faunal Refuge, one of the best patches of forest in the peninsula and an excellent locality for quail-doves. The local ranger Orlando accompanied us on both our morning and afternoon visits, and led us through the maze of trails to a succession of great birds. Our main target was Blue-headed Quail-Dove and we began the day watching quietly near a favourite drinking pool. A Zenaida Dove and an Ovenbird foraged on the track, a couple of Grey-headed Quail Doves appeared briefly near the pool, and then

scarcely an hour after we had arrived, a pair of beautiful Blue-headed Quail-Doves walked out onto the track and gave prolonged views. Well pleased, we moved to an area of more open forest and here we heard the distinctive cooing of a Key West Quail Dove. Somewhat to our surprise, the bird reacted instantly to playback, flying in to land on an exposed branch only yards away and giving extraordinary views for several minutes. Then we were off to the other end of the reserve to look for a Cuban Nightjar at its daytime roost. The nightjar (a male) was on its usual perch, eight feet up in a tree alongside the track, and gave staggering views from close range. On the way out to the nightjar, we had passed the nest-site of a pair of Bare-legged Owls, but the owls were very flighty, and so in the afternoon, Orlando took us to another nest-site, and this time the owl behaved beautifully, coming almost completely out of its hole and showing its bare legs. We ended the afternoon waiting by some flowering trees near the reserve entrance in the hope of seeing a Bee Hummingbird at close range. The Bee Hummingbird failed to show, but we had exceptional views of several Cuban Emeralds and a male Fernandina's Flicker foraging on the ground. After dinner that evening, Angel took us on a short excursion to the outskirts of Playa Larga, and here we finally caught up with Stygian Owl – a very responsive bird that posed in full view on the top of tree.

The only remaining endemic that we were now likely to see was the Zapata Wren. An early start enabled us to get to an area of woodland on the edge of the swamp before sunrise and here, just as it was beginning to get light, we had superb views of several very responsive Cuban Nightjars. It was then only a short drive to the Zapata Wren locality at La Turba. Some patience was required, but after about half an hour, we managed to coax a wren into the trees alongside the track and here, eventually, we all obtained good views. But the bird finally lost interest in us and moved away, and the only other wren that we heard was some way off. Farther along the track we found a couple of Anhingas, several Black-crowned Night-Herons and a very obliging pair of Zapata Sparrows, but there were few other birds about so we started off back to Playa Larga. The Sora was still present in the marshes by the main road, along with two Solitary Sandpipers and a distant Red-shouldered Blackbird. We called in at La Boca resort for a much-needed coffee, and here we found a Belted Kingfisher, a Fernandina's Woodpecker, a nice assortment of migrant warblers, a couple of Greater Antillean Orioles and a pair of Shiny Cowbirds. That afternoon we returned again to Bermejas Faunal Refuge for another session with the quail-doves and hummingbirds. Most of us headed straight into the forest in search of quail-doves, while two of us sat and waited by the flowering trees. The quail-dove party were rewarded with brief views of two Grey-headed Quail-Doves and a Bee Hummingbird, while the hummingbird group had great views of a male Bee Hummingbird. Unfortunately, our activities were cut short by the gathering storm clouds, and for those in the forest it was quite a dash to get back to the bus before the onset of heavy rain.

We began our last full day in the Zapata Peninsula watching Antillean Nighthawks doing spectacular dives in the grounds of our hotel. After breakfast, we headed out to a series of lagoons along La Salinas track on the west side of the Bay of Pigs. The mosquitoes were pretty bad but the birding was excellent. At our first stop at a small freshwater pond, we found a Least Grebe, and then at a complex of brackish pools we found a pair of Wilson's Plovers, a pair of Killdeers at the nest and displaying Willets, along with a few migrant waders. Farther along the track, the large saline lagoons held good numbers of waterbirds including 10 Tricoloured Herons, eight Reddish Egrets, 12 White Ibises, 30 Roseate Spoonbills, about 200 American Flamingos, a flock of 35 Caspian Terns, and two pairs of Least Terns. Cuban Black-Hawks and Yellow Warblers were common in the mangroves, while other birds of note included four Magnificent Frigatebirds, an Osprey, a Peregrine Falcon and three Belted Kingfishers. We continued on to the end of the track, but here the vast lagoons were almost devoid of birds and the recently erected observation tower seemed rather pointless. Already by late morning the storm clouds were beginning to gather again, and some very heavy rain after lunch dampened our enthusiasm for another excursion into the forest. Instead we chose to visit the marshes along the road

north of town in the hope of finding a rail or two, but there was little about other than another Peregrine Falcon, a pair of Limpkins and a mixed flock of migrant hirundines which included three Northern Rough-winged Swallows – the only ones of the trip.

The next day was our last day in Cuba, but fortunately we did not have to leave for Havana until mid-morning and so we still had time for a pre-breakfast excursion into the swamp to look for Spotted Rail. After some perseverance, we managed to get a Spotted Rail to call back a few times in response to playback, but the swamp vegetation was unbroken and it soon became clear that the rail was insufficiently interested in us to come out into the open, so sadly we had to make do with our last good looks at a few migrant warblers before heading back to our hotel for breakfast, a final shower and check-out. The journey back to Havana was uneventful, and we arrived in time for lunch and a leisurely stroll around the fascinating old city. This was hot and thirsty work, and so, like many before us, we eventually gravitated to the Floridita. Here, with a bronze effigy of Hemingway propping up the bar, we relaxed over a daiquiri and reflected on our successes, before heading out to the airport and the long journey home.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

PODICIPEDIDAE

Least Grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus*: Good views of one at a small pond along La Salinas track in the Zapata Peninsula.

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*: A few on the dams by the autopista near Havana and also a single bird at a lake in the Sierra de Najasa. The form concerned is *antillarum*.

PELECANIDAE

Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*: The nominate race was fairly common off Havana, in the keys and along La Salinas track, and we also saw the odd bird on one of the dams by the autopista and by the Bay of Pigs at Playa Larga.

PHALACROCORACIDAE

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*: Common in the keys, particularly along the causeway where there was a dense feeding concentration totalling about 1,500 birds. We also saw a party of four on Niña Bonita Dam near Havana and a few along La Salinas track. The form concerned is *floridanus*.

Neotropic Cormorant (Olivaceous Cormorant) *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*: Two or three on the dams by the autopista west of Havana, three on dead trees in the lake near Moron, and at least half a dozen at Zapata. The form concerned is *mexicanus*.

ANHINGIDAE

Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga*: One on Niña Bonita Dam near Havana, a distant bird in flight over the mangroves at Cayo Coco, and a couple along La Turba track at Zapata. The form concerned is *leucogaster*.

FREGATIDAE

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*: Fairly common in the keys, where we saw at least 15, and also seen over the Bay of Pigs and at La Salinas.

ARDEIDAE

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*: Seen well on a number of occasions, particularly in the keys where we found at least six of the rare white morph and several odd looking intermediate individuals. The white morph, known as the Great White Heron, has been considered to be a distinct subspecies, *A. h. occidentalis*, but is now generally regarded as being merely a colour phase within that subspecies. These white birds are known to breed only in Cuba, Florida, St Thomas and on islands off Venezuela. Intermediate individuals are known as Würdemann's Heron.

Great Egret (Great White Egret) *Ardea alba*: The form *egretta* was fairly common and widespread in suitable habitat throughout.

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*: Another common and widespread egret (subspecies *brewsteri*).

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*: Recorded commonly throughout the tour, even in dry areas far from open water. The monotypic genus *Florida* is sometimes used for this species.

Tricoloured Heron (Louisiana Heron) *Egretta tricolor*: Fairly common in the keys and along La Salinas track at Zapata, and also seen a couple of times in freshwater marshes at Zapata. We recorded about 30 in all. The form concerned is *ruficollis*.

Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens*: Good views of five or six of these attractive herons in the keys and eight along La Salinas track at Zapata. Almost half of the individuals recorded were of the wholly white phase.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*: Very common throughout Cuba. This species (nominate form) arrived in Cuba in the 1950s, and is most probably responsible for the spread of cattle ticks in the West Indies.

Green Heron *Butorides virescens*: First seen on the shore east of Havana, and then seen in ones or twos on several occasions at Los Palacios rice-fields, at our hotel on Cayo Coco and in the Zapata Peninsula. The Green Heron is now usually split from the Striated Heron *B. striatus* of South America and the Old World. The form occurring in Cuba is the nominate form.

Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*: First encountered at Niña Bonita Dam on the drive back to Havana, and then recorded in small numbers in the garden at Los Caneyes Hotel, at a lake in the Sierra de Najasa and along La Turba track at Zapata. The race concerned (*hoactli*) is weakly defined and sometimes absorbed within nominate *nycticorax*.

THRESKIORNITHIDAE

White Ibis *Eudocimus albus*: Good views of about 15 in the keys and 12 along La Salinas track, and also seen by the autopista near Soroa and near our hotel at Playa Larga.

Roseate Spoonbill *Ajaia ajaja*: An immature at a tiny pool in the forest on Cayo Coco was a surprising find. More typical were small flocks totalling about 30 at the saline lagoons along La Salinas track in the Zapata Peninsula.

PHOENICOPTERIDAE

American Flamingo (Caribbean Flamingo) *Phoenicopterus ruber*: Distant views of up to 1,000 in the shallow waters off the north end of the causeway out to Cayo Coco; close views of ten at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo, and good views of about 200 along La Salinas track at Zapata. The much paler Old World form is now usually split off as a separate species, the Greater Flamingo *P. roseus*. The total population of American Flamingos is estimated at about 300,000 birds in three main breeding areas: Yucatan, Cuba/Bahamas, and the Netherlands Antilles. A few hundred birds also occur in the Galapagos Islands.

ANATIDAE

West Indian Whistling-Duck (West Indian Tree Duck) *Dendrocygna arborea*: Extremely close views of a group of eight on the mangrove-fringed lagoon within the grounds of our hotel complex on Cayo Coco shortly after we arrived. Only one could be found here the next day, but five were present the following morning. The West Indian Whistling-Duck is a globally threatened species, currently listed as Vulnerable by BirdLife International in *Threatened Birds of the World*. It is restricted to the Greater Antilles, with Cuba holding the bulk of the population. Total numbers are still thought to exceed 10,000, but are declining as a result of loss of wetland habitat and excessive hunting.

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*: Good views of about 15 at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: Eight with the Blue-winged Teal on Cayo Guillermo.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*: Reasonable scope views of six or seven at Niña Bonita Dam near Havana, on both our visits.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*: Distant views of five at Niña Bonita Dam near Havana on our first visit and a single bird on our second visit.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: Distant views of about 30 off the causeway on our way out to Cayo Coco and 27 on the way back. This is not a bird that one usually associates with

the azure waters of the tropics! Here, near the extreme southern limit of the wintering range, adult males are very scarce.

Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*: Several flocks totalling about 150 on Niña Bonita Dam near Havana, on both our visits.

CATHARTIDAE

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*: An amazingly abundant bird throughout Cuba, recorded in good numbers every day and at every site that we visited. Road kills obviously constitute an important element in their diet.

PANDIONIDAE

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*: Recorded on several occasions, although most of our views were very distant: one over the autopista near Soroa, one over the lake near Moron, a couple of individuals in the keys, and one along La Salinas track. All of the birds that we saw were probably of the North American migrant race *carolinensis* which shows a thick dark mask.

ACCIPITRIDAE

Snail Kite *Rostrhamus sociabilis*: Good views of eight at Coronella Dam near Havana on our way back from Soroa, and also seen by the autopista near Soroa. The race concerned is *plumbeus*.

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonicus*: Our only observations were of single 'ring-tails' seen from the bus on two occasions, one near Soroa and one near San Diego de los Baños.

Gundlach's Hawk *Accipiter gundlachi*: Close but sadly rather brief views of a very responsive immature bird in the forest at Soroa, and more prolonged views of a noisy adult soaring overhead at Los Caneyes Hotel at Santa Clara. This species is listed as Endangered in *Threatened Birds of the World*. The population was estimated at 150-200 pairs in 1994, and more recently at 300 individuals and declining. The decline is thought to be due to habitat destruction and persecution (because the hawks sometimes prey on poultry).

Cuban Black-Hawk *Buteogallus [anthracinus] gundlachii*: Great views of at least a dozen in the keys, most notably in the grounds of our hotel where a territorial male reacted angrily to 'pishing', and common along La Salinas track at Zapata, where we counted at least 10. The distinctive Cuban form of the Common Black-Hawk complex is now considered by many ornithologists to be a separate species. It differs from *anthracinus* in being smaller and browner, with cinnamon edges to some of the mantle feathers, and showing a prominent white crescent on the underside of the primaries. It is restricted to mangroves where it feeds on crabs.

Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus*: The resident race *cubanensis* was seen well on several occasions at La Güira National Park, in the Sierra de Cubitas and in the Zapata Peninsula.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*: Single individuals were recorded on six occasions: twice in the west, twice on the drive to Camagüey and twice in the Zapata Peninsula. The form concerned is *solitudinis*.

FALCONIDAE

Northern Crested-Caracara *Caracara cheriway*: Surprisingly scarce this year. We saw only one on the drive to Camagüey, three or four in the keys, and one in the Zapata Peninsula.

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*: This very pretty little falcon was fairly common throughout the tour and gave many close views. The form occurring in Cuba (*sparveroides*) is notable for having two colour phases, a very clean-looking white-bellied morph and a much scarcer

rufous-bellied morph. This subspecies is also found in the southern Bahamas and possibly Jamaica.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*: Single birds were recorded on three occasions in the keys and once in the Zapata Peninsula. The North American birds, with their banded tails and little sexual dimorphism, may well prove to be a different species from Old World populations.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*: Our only observations were in the Zapata Peninsula, where we saw an adult perched in a mangrove tree by La Salinas track and another adult soaring overhead at La Boca later the same day.

NUMIDIDAE

Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*: Half a dozen 'wild-looking' birds in open woodland in the Sierra de Najasa and lots of obvious pets. This species was apparently introduced in the West Indies "centuries ago".

RALLIDAE

Clapper Rail *Rallus longirostris*: Superb views of a very responsive pair in mangroves on Cayo Guillermo, another individual walking across a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo, and yet another at our hotel later the same day. We also heard one calling along La Salinas track at Zapata. The race concerned is *caribaeus*.

King Rail *Rallus elegans*: Difficult this year. The rice-fields near Los Palacios seem to have been abandoned and little suitable habitat now remains for the rails. One bird called back several times in response to playback and was seen briefly by two of us, while a second bird called only once and remained well hidden. The race concerned is *ramsdeni*.

Sora *Porzana carolina*: Distant views of a bird at the edge of a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo, and much better views of another in an open marsh near Playa Larga on two occasions.

Spotted Rail *Pardirallus maculatus* (H): One was heard calling on several occasions in response to playback in the swamp along La Turba track at Zapata on our last morning, but we had no chance of seeing it in the dense vegetation.

Purple Gallinule (American Purple Gallinule) *Porphyryla martinica*: Seen well on several occasions: one near Los Palacios, three at a lake in the Sierra de Najasa, and up to five at La Boca in the Zapata Peninsula.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: Small numbers at freshwater wetlands throughout the tour. The form concerned is *cerceris*.

American Coot *Fulica americana*: About 150 at Niña Bonita Dam and Coronella Dam west of Havana, and a single bird at a lake in the Sierra de Najasa. The form concerned is nominate *americana*.

ARAMIDAE

Limpkin *Aramus guarauna*: A very sneaky bird in a ditch at Los Palacios, one on the drive to Camagüey, two in the Sierra de Najasa, and two by the roadside near Playa Larga after a heavy shower.

CHARADRIIDAE

Grey Plover (Black-bellied Plover) *Pluvialis squatarola*: About 12 on the shore in Havana, about 25 in the keys, and three by La Salinas track at Zapata.

Wilson's Plover *Charadrius wilsonia*: Superb views of a nesting pair by a small saline pool along La Salinas track at Zapata. The form concerned is nominate *wilsonia*.

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*: A dozen on the shore in Havana, and two flocks totalling about 35 in the keys.

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*: Widespread, with small numbers of the form *ternominatus* being seen and heard throughout. Breeding was well underway in the Zapata Peninsula, where we found a pair with three tiny chicks and a very confiding female incubating her eggs.

HAEMATOPODIDAE

American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*: One on the mudflats near the lighthouse on Cayo Paredon Grande. This is a very scarce and local species in Cuba, and was a 'write-in' for our Cuba tour.

RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*: Four on the drive to Camagüey, 10 at a lake in the Sierra de Najasa, at least 60 at the lagoons on Cayo Guillermo, three near Playa Larga, and six along La Salinas track. This form, along with several others, is often lumped in Black-winged Stilt *H. himantopus*.

JACANIDAE

Northern Jacana *Jacana spinosa*: A couple on the drive to Camagüey, 13 at a lake in the Sierra de Najasa and two at La Boca in the Zapata Peninsula. The form concerned is *violacea*.

SCOLOPACIDAE

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*: A single bird at the lake near Moron and eight in the Zapata Peninsula.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*: Two on Cayo Guillermo, six in the marshes north of Playa Larga and one at La Salinas.

Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaria*: Two birds at the roadside pools north of Playa Larga.

Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*: Good views of about ten in the keys and four at La Salinas, including some birds in display. The nominate form breeds in small numbers in Cuba.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*: One on the beach in Havana, one by the river at San Diego de los Baños, one at the lake near Moron, and two at La Salinas. Most were already assuming their spotted breeding dress.

Hudsonian Whimbrel *Numenius hudsonicus*: Five on the mudflats at the east end of Cayo Coco and two at Playa Larga. The New World form is usually lumped with the Old World form under the name Whimbrel *N. phaeopus*.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: At least 25 on the beach in Havana, about 25 in the keys, and one at La Salinas. The form wintering in the Caribbean is *morinella*, which breeds in low Arctic Canada and north-eastern Alaska.

Red Knot *Calidris canutus*: Good views of a party of 16, all still in winter dress, at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo. The Red Knots wintering from Florida through the Caribbean to northern South America are thought to belong to the form *roseaari* which breeds on Wrangel Island and in north-western Alaska.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*: About 15 on the beach in Havana.

Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*: Good views of two with the other 'peeps' on the shore in Havana.

Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*: Good views of three with the other 'peeps' on the shore in Havana.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*: About 150 on the shore in Havana, 100 in the keys and seven at La Salinas.

Stilt Sandpiper *Calidris himantopus*: Distant views of a party of six at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo.

Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*: Good views of about 30 at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo, identified on call. We also had very distant views of an unidentified dowitcher at La Salinas. Short-billed Dowitcher is much the commoner of the two American dowitchers in Cuba.

LARIDAE

Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*: Common off Havana and in the keys. We also saw one at Niña Bonita Dam near Havana and a few at the head of the Bay of Pigs. The race concerned is nominate *atricilla*.

American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus*: A single immature bird flew west off the beach in Havana on our first morning. This is a recent split from the European Herring Gull *L. argentatus*, and still not widely accepted.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*: An adult with an injured foot by the ruined bridge at the east end of Cayo Coco. The Lesser Black-backed Gull is a very rare straggler to the Caribbean, not listed for Cuba by Raffaele *et al.* (1998), but reported from the keys on several occasions in recent years. The bird that we saw may well have been a long-staying individual also recorded during the 2005, 2006 and 2008 tours.

STERNIDAE

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*: One off the beach in Havana, one at Niña Bonita Dam on our second visit, and about 35 at La Salinas, mostly adults in breeding plumage. This species seems to have become commoner in Cuba in recent years, as Raffaele *et al.* (1998) listed it as a "rare non-breeding resident".

Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*: Common off Havana and in the keys, and also seen in smaller numbers in the Bay of Pigs and at La Salinas. In the keys, the birds were in full breeding plumage and presumably about to breed locally. The nominate form occurs in Cuba.

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*: About 15 with the Royal Terns off Havana on our first morning, and two off the causeway on our way out to Cayo Coco. The race concerned is *aculflavidus*.

Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*: Four terns at Niña Bonita Dam near Havana on our return visit were probably all this species, although only one came close enough for clinching views. This is a surprisingly scarce winter visitor and passage migrant in Cuba.

Least Tern *Sterna antillarum*: Good views of four at the saline lagoons at La Salinas, including a pair that obligingly passed almost overhead. The nominate form is a locally common breeding bird in Cuba.

COLUMBIDAE

Rock Dove *Columba livia*: Common around towns and villages.

Scaly-naped Pigeon (Red-necked Pigeon) *Columba squamosa*: Fairly common in the good forest above Soroa, judging by the amount of calling, but hard to pick out in the canopy. It was not until our second visit that all of us finally got to see birds well in the scope. We also had good views of four over the forest in the Sierra de Cubitas. This species is restricted to the islands of the Caribbean.

White-crowned Pigeon *Columba leucocephala*: A common and widespread pigeon, seen well on many occasions throughout the tour. Our best views were in the garden at Soroa Villa Hotel.

Plain Pigeon *Columba inornata*: About 12 individuals in the Sierra de Najasa, many of which showed extremely well. This very plain pigeon, which is confined to the Greater Antilles, is listed as Vulnerable in *Threatened Birds of the World*. The total population is estimated at only 1,000-2,500 birds and thought to be declining rapidly.

- Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: Recorded in Havana, at Los Palacios, on the drive to Camagüey, on Cayo Guillermo and on Cayo Coco. This species was introduced to New Providence in the Bahamas in 1974, and is believed to have spread naturally from there to Cuba in the 1980s.
- White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica*: Widespread in small numbers, and seen well on many occasions.
- Zenaida Dove *Zenaida aurita*: First seen in La Güira National Park, and then seen in ones and twos in the keys and at several localities in the Zapata Peninsula. Our best views were of several birds coming down to drink at a small pool in the forest on Cayo Coco. This species is virtually restricted to the Caribbean; the form occurring in Cuba is the nominate form.
- Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*: A very common and widespread species, recorded on every day of the tour (nominate form).
- Common Ground-Dove *Columbina passerina*: Common and widespread in small numbers. The form concerned is *insularis*.
- Key West Quail-Dove *Geotrygon chrysia*: Good but brief views of one by a small pool in the forest on Cayo Coco, and superb views of a very obliging bird in Bermejas Faunal Refuge in the Zapata Peninsula. Unusually, the latter responded extremely well to playback. This species is restricted to the northern Caribbean.
- Grey-headed Quail-Dove *Geotrygon caniceps*: The least difficult of the four quail-doves in the Zapata Peninsula. We saw two in the forest near Soplillar and six during our three visits to Bermejas Faunal Refuge. A couple of these gave good views as they walked ahead of us along the trail. This species is also known from Hispaniola where the endemic subspecies *leucometopius* has a white forehead and is now often recognized as a separate species. This would leave the nominate form as another Cuban endemic. The species is listed as Vulnerable in *Threatened Birds of the World* because of its declining population.
- Ruddy Quail-Dove *Geotrygon montana*: One flew across the trail in the forest at Soroa, and one (a female) was seen briefly on the trail at Los Ondones in the Zapata Peninsula. Although quite common, this seems to be the most reluctant of the four quail-doves in Cuba to show itself well.
- Blue-headed Quail-Dove *Starnoenas cyanocephala*: This “jewel of the Cuban avifauna” is much the most difficult of the four Cuban quail-doves and can be a very elusive bird. This year, however, we came up trumps on only our third excursion into the forest in the Zapata Peninsula, thanks to the expert knowledge of Orlando, the local ranger at Bermejas Faunal Refuge. He led us straight to one of the quail-dove’s favourite drinking pools, and we had to wait little over an hour before a pair of these superb birds wandered into view on the track near the pool. Luckily, the birds stayed on the track for several minutes and great views were enjoyed by all. Sadly, the Blue-headed Quail-Dove is another globally threatened Cuban endemic, listed in the category Endangered in *Threatened Birds of the World*. The total population is estimated at only 1,000-2,500 individuals, and is declining. The decline is thought to be due largely to habitat destruction and excessive hunting, although recent hurricanes may also have had an adverse effect.

PSITTACIDAE

- Cuban Parakeet *Aratinga euops*: Good flight views of several small groups totalling about 20 birds in the Sierra de Najasa, and decent views of a party of ten at Bermejas Faunal Refuge. We did see a few birds perched, but they were way off. This Cuban endemic is listed as Vulnerable in *Threatened Birds of the World*. The population is thought to number less than 10,000 birds and could be as low as 2,500. Direct persecution (as a pest on crops),

habitat loss, the destruction of nest sites and trapping for the pet trade have all contributed to the species' decline.

Rose-throated Parrot (Cuban Parrot) *Amazona leucocephala*: Superb views of two pairs and a single bird near one of their nesting trees in the Sierra de Najasa, and several sightings of pairs and single birds in flight in the Zapata Peninsula. This attractive parrot is also found in the Bahamas and the Cayman Islands, the form occurring in Cuba being the nominate. It is another declining species, classified as Near-threatened by BirdLife International. Loss of nest sites and the taking of young for the pet trade have contributed to the species' decline.

COCCYZIDAE

Great Lizard-Cuckoo *Saurothera merlini*: A fairly common bird throughout the forested parts of Cuba, seen well on many occasions, especially at Soroa and in the Zapata Peninsula, and often heard giving its bizarre calls. The only form that we encountered was the nominate form. This species is also found in the Bahamas.

CROTOPHAGIDAE

Smooth-billed Ani *Crotophaga ani*: Common in open country throughout.

TYTONIDAE

Barn Owl *Tyto alba*: One flew across the road before dawn as we were driving from Havana to Hato de Jicarita. The race concerned is *furcata*.

STRIGIDAE

Bare-legged Owl *Gymnoglaux lawrencii*: Superb views of these cute little owls at their nest holes on several occasions. Our first was a bird peering out of a hole in a dead palm stump in the Sierra de Najasa, thanks to Pedro. Angel showed us another peering out of its nest hole in the forest near Soplillar, and Orlando took us to two occupied nest-sites in Bermejas Faunal Refuge, one with a very flighty pair of birds outside the nest and the other with a single very obliging bird which came almost completely out of its nest-hole to inspect us.

Cuban Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium siju*: Many great views of this attractive little owl, including a bird peering at us out of its nest-hole. We found the pygmy-owl's call to be very useful for attracting other birds, particularly hummingbirds, vireos and wood warblers.

Stygian Owl *Asio stygius*: Our nocturnal foray for this species in the grounds of Soroa Villa Hotel produced only a distant calling bird which showed no interest in playback, and we failed to find the owl in the grounds of Los Caneyes Hotel, where birds have been found roosting in the past. However, Angel knew of a pair close to our hotel in the Zapata Peninsula, and within seconds of arriving at the site we were enjoying great scope views of one of these splendid owls in the spotlight. Cuba is without doubt one of the best places to see this owl, which occurs from Mexico to Argentina but is very scarce over much of its range. The form occurring in Cuba is *siguapa*, which is also the Cuban name for the species.

CAPRIMULGIDAE

Antillean Nighthawk *Chordeiles gundlachi*: This summer visitor to Cuba was only just arriving back from its winter quarters (assumed to be in South America) as we were arriving at Zapata. We saw our first in the morning of 9 April, roosting on a bare branch of a tree in the garden of our hotel at Playa Larga. According to Angel, this was the first of the spring. Over the next few days we had many great views of at least three individuals hawking

high over the hotel and one bird putting on a spectacular aerial display in response to playback – passing within a few feet of us at the bottom of its incredible dives.

Cuban Nightjar *Caprimulgus cubanensis*: Superb daytime views of a male perched in a tree by the track in Bermejas Faunal Refuge, and good views of three or four in open woodland at La Turba the next morning, just as it was beginning to get light. This form is now considered a Cuban endemic as the vocally distinct form *ekmani* from Hispaniola has been split off as a separate species, the Hispaniolan Nightjar. Both forms were formerly known as the Greater Antillean Nightjar.

APODIDAE

Antillean Palm Swift *Tachornis phoenicobia*: Fairly common and widespread; some of our best views were at Los Caneyes Hotel near Santa Clara, where the birds were nesting under the eaves of the chalets.

TROCHILIDAE

Cuban Emerald *Chlorostilbon ricordii*: The common hummingbird in Cuba, first recorded in Havana and then seen virtually everywhere that we went. This was often the first species to respond when we played the pygmy-owl recording. It also occurs in the Bahamas.

Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae*: We did very well with this species this year, recording a total of six individuals in the Zapata Peninsula and having some great views. Our first were at Los Ondones, where we had prolonged scope views of a colourful little male returning repeatedly to its song perch on the uppermost dead twigs of a tall tree and also found another singing male nearby, a male moulting into breeding plumage and a female. David and Pat had superb views of a male visiting flowering trees near the entrance to Bermejas Faunal Refuge, while the rest of us had brief views of another individual in the reserve. Not surprisingly, this little gem did very well in the 'Bird of the Trip' contest, missing the top spot by only a whisker. This Cuban endemic, the world's smallest bird, is listed as Near-threatened by BirdLife International. The Zapata Peninsula is one of its strongholds, but even here it appears to be very scarce. According to Angel, the principal threat in the Zapata area is the destruction of nests by hurricanes, which have become increasingly frequent in recent years.

TROGONIDAE

Cuban Trogon *Priotelus temnurus*: A superb bird, surprisingly common and pleasingly tame. We encountered it in virtually every patch of forest that we visited, and had some stunning views. This is Cuba's national bird and another endemic.

TODIDAE

Cuban Tody *Todus multicolor*: Another brilliant little bird, common and remarkably tame. We found our first in the forest at Soroa and then went on to see it in virtually every patch of woodland that we visited. Once again, this colourful and obliging endemic came top in the 'Bird of the Trip' contest, although it beat Bee Hummingbird by only the narrowest of margins. The five closely related species of tody comprise a small family confined to the Greater Antilles. Their closest relatives are the Motmots (Momotidae), especially the Tody Motmot of Central America.

ALCEDINIDAE

Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon*: Good views of a couple in the keys and five in the Zapata Peninsula. This is mainly a winter visitor to Cuba from North America, although some individuals apparently remain in Cuba throughout the year.

PICIDAE

- West Indian Woodpecker *Melanerpes superciliaris*: The commonest, most widespread and noisiest of the woodpeckers, encountered on many occasions throughout the tour – often at very close range. This species is also found in the Bahamas and on Grand Cayman.
- Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius*: Single birds were seen in the garden at Soroa Villa Hotel, in the garden at Los Caneyes Hotel and at Los Ondones in the Zapata Peninsula. This is winter visitor from eastern North America.
- Cuban Green Woodpecker *Xiphidiopicus percussus*: A very attractive woodpecker, seen well on many occasions throughout the tour, and watched at the nest on a couple of occasions. This is another Cuban endemic, placed in its own monotypic genus.
- Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*: Close but brief views of one in the forest at Soroa on our first afternoon. The endemic form *chrysocaulosus* is sometimes treated as a separate species, the Cuban Flicker.
- Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae*: Great views of a pair being chased around by West Indian Woodpeckers in open woodland in the Sierra de Najasa; superb views of a male foraging on the ground near the entrance to Bermejas Faunal Refuge, and several others seen and heard in the Zapata Peninsula. This species has been recorded as a vagrant in the Bahamas, but otherwise is a Cuban endemic. It is listed as Endangered in *Threatened Birds of the World*. The total population is estimated at only 300-400 pairs and thought to be declining. Logging, the felling of trees to obtain parrot chicks and hurricanes have all contributed to limiting the number of potential nest sites.

TYRANNIDAE

- Crescent-eyed Pewee (Cuban Pewee) *Contopus caribaeus*: A fairly common flycatcher, seen in small numbers in most of the forests that we visited and often remarkably tame. This form, previously known as the Greater Antillean Pewee, has recently been split into three allospecies. The form occurring in Cuba is also found in the Bahamas and retains the original scientific name.
- La Sagra's Flycatcher *Myiarchus sagrae*: Another fairly common flycatcher, recorded in virtually every patch of forest that we visited. The nominate form in Cuba (and the Cayman Islands) differs only slightly from the other subspecies (*lucaysiensis*) in the Bahamas.
- Grey Kingbird *Tyrannus dominicensis*: A very common summer visitor to Cuba and the conspicuous kingbird of open country and hotel gardens.
- Loggerhead Kingbird *Tyrannus caudifasciatus*: Common in wooded areas throughout, with many excellent sightings. This species was one of the most responsive to the pygmy-owl recording.
- Giant Kingbird *Tyrannus cubensis*: Great scope views of a pair near their nest in the top of a huge tree in the Sierra de Najasa, and two other birds seen in the same general area. Unusually, one of these flew down to perch on a telegraph wire almost alongside the bus and gave incredible views. This is another rare and declining species, listed as Endangered in *Threatened Birds of the World*. The total population is estimated at just 250-1,000 individuals. The reason for its rarity is unclear, although habitat loss from logging and conversion to agricultural land is thought to be a factor. The Giant Kingbird is now found only in Cuba, although there are old records from the southern Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands where it may once have bred.

HIRUNDINIDAE

- Cuban Martin *Progne cryptoleuca*: Seen well on many occasions throughout the tour, beginning with half a dozen around the old fort at the entrance to Havana harbour and ten or so over

Havana suburbs on our first morning. This species is known to breed only in Cuba, but disappears outside the breeding season, and is believed to migrate to South America for the winter, although it has never been definitely recorded there (presumably because of identification problems). It is a late migrant, not usually arriving back before the end of March

Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*: We encountered large migrant flocks over the marshes at Hato de Jicarita and at Soplillar in the Zapata Peninsula, but otherwise saw only a few individuals with other hirundines.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*: Our only sighting was of at least three birds with a large migrant flock of hirundines at La Boca in the Zapata Peninsula – after a heavy rain shower.

Cave Swallow *Petrochelidon fulva*: A locally common summer visitor to Cuba, first encountered around the old fort at the entrance to Havana harbour and then seen well at Hato de Jicarita, on Cayo Coco and on several occasions in the Zapata Peninsula. The form concerned is *cavicola*.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: A fairly common passage migrant, recorded in small flocks on several occasions throughout the tour.

CORVIDAE

Cuban Palm Crow *Corvus minutus*: Exceptionally easy this year! We found our first group of five feeding on the road as we approached the Sierra de Najasa and then had great views of about five more in the open 'parkland' with scattered palm groves. This species is virtually identical in appearance to the much commoner Cuban Crow, but is slightly smaller and appears to have a shorter neck in flight. Fortunately, the nasal, Rook-like calls of the Palm Crow are very different from the crazy squealing and squawking of the Cuban Crows. The Cuban Palm Crow has recently been split off from the Hispaniolan form *C. palmarum*, and thus becomes another Cuban endemic. It is listed as Endangered in *Threatened Birds of the World* because of its tiny range (two small areas in Camagüey Province), small population size (2,500-10,000 individuals) and declining numbers. The reasons for the decline are unknown.

Cuban Crow *Corvus nasicus*: Common in the Sierra de Najasa, where we recorded at least 20, and seen in small numbers every day in the Zapata Peninsula. The birds in the garden of our hotel at Playa Larga seemed to be particularly noisy. The amazing, almost parrot-like vocalisations of this species give it a unique character. This near endemic also occurs on the Caicos Islands.

TROGLODYTIDAE

Zapata Wren *Ferminia cerverai*: Our early morning visit to the marshes at Hato de Jicarita on the northern edge of Zapata Swamp failed to produce any wrens, and we had to wait until we reached La Turba in the southern part of the swamp before we finally caught up with this much sought after endemic. As always, the wren was initially very elusive, giving only fleeting glimpses as it sang from dense cover in the swamp, but eventually it flew into the trees along the side of the track and gave some great views. We also heard another bird singing farther out in the swamp. With its tiny range (confined to Zapata Swamp), tiny population size (1,000-2,400 individuals) and declining trend, this is yet another Cuban endemic bird listed as Endangered in *Threatened Birds of the World*. The principal threats are dry-season burning, wetland drainage and agricultural expansion, although predation by introduced mongooses and rats may also be a problem.

POLIOPTILIDAE

Cuban Gnatcatcher *Polioptila lembeyi*: Excellent views of three of these pretty little gnatcatchers in dry, coastal scrub on Cayo Paredon Grande, and brief views of a single bird on Cayo Coco later the same day. This rather scarce and local species is another Cuban endemic.

TURDIDAE

Cuban Solitaire *Myadestes elisabeth*: Superb views of a very obliging bird in the forest in La Güira National Park, and several others heard in this area and in the forest at Soroa. As with other solitaires, the strangely beautiful song is at the same time both scratchy and melodious, and very difficult to describe in words. This species is listed as Near-threatened in *Threatened Birds of the World* because of its restricted range and threats from habitat loss.

Red-legged Thrush *Turdus plumbeus*: A very fancy thrush - common and widespread, and often remarkably tame, but not renowned for its song! The distinctive rufous-bellied race in Cuba is *rubripes*. Other forms occur in the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Dominica.

MIMIDAE

Grey Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis*: A common winter visitor from North America, found in small numbers in most forested areas and responding well both to the pygmy-owl recording and 'pishing'. About a dozen were seen coming down to drink at a small pool in the forest on Cayo Coco.

Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*: Very common and widespread, and recorded on every day of the tour. The race concerned is *orpheus*.

Bahama Mockingbird *Mimus gundlachii*: Superb views of a bird in song and distant views of another at the usual locality in coastal scrub on Cayo Guillermo, and then very close views of a single bird in the coastal scrub on Cayo Paredon Grande the next day, while we were looking for Thick-billed Vireos. This Caribbean endemic has a very strange distribution, being confined to the Bahamas, the Turks & Caicos, some of the keys off northern Cuba, and the arid coastal lowlands of southern Jamaica.

VIREONIDAE

Thick-billed Vireo *Vireo crassirostris*: Great views of two very responsive birds and three others heard in dense coastal scrub on Cayo Paredon Grande. This rather dull vireo has a strangely fragmented distribution in the western Caribbean.

Cuban Vireo *Vireo gundlachii*: First encountered in the forest at Soroa and then seen well on several occasions throughout the tour, usually in response to 'pishing' or the pygmy-owl recording. This is another Cuban endemic that seems to be fairly common throughout the lowland forest and scrub.

Yellow-throated Vireo *Vireo flavifrons* (NL): One was seen by Dennis and Sue in the grounds of our hotel at Soroa. A winter visitor from North America.

Black-whiskered Vireo *Vireo altiloquus*: One of the commonest birds in the forest and scrub, very responsive to the pygmy-owl recording and 'pishing', and seen really well on numerous occasions.

PARULIDAE

Northern Parula (Parula Warbler) *Parula americana*: Rather few this year: only four in the Sierra de Najasa, one on Cayo Coco and three in the Zapata Peninsula. Most of the wintering population had obviously left.

- Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia*: Seen very well on several occasions in the mangroves in the keys, even in the grounds of our hotel on Cayo Coco, and also found commonly in the mangroves on La Salinas track in the Zapata Peninsula. The resident form *gundlachi* and several other related forms found mainly in the Caribbean are sometimes considered to be a separate species, the Golden Warbler. The scientific name remains unchanged.
- Magnolia Warbler *Dendroica magnolia*: Encountered only in the Zapata Peninsula, where we had reasonable views of male and a female at Los Ondones and brief views of a male near Soplillar.
- Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina*: First recorded in the garden at Los Caneyes Hotel, where there were at least three, and then seen on a number of occasions in the Sierra de Najasa, Sierra de Cubitas, the keys and Zapata Peninsula. A few of the males were already in superb breeding plumage.
- Black-throated Blue Warbler *Dendroica caerulescens*: One of the commoner and more attractive wintering warblers, still present in small numbers in most forested areas.
- Black-throated Green Warbler *Dendroica virens*: Another very attractive wintering warbler, still present in small numbers and seen well on many occasions.
- Yellow-throated Warbler *Dendroica dominica*: A very striking warbler, recorded on five occasions: at Soroa (twice), in La Güira National Park, in the Sierra de Najasa and at La Boca.
- Olive-capped Warbler *Dendroica pityophila*: Easily found in the pines in La Güira National Park, and showing well in response to playback. We saw at least four and heard about six more. This near-endemic also occurs in the Bahamas.
- Prairie Warbler *Dendroica discolor*: First observed in the Sierra de Najasa, and then seen well on many occasions in the keys and in the Zapata Peninsula. An inquisitive warbler that responds well to 'pishing'.
- Palm Warbler *Dendroica palmarum*: A common wintering warbler of open areas, at times reminiscent of a small pipit.
- Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia*: A very striking warbler, seen well on several occasions throughout the tour and always a pleasure to behold. We logged about 20 in all.
- American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla*: The commonest and most widespread of the wintering warblers, still present in good numbers and very responsive both to the pygmy-owl recording and to 'pishing'. We found them just about everywhere we went.
- Worm-eating Warbler *Helmitheros vermivorus* (NL): One seen briefly by Angel and Martin in the forest near Soplillar in the Zapata Peninsula.
- Ovenbird *Seiurus aurocapillus*: Still present in small numbers in forested areas throughout the tour, and seen well on many occasions. Another common winter visitor from North America.
- Northern Waterthrush *Seiurus noveboracensis*: Seen well on several occasions in the keys, notably at the small pool in the forest on Cayo Coco, and also at many localities in the Zapata Peninsula.
- Louisiana Waterthrush *Seiurus motacilla*: Decent scope views of one by the river at San Diego de los Baños and then close views of two at Hato de Jicarita. This is one of the earliest North American migrants to depart in spring.
- Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*: A very common wintering bird, seen well on many occasions throughout the tour. This species seems unable to resist 'pishing'.
- Yellow-headed Warbler *Teretistris fernandinae*: A common resident in the woodlands of western Cuba, first seen in small numbers at Soroa and La Güira and then found commonly in the forest in the Zapata Peninsula. This noisy and inquisitive warbler is a Cuban endemic.
- Oriente Warbler *Teretistris fornsi*: It took us a while to find our first pair in the forest in the Sierra de Cubitas, but the birds finally showed well, and we then had great views of several pairs on Cayo Paredon Grande and Cayo Coco. The slightly decurved bill gives this Cuban

endemic an odd-looking appearance. This and the Yellow-headed Warbler are the only members of the genus *Teretistris*.

THRAUPIDAE

Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus*: Common and conspicuous in the forest at Soroa and also seen in La Güira National Park, in the grounds of Los Caneyes Hotel and in the Sierra de Cubitas. This colourful species of Central and South America was probably introduced to Cuba.

Western Stripe-headed Tanager (Western Spindalis) *Spindalis zena*: A fairly common and very colourful tanager, at times remarkably confiding. We had many great views, especially at Soroa, in La Güira National Park, in the Sierra de Cubitas and in the keys. Rather strangely, however, we only saw a couple in the Zapata Peninsula. The form concerned (*pretrei*) is one of the western *zena* group, which is now considered specifically distinct from *dominicensis*, *nigricephala* and *portoricensis* of Hispaniola, Jamaica and Puerto Rico, respectively.

Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*: Good views of a male responding to the pygmy-owl recording in the forest at Soroa.

CARDINALIDAE

Blue Grosbeak *Guiraca caerulea* (NL): A male was seen well by most of the group in the grounds of Los Caneyes Hotel at Santa Clara during our second visit. This is a rare migrant in Cuba.

Indigo Bunting *Passerina cyanea*: Our only records were of single birds at Hato de Jicarita and Los Caneyes Hotel on our first visit, and a party of four (including two males) at Los Caneyes on our second visit. Most of the wintering population had obviously left.

Painted Bunting *Passerina ciris*: Superb views of first a female and then a superb male coming down to drink at a small pool in the forest at Cueva del Jabali on Cayo Coco.

EMBERIZIDAE

Cuban Bullfinch *Melopyrrha nigra*: Less common than usual this year. We saw only a couple briefly in La Güira National Park and found very few in the Zapata Peninsula. Fortunately, there were still plenty about in the keys and we had great views of about ten coming down to drink at a pool in the forest on Cayo Coco. The nominate form occurs in Cuba. Another form occurs on Grand Cayman, but this has a much larger bill and different vocalisations, and is possibly a distinct species.

Cuban Grassquit *Tiaris canora*: This very local Cuban endemic seems to be getting scarcer every year. Our side-trip from La Güira National Park to a farm in the lowlands where the species regularly comes to drink was successful, but we found only four individuals and had to wait over an hour before everyone had had good views. Later we were to learn that this pretty little grassquit has become very rare in the Sierra de Najasa since the last two hurricanes. The species also occurs on New Providence in the Bahamas, where it was introduced in 1963.

Yellow-faced Grassquit *Tiaris olivacea*: Fairly common throughout the tour; first encountered in the forest at Soroa and then seen well on many occasions.

Zapata Sparrow (Cuban Sparrow) *Torreornis inexpectata*: Excellent views of a pair of the rare nominate race at Hato de Jicarita on the northern edge of Zapata Swamp; close but brief views of a sneaky individual of the very similar *varonai* race on Cayo Coco, and superb views of another pair of the nominate race at La Turba in the Zapata Peninsula. This Cuban endemic is listed as Endangered in *Threatened Birds of the World*. The total population of all three subspecies is thought to number less than 1,000 individuals. The subspecies on Cayo Coco is considered to be the least at risk, but, as we could see for

ourselves, the development of huge tourist resorts is gobbling up the sparrow's habitat at an alarming pace.

ICTERIDAE

Red-shouldered Blackbird *Agelaius assimilis*: Good views of two pairs at Hato de Jicarita, where one of the males uttered its wheezing song in response to playback, and distant views of a pair in the marshes along the main road north of Playa Larga. This Cuban endemic (a very close relative of the abundant Red-winged Blackbird *A. phoeniceus* of North America) differs from the Red-winged Blackbird in being monogamous (not highly polygamous), in showing much less sexual dimorphism (the females are entirely black), and having a slightly different song.

Tawny-shouldered Blackbird *Agelaius humeralis*: First observed in the garden of our hotel at Soroa, and then recorded in small numbers at many localities except in the keys. The form that we encountered was *scopulus*. A near-endemic, it also occurs in west-central Haiti, where it is uncommon.

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*: Seen well on several occasions in grassland areas, notably at one of the dams by the autopista between Havana and Soroa. The form concerned (*hippocrepis*) is endemic to Cuba.

Cuban Blackbird *Dives atroviolacea*: A common and widespread endemic, occurring even in central Havana, but absent from the keys.

Greater Antillean Grackle *Quiscalus niger*: One of the commonest birds of the Cuban countryside, recorded in good numbers on every day of the tour.

Shiny Cowbird (Glossy Cowbird) *Molothrus bonariensis*: Five at a farm in the lowlands north of La Güira National Park and pairs on a couple of occasions near Playa Larga in the Zapata Peninsula. This is a relatively recent colonist in Cuba, having reached the island from South America via the Lesser Antilles.

Greater Antillean Oriole *Icterus dominicensis*: Fairly common in wooded areas throughout, and seen well on many occasions, notably in the grounds of our hotel at Soroa, in the Sierra de Cubitas and in the Zapata Peninsula. The form concerned, *melanopsis*, is sometimes treated as a separate species, the Cuban Oriole.

Baltimore Oriole *Icterus galbula*: Good views of a male moulting into breeding plumage at our picnic lunch stop in the Sierra de Najasa.

PASSERIDAE

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Common around towns and villages throughout the tour.

MAMMALS

Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus* (NL): One seen by Paul in Camagüey – the only wild mammal of the trip except for a few unidentified bats.

THE BIRD OF THE TRIP

	Total score	No. of lists
1st Cuban Tody	34	10
2 nd Bee Hummingbird	34	9
3 rd Blue-headed Quail-Dove	18	4
4 th Cuban Trogon	14	5
5 th Bare-legged Owl	10	2
6 th Antillean Nighthawk	9	3
7 th Key West Quail-Dove	7	3
8 th Fernandina's Flicker	5	2
9 th Cuban Pygmy-Owl	4	2
=10 th Gundlach's Hawk	4	1
=10 th Red-legged Honeycreeper	4	1