

## HISPANIOLA & PUERTO RICO

*Sunday 31st March – Friday 12th April 2013 (13 days)*

*Leader: to be confirmed*

*Group Size Limit: 9*

*Tour Category: Easy for the most part, occasionally Moderate*



*Palmchats (Nik Borrow)*

Columbus discovered the large islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico soon after his famous transatlantic crossing and soon after, in the early 1500s, the Spanish, eager for slaves to work in the goldmines of Hispaniola, conquered the native Indians and colonized the whole region. Santo Domingo, the present-day capital of the Dominican Republic (which occupies roughly two-thirds of Hispaniola), became the centre of Spanish influence and was sacked by Francis Drake in 1586. Buccaneers and pirates used the islands as bases for their pillaging forays. Later millions of slaves were imported from Africa and the resulting blend of different cultures has profoundly influenced the whole history of the West Indies.

Much of these two islands are rugged and mountainous, but they encompass a wide variety of habitats, and are fringed by some glorious white sand beaches dotted with coconut palms and the turquoise-blue waters of the Caribbean. Millions of years ago, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico were mountain ranges

connected to both Jamaica and ultimately to what is present-day Central America, but nowadays their endemic-rich animal and plant-life reflect their long isolation both from the North American continental mainland and from the other islands that form the Greater Antilles.

Ornithologically, these islands are perhaps most notable for the occurrence of two restricted-range families, the gem-like Todies, comprising five very similar species restricted to the Greater Antilles, and the enigmatic Palmchat, which is endemic to Hispaniola. With the richest concentration of endemic bird species in the Caribbean, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico offer an attractive combination for anyone with an interest in the avifauna of this beautiful part of the world. Hispaniola boasts 32 endemics (although one, Gray-crowned Palm-Tanager, is virtually confined to Haiti and not possible on bird tours to the Dominican Republic part of the island) and Puerto Rico a further 18 (if one includes one species shared with the Virgin Islands),

and there are also a host of more widespread endemic Caribbean specialities. Families that are especially well represented amongst the Caribbean endemics include pigeons, parrots, cuckoos, nightjars, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, tyrant flycatchers, vireos and wood warblers. With persistence we should see the great majority of these specialities. Apart from the endemic birds, the pleasant tropical climate encourages many North American passerines to winter on these islands and even more to make a stopover while on spring migration.

We start our journey in the Dominican Republic, which comprises the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola. Here we will spend most of our time in the forested valleys of the Sierra de Bahoruco and on the shores of Lago Enriquillo, the largest lake in the Caribbean. At lower altitudes we will be looking for the famous Palmchat as well as many other endemics including Ashy-faced Owl, Hispaniolan Nightjar, Least Poorwill, the splendid Broad-billed Tody, Hispaniolan Parrot, the strange Hispaniolan Lizard-Cuckoo, the rare Bay-breasted Cuckoo, Antillean Piculet, Hispaniolan Woodpecker, Hispaniolan Pewee, White-necked Crow, Flat-billed Vireo, Black-crowned Palm-Tanager, Hispaniolan Stripe-headed Tanager (or Hispaniolan Spindalis), and Hispaniolan Oriole.

At higher altitudes we will be looking for Hispaniolan (or White-fronted) Quail-Dove, Hispaniolan Parakeet,

Hispaniolan Emerald, Narrow-billed Tody, Hispaniolan Trogon, Golden Swallow, Hispaniolan Palm Crow, the rare La Selle Thrush, the attractive Hispaniolan Highland-Tanager and the skulking Green-tailed Ground-Tanager (the latter two species were previously thought to be parulid warblers!), the skulking Western and Eastern Chat-Tanagers, Antillean Siskin and Hispaniolan Crossbill.

We will also explore the remote wilderness that is Los Haitises National Park, an area that is the last stronghold of the increasingly rare endemic Ridgway's Hawk.

From Hispaniola we will fly eastwards to the much smaller island of Puerto Rico, where we will visit the tropical rainforest of the Luquillo Mountains. Later we will work the trails of the humid reserve of Maricao, before travelling to the dry forests of Guanica. Here we will be seeking out such endemics as the weird Puerto Rican Lizard Cuckoo, Puerto Rican Screech-Owl (which also occurs on the Virgin Islands), the rare Puerto Rican Nightjar, Puerto Rican Emerald, Green Mango, the lovely Puerto Rican Tody, Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Puerto Rican Pewee, Puerto Rican Flycatcher, Puerto Rican Vireo, the rare Elfin Woods Warbler, the lovely Adelaide's Warbler, Puerto Rican Tanager, Puerto Rican Stripe-headed Tanager (or Puerto Rican Spindalis), Puerto Rican Bullfinch, Puerto Rican Oriole, the declining Yellow-shouldered Blackbird and, with luck, the critically-endangered Puerto Rican Parrot.





*Northern Potoo (Craig Robson)*

By the end of our journey through these two fascinating islands we should have seen the vast majority of their endemic birds, as well as many other Caribbean specialities, while enjoying some beautiful scenery and the special atmosphere of the Caribbean.

Birdquest has operated tours to Hispaniola and Puerto Rico since 1998.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour begins in the early evening at Santo Domingo airport on Hispaniola. From here we will drive westwards to Barahona for a three nights stay.

**Days 2-3** We will be based in a comfortable hotel in Barahona, on the south coast of Hispaniola, while we explore the lower and middle elevations of the Sierra de Bahoruco, the remote Sierra de Neiba and the lowlands in the vicinity of Lago Enriquillo and Laguna de Oviedo.

The dry woodland of the lower and middle altitudes of the Sierra de Bahoruco offers some exciting birding. Most of the trees are draped in black, moss-like bromeliads and the undergrowth consists of dense, thorny scrub. The stunning Broad-billed Tody, with its grass-green crown and upperparts, cherry-red throat patch, lemon belly and bubble-gum pink

flanks must surely rank as one of the world's most beautiful birds. It is one of just four members of the tody family, *Todidae*, which is restricted to the Greater Antilles. Other Hispaniolan endemics found here include Hispaniolan Parrot, the bizarre Hispaniolan Lizard-Cuckoo, the rare and declining Bay-breasted Cuckoo (still used in traditional medicine by the local inhabitants), the attractive Antillean Piculet (belonging to the monotypic genus *Nesocittes*), the adaptable Hispaniolan Woodpecker, Hispaniolan Pewee, Flat-billed Vireo, Black-crowned Palm-Tanager and the beautiful Hispaniolan Stripe-headed Tanager (or Hispaniolan Spindalis). We will also be on the lookout for more widespread Caribbean specialities such as Scaly-naped (or Red-necked) and White-crowned Pigeons, the smart Zenaida Dove, Antillean Mango, the tiny Vervain Hummingbird (found also in Jamaica), the smart Red-legged Thrush, Antillean Euphonia and Greater Antillean Bullfinch. Birds of wider distribution may well include the retiring Ruddy Quail-Dove, the introduced Jamaican Parakeet, Bananaquit and an array of wintering wood-warblers including Black-and-white, Prairie, Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, Cape May and Palm Warblers, Ovenbird and American Redstart.

In the lowlands, patches of Royal Palms provide nesting sites for Hispaniola's most interesting endemic, the strange Palmchat, sole member of its family. These noisy and garrulous birds, which are distant relatives of the waxwings and silky flycatchers, build large communal nests of dead twigs. The strange White-necked Crow also favours areas with Royal Palms. Now extinct in Puerto Rico, and so endemic to Hispaniola, the species is easily recognizable by its loud and liquid calls, its peculiar, leisurely flight and its bright red eye. Minute Antillean Palm-Swifts nest here as well, flying in and out of their saliva-cemented nest constructions, which are attached to the undersides of the palm fronds, while the localized and retiring Plain Pigeon (endemic to the Greater Antilles) is another devotee of palm groves and Caribbean Martins often hunt for insects in the vicinity.

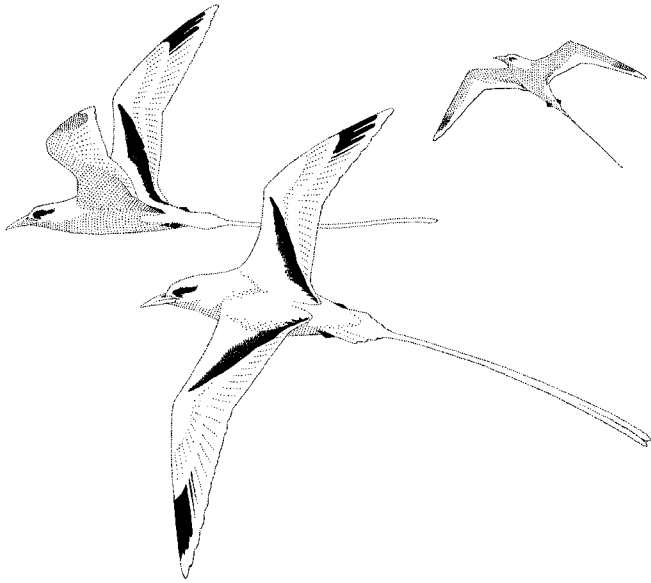
In a large depression west of Barahona lies the saline Lago Enriquillo, the largest lake in the Caribbean. Once an ocean bay but later cut off by geological events, its surface lies now over 40m below sea-level. The brackish Lago Enriquillo and nearby Laguna de Oviedo often hold a small flock of colourful American Flamingoes, as well as the crepuscular West Indian Whistling-Duck, White-cheeked Pintail and Caribbean Coot. Amongst the many other waterbirds are Pied-billed and Least Grebes, Brown Pelican, Great Blue, Little Blue, Tricolored and Green Herons, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Western Cattle, Great and Snowy Egrets, White and Glossy Ibises, Roseate Spoonbill, Blue-winged Teal, American Coot, Black-necked Stilt, Black-bellied (or Grey), Semipalmated and Snowy Plovers, Killdeer, Spotted, Solitary, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Laughing Gull and Gull-

billed, Caspian and Royal Terns. Additional species may well include Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Mangrove Cuckoo, Belted Kingfisher and Northern Waterthrush. Visiting Magnificent Frigatebirds forage over the lagoons.

Lago Enriquillo is surrounded by desert terrain reminiscent of Arizona, and partly cultivated area. Here the ubiquitous Northern Mockingbird perches atop roadside bushes and White-winged and Mourning Doves, Common Ground-Doves, Stolid Flycatchers and Yellow-faced Grassquits abound, while other species are likely to include Gray Kingbird, the endemic Hispaniolan Oriole (part of the Greater Antillean Oriole complex) and Greater Antillean Grackle. In the nearby xerophytic scrub zone we can expect to find Smooth-billed Ani, Burrowing Owl, Loggerhead Kingbird and Black-whiskered Vireo. Small colonies of introduced Village Weavers occur near some of the small human settlements.

The area offers some exciting nightbirding as well and we shall be making a serious effort to obtain views of the diminutive endemic Least Poorwill, the very vocal endemic Hispaniolan Nightjar (part of the Greater Antillean Nightjar complex) and the inscrutable endemic Ashy-faced Owl and the splendid Northern Potoo.

We will also follow a really atrocious track into the higher reaches of the Sierra de Neiba, north of Lago Enriquillo, in search of the hard-to-find endemic Eastern Chat-Tanager. It differs only subtly in plumage from Western Chat-Tanager, but has a very different song. It favours evergreen shrubbery at the edge of montane forest. We should also encounter the widespread Rufous-collared Sparrow at its only Caribbean location.



*White-tailed Tropicbirds (Tony Disley)*

**Day 4** After some more birding at lower altitudes we will climb into the Sierra de Bahoruco to Barancoli Camp for a two nights stay.

**Day 5** We will leave early this morning in order to reach the upper elevations of the rugged Sierra de Bahoruco by dawn,. Here the forest is even wetter and the evergreen broadleaf trees are covered with a heavy load of bromeliads, vines and other epiphytes. Here, close to the Haitian border, the mountains are often shrouded in clouds. The ethereal song of the lovely Rufous-throated Solitaire fills the crisp morning air and resplendent endemic Hispaniolan Trogons perch quietly amidst the emerald foliage. Endemic Narrow-billed Todies replace their lowland cousins and the endemic Western Chat-Tanager, a large species that looks and behaves more like an Asian babbler than a tanager, skulks in the dense undergrowth. The greatest prize here in these cool montane forests is Hispaniola's most sought-after endemic bird, the secretive La Selle Thrush, which was unknown to science until Alexander Wetmore discovered the species in 1927 on Morne

La Visite in Haiti. We stand the best chance of seeing this elusive bird at dawn (or dusk), when it tends to be less retiring and may be located by listening for its loud carolling song. Other endemics that we will be wanting to find in these humid, high-elevation forests include the shy and timid Hispaniolan (or White-throated) Quail-Dove (split from Gray-headed), Hispaniolan Emerald, the attractive Hispaniolan Highland-Tanager (formerly called White-winged Warbler and placed in the parulids, this species has more recently been found to be a tanager) and the unobtrusive Green-tailed Ground-Tanager (another species that was formerly considered a parulid warbler).

We shall also explore the dry pine habitat on the south-facing slopes of the Sierra. The most surprising and unexpected species here on this Caribbean island is surely the endemic Hispaniolan Crossbill (split from White-winged or Two-barred). With a bit of luck we should find this species cavorting in the pines or coming down to drink at a favourite pool, sometimes with the perky endemic

Antillean Siskin. Handsome Golden Swallows (now extinct on Jamaica and so endemic to Hispaniola) often patrol the forested ridges while Hispaniolan Parakeets screech as they fly past and Hispaniolan Palm Crows utter their raucous calls from the treetops. Additional species here may well include Sharp-shinned and Red-tailed Hawks, and Pine Warbler.

**Day 6** After a final day in the Sierra de Bahoruco we will return to Barahona for an overnight stay.

**Day 7** After a final morning in the Barahona region we will drive via Santo Domingo to Los Haitises National Park for a two nights stay. Sea cliffs near Santo Domingo, which we will visit en route, hold colonies of Cave Swallow and sometimes a few elegant White-tailed Tropicbirds.

**Day 8** Ridgway's Hawk used to be a widespread raptor on Hispaniola, but habitat loss through large-scale clearance for livestock farming and coffee plantations, together with direct persecution, led to a disastrous decline. This once-common endemic is now virtually confined to Los Haitises National Park, which is situated at the head of Samana bay, due north of the capital. We stand a very good chance of encountering this interesting species, which is now considered to be the rarest *Buteo* on earth, with a surviving population of only 200-250 individuals. It favours the subcanopy and only relatively rarely takes to the sky and rides the thermals as so many other *Buteo* species do. We will have the whole day to try to track down this enigmatic species, but off course we will also encounter many other Hispaniolan specialities in the process.

**Day 9** This morning we will return to Santo Domingo airport and take a short flight to San Juan, the capital of

Puerto Rico. After arrival we will transfer to our hotel in nearby Luquillo for an overnight stay.

**Day 10** The Caribbean National Forest covers about 25,000 acres (10,000 hectares) in the Luquillo Mountains. This area receives more rainfall than any other locality in Puerto Rico, resulting in the occurrence of a dense rainforest on the lower slopes of El Yunque, a peak which rises to 3494ft (1065m). At higher altitude palm forest takes over and stunted, moss-draped dwarf forest huddles on the highest peaks and ridges. Giant ferns, bamboo thickets and tiny wild orchids are a feature of this reserve, which was severely damaged by Hurricane Hugo in 1989 and again by Hurricane George in 1998. We plan to be in the forest before dawn so we can track down the near-endemic Puerto Rican Screech-Owl (which also occurs on some small islets near Puerto Rico and in the Virgin Islands). Tremulous trills and fear-inspiring maniacal laughs usually betray the whereabouts of this atypical, eartuft-less member of the genus *Megascops*.

The highly endangered Puerto Rican Parrot is now restricted to a small and largely inaccessible part of the eastern Luquillo Mountains and to the Rio Abajo State Reserve in north-central Puerto Rico. At the moment there are only about 40 individuals left in the wild, so we will have to be lucky to encounter this parrot, whose population was almost wiped out by Hurricane Hugo (in 2000 and 2001 about 25 captive individuals were released in order to augment the surviving population). From our carefully-chosen viewpoint we stand a real chance of observing this rarest of all the Puerto Rican endemics as the birds move between their roost sites and the fruiting trees in which

they will spend much of the day.

Berry-bearing trees surrounding the open area at the viewpoint are often raided by families of smart endemic Puerto Rican Woodpeckers and drably-garbed endemic Puerto Rican Tanagers. The Green Mango is a large but rather unobtrusive endemic hummingbird which habitually resides near one of the waterfalls. We should also find such other endemics as Puerto Rican Emerald, Puerto Rican Tody (the third tody of the tour), Puerto Rican Stripe-headed Tanager (or Puerto Rican Spindalis) and Puerto Rican Bullfinch.

Later we shall explore some dry coastal scrub and the adjacent shoreline before travelling southwestwards to San German for a three nights stay. Flowering bushes in the northeast of Puerto Rico are often visited by Antillean Crested Hummingbird (of the green-crested race) and Green-throated Carib, two smart hummingbirds that are otherwise restricted to the Lesser Antilles. Other species we could see here include the mean-looking Pearly-eyed Thrasher and Antillean Mango. Brown Boobies sometimes fish in the shallow bays.

**Days 11-12** Not far from San German is the Maricao State Forest, where we will explore the lush montane environment. This reserve offers us the best chance to observe the rare Elfin Woods Warbler, a species that was only discovered in 1971 in elfin forest in the Luquillo Mountains. It resembles a Black-and-white Warbler, but has a rather different head pattern and favours the sub-canopy of the montane forest. The total population of this fairly elusive endemic may be no more than 300 pairs. From dense thickets the emphatic and nasal call of the weird-looking endemic Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo emanates through the forest, and we will try to lure this lethargic and fearless bird into view. Mixed feeding flocks containing such endemics as Puerto Rican Pewee, Puerto Rican Vireo and Puerto Rican Oriole (part of the Greater Antillean Oriole complex) will provide additional entertainment.

We will also search the arid scrubland and mangrove areas of the southwest of the island for the localized and declining endemic Yellow-shouldered Blackbird. This once-common species has been plagued by the arrival of the Shiny Cowbird, a fairly

recent colonizer from South America. This nest parasite has chosen the Yellow-shouldered Blackbird as its principal host and now the total population numbers only about 1250, in spite of continuous efforts to control the Shiny Cowbird population.

In addition, we will spend some time in the International Biosphere Reserve of Guanica, which is situated on the hilly south coast of the island and protects an extensive area of subtropical dry, near-xerophytic forest. Many of the Puerto Rican endemics and Caribbean specialities are found here, but the handsome endemic Adelaide's Warbler will certainly steal the show. Other species here should include the rather dull Caribbean Elaenia and the endemic Puerto Rican Flycatcher. Mangrove-fringed pools often harbour Clapper Rails as well as a variety of egrets, herons and migrant waders. At dusk we will hope to hear the whistled 'whip' notes of the Puerto Rican Nightjar, a species that, until 1961, when a surviving population was discovered in Guanica forest, was only known from a skin collected in 1888! By carefully using the spotlight, we should be able to study this remarkable bird.

**Day 13** After some final birding we shall return to San Juan, where the tour ends around midday.

#### **Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The hotels are of normal standard almost throughout. Barancoli Camp in the Sierra de Bahoruco, where we spend two nights, is pleasantly situated but fairly basic and bathroom facilities are shared. Transport is by small coach and minibus/passenger van, and roads are mostly good, except in the sierras in the Dominican Republic.

**Walking etc:** The walking effort is easy throughout. There are some very long days in the field in the Dominican Republic, where some of the nightbird specialities are hard to find.

**Climate:** Mostly warm or hot, dry and sunny, but it is sometimes cool and overcast. It may rain at times.

#### **Bird Photography:**

Opportunities are worthwhile.

**Part-Tour Option:** Subject to space being available, you can opt to take the Hispaniola section only or the Puerto Rico section only. Please contact us for further information.