

Trip Report: Cuba (Havana, Zapata & Topes de Collantes)

July 8th – 16th 2017



This report summarises a one week visit to Cuba, during which I attended the BirdsCaribbean bi-annual conference held at the Parque Nacional Topes de Collantes in the Escambray Mountains (Sancti Spíritus province), preceded by a four day cultural and birding tour of Havana and Zapata (Matanzas province).

The 17 participants on the pre-conference tour included academics, environmental and tourism professionals, and other interested parties from across the US and Caribbean region who were also continuing on to attend the conference. Despite this dauntingly large birding group, we enjoyed a very positive overall dynamic and, I think without exception, all managed to see the key birds encountered along our route. In addition to the expert facilitation by the tandem of Attila (our cultural guide) and Maydiel Cañizares (our specialist bird guide) the positive group vibe was very much attributable to the patience, energy, birding skills and shared interests of the participants. This was no ordinary, oversized tour group struggling to get on to the birds!



Mirror, mirror on the wall ... Cuban Tody [Topes de Collantes]

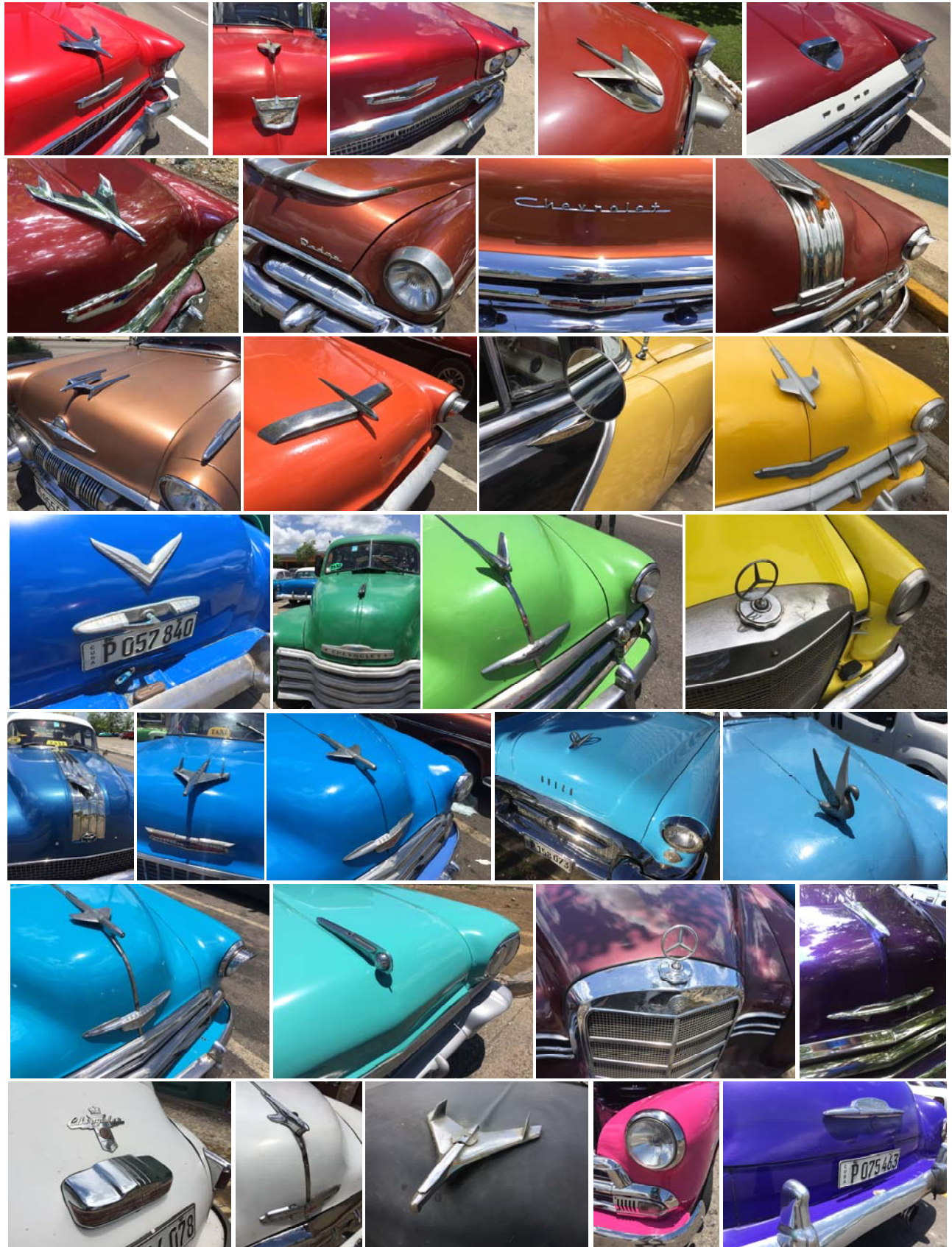
The BirdsCaribbean conference itself was intellectually and culturally stimulating, and felt very inclusive for me as a first timer. Many interesting presentations were delivered and there were excellent networking opportunities amongst the 240 delegates from across the Caribbean. Outside of the core conference activities, I also participated in a conference-organized field trip to the nearby historic town of Trinidad, and squeezed in some early-morning and late-afternoon self-guided birding sessions. With good habitat on our hotel's doorstep, excellent birders including Willy, Vision, Adams, Jessica, Jen and Ricardo for company, and our growing knowledge about birding in Cuba, these were productive and enjoyable outings.

Over the course of the week I saw almost all the endemics and regional specialties that one could reasonably expect for the locations visited during this itinerary. This included 17 Cuban endemics within a personal trip total of 79 species (including 30 lifers). Detailed bird counts for each specific site visited have been entered into eBird (a total of 14 separate checklists, with special thanks to Martha and The Bahamas team, who maintained a master checklist on behalf of the tour participants). I have included at the end of this trip report a consolidated list of the species encountered in each of the three broad areas (Havana, Zapata lowlands, and Topes de Collantes), along with a personal commentary for some key species.

The first two nights of the tour were spent in Havana, providing sufficient time to explore the city, sample mojitos, and enjoy meals in the surprisingly good private restaurants within walking distance of our hotel. Attila led us on an informative morning walk through the extensive and impressive historical city centre, which delivered a bonus of two lifers – Antillean Palm-Swifts (also flying around the entrance to our hotel) and Cuban Martins. A relaxed evening enjoying the sunset and 21:00 canon firing ceremony at the Castillo de San Carlos de la Cabaña was an opportunity to mingle with tourists and locals alike in an historic setting.



Sights around Havana, including the cathedral kitten, and a tagged (not K-9) and neutered stray dog in the old city



A rainbow spectrum of vintage cars in Cuba



Colourful Cuban drinks

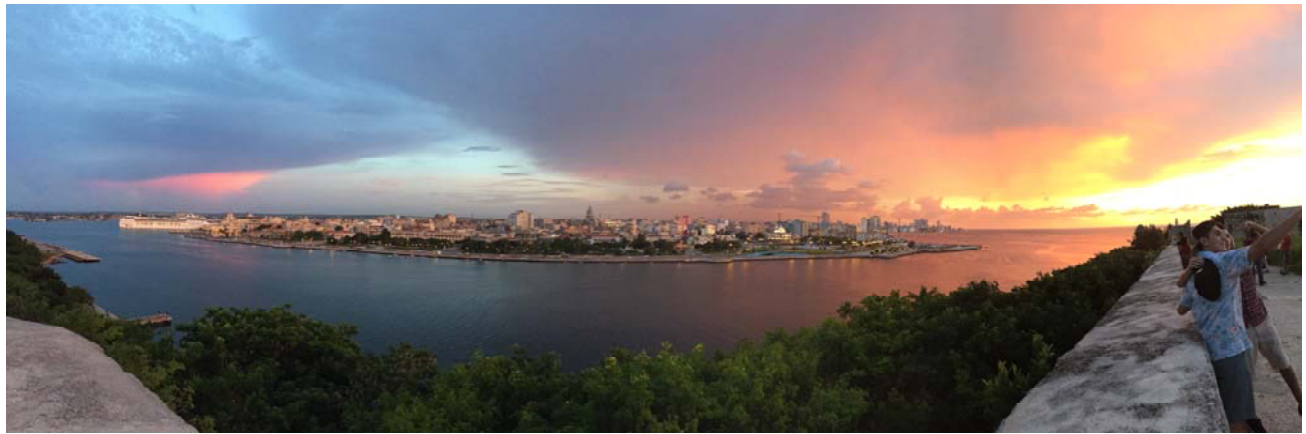
In order to squeeze in some birding on both of our free afternoons in Havana, I took a 30-minute taxi ride each day to the Jardín Botánico Nacional (located in the countryside south of the city), with most of the other tour participants accompanying me during the second of these visits. The reward for getting out of the city and into some woodland was several lifers and two more Cuban endemics - Cuban Green Woodpecker and Cuban Blackbird (the latter mixed in with Greater Antillean Grackles, giving an early opportunity to compare and contrast amongst mixed flocks feeding on the ground). Other lifers for me included West Indian Woodpeckers (seen attending a nest hole), Cuban Emerald (not an endemic), Cuban Pewee (another of the non-endemic “Cubans”), Great Lizard Cuckoo (large and raucous), La Sagra’s Flycatcher (drab, and the only *myiarchus* present during summer), Loggerhead Kingbird, and Tawny-shouldered Blackbird.



Attila showing our group around the Castillo de San Carlos de la Cabaña overlooking the harbour in Havana



West Indian Woodpecker [Jardin Botánico Nacional]



Sunset over the historic centre of Havana, as seen from the Castillo de San Carlos de la Cabaña

From Havana we drove several hours south and east towards Zapata, a hotspot of endemism, for the core birding component of the tour. Maydiel, a guide from the Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata, was there to meet us. First on the itinerary, during the heat of the day, was a siesta at our hotel at Playa Larga on the Bay of Pigs. So, naturally, Willy and I set off instead for some independent birding along a trail behind the beach on the eastern edge of the hotel's grounds. Our efforts did not go unrewarded, with Cuba's national bird, a Cuban Trogon heard and - eventually - seen calling in some mangroves and several Yellow-headed Warblers seen and photographed. Two more endemics under our belt, and we hadn't even started the official birding! Little did we know that the Cuban Trogon is surely the easiest trogon in the world to find - I probably saw at least 50 during the week - and after a few days it felt to me as though we were not really bothering to look for them any more unless they were potentially well perched for a photo. What a luxury!



Yellow-headed Warbler [Playa Larga, Zapata]



Bee Hummingbird [Soplillar, Zapata]



Bee Hummingbird (female) [Soplillar, Zapata]

The birding pace and quality accelerated from there, starting with a visit to a small, private garden in the modest village of Palpite a few km north of Playa Larga. Our hosts, Bernabe and Juanita, proudly showed us several Bee Hummingbirds visiting the flowering bushes and sugar-water feeders, plus a juvenile Cuban Oriole that seemed to be interested in the sugar-water. The male Bee Hummingbird is generally acknowledged to be the smallest bird in the world and two reclusive males (that generally perched deep within a flowering bush) and three confident females were enjoyed from point blank range. The female is slightly larger than the male (albeit imperceptibly so to the observer in the field) and is apparently also slightly larger than the Vervain Hummingbird that is found elsewhere in the Greater Antilles. In comparison with the Cuban Emeralds perched nearby, all of the Bee Hummingbirds seemed very diminutive. Seeing this ultra-tiny gem brought back fond memories of seeing the world's smallest passerine – Short-tailed Pygmy Tyrant (*Myiornis ecaudatus*) – hovering like a large bee in the forest near to the Barquilla de Fresa, Venezuela during a trip with Emma and David M-K.

After a short drive east of Soplillar, we set off along a 4WD track into the forest and across a palm savannah in an attempt to see as many endemics as possible before a seemingly imminent thunderstorm put paid to the afternoon's birding. We racked up quality birds at a frenetic pace. This included Cuban Trogons (of course), our first Cuban Tody (a somewhat angrily buzzing, green, red, and pink coloured, golf ball-sized wonder of nature), Cuban Pygmy-Owls (two peering down from the canopy), Bare-legged Owl (one peering out from its roost hole), Cuban Green Woodpecker (one frantically digging in a palm tree), and Cuban Parrots (flying overheard to their roost sites; not endemic). As we retreated towards the bus, a pair of Gray-fronted Quail-Dove appeared on the track for all to admire. What a bonus. And still the storm held off!



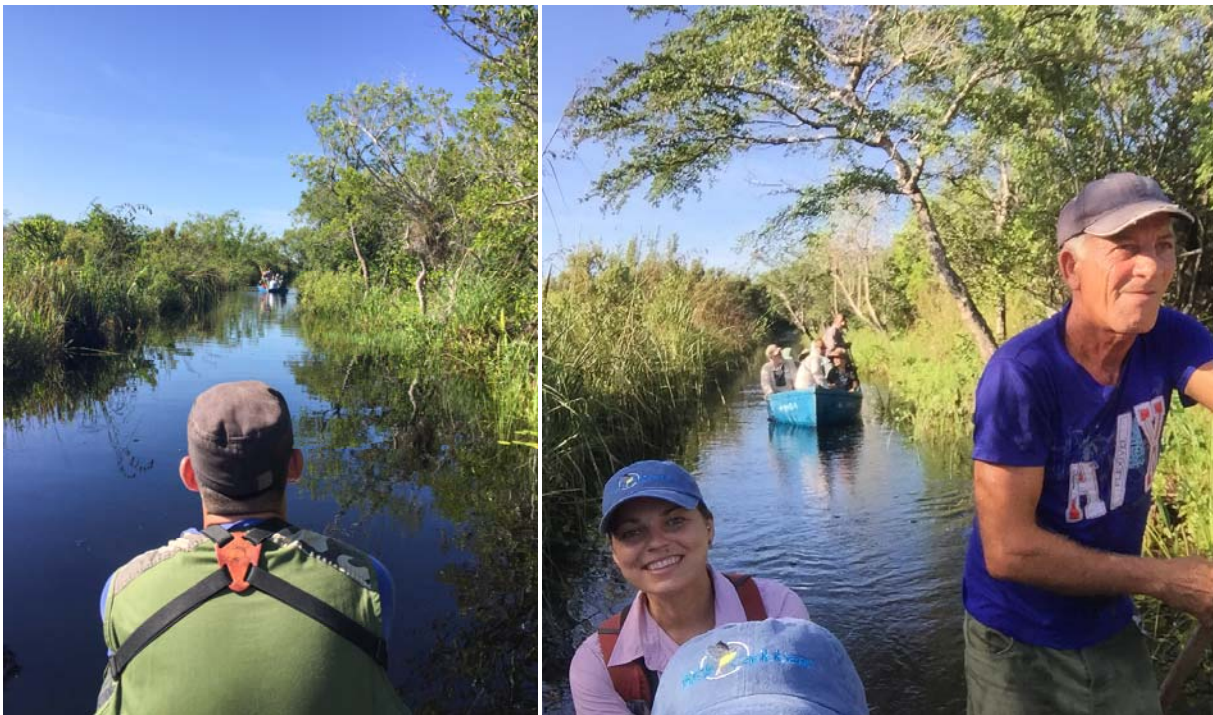
Bare-legged Owl [Soplillar, Zapata]

En route to a nearby site just north of Soplillar, we saw our only Cuban Crow (yet another non-endemic “Cuban”) of the trip. A walk through another palm savannah was rewarded with distant views of Cuban Orioles in the canopy and our only Fernandina’s Flicker (apparently one of more easily missed endemics). We waited in the area until it was almost dark, seeing a constant stream of birds, but failing to elicit any response from the Cuban Nightjars that often frequent the area. Back at Playa Larga we enjoyed a well-earned dinner and celebration of an epic afternoon of birding that had delivered no less than 10 Cuban endemics and several more Cuban specialties.



Sunset over a palm savannah [Soplillar, Zapata]

Next morning was our chance to see two of Zapata’s key birds - Zapata Wren and Zapata Sparrow - in the Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata. On arrival at the community of Santo Tomas we were informed that high waters had flooded the access track to the boats that we would be using to access the swamp, so it was off with the hiking boots as we waded through knee deep water for several hundred meters towards the point where the boats would be able to meet us. We then punted our way slowly along a channel through the sawgrass and bushes that comprise this edge of the swamp, birding along the way. The first endemics of the day were several Yellow-headed Warblers, followed by a responsive Zapata Sparrow that initially skulked in the darkness, before popping onto the top of a bush to call indignantly in our direction.



Maydiel leads the punts in search of Zapata Wren and Zapata Sparrow [Parque Nacional Zapata]

Eventually we reached the boardwalk that provided access to Zapata Wren habitat – so off we waded through the ca. 6 inches of tannin-stained water on top of the boardwalk. Huddled together on the submerged boardwalk we waited for a response from the Zapata Wren, and then suddenly there it was, calling at full voice from within a nearby bush. Miraculously, we all managed to safely shuffle ourselves around so that everyone secured a view, without anyone falling off. Eventually the wren moved to a more open perch, where it proceeded to serenade us for several more minutes. Mid-chorus, another Zapata Sparrow flew in, perched perfectly in front of us, and then departed before cameras could be raised in its direction.

Punting slowly back to the dock, satisfied with our success and quietly hoping that the rising water levels in our boat would not reach the gunwales, we searched for two further endemics – successfully locating a pair of Cuban Bullfinches, but getting no response from any of the Red-shouldered Blackbirds sometimes found in this area. Finally, during the hike out along the flooded trail, we found our first small group of Western Spindalis, including a brightly patterned male.



Zapata Sparrow ; Zapata Wren [Parque Nacional Cienaga de Zapata]

The afternoon was spent driving along the dirt road that cuts through the saltpans at Las Salinas, with one key objective in mind – the endemic Cuban Black-Hawk. But first on the menu was a Stygian Owl that we flushed from a roadside perch - its' tail feathers practically brushing the windshield of the bus - before it perched again directly over the road. We stopped and enjoyed walk-away views, although the low surrounding vegetation resulted in backlighting that made for challenging photographic conditions. Over the course of the next couple of hours we saw six Cuban Black-Hawks, including one briefly perched close to the road, along with a wide variety of more common shore and shallow water birds. The hundreds of brightly coloured American Flamingos wading in the shallows were another crowd pleaser.



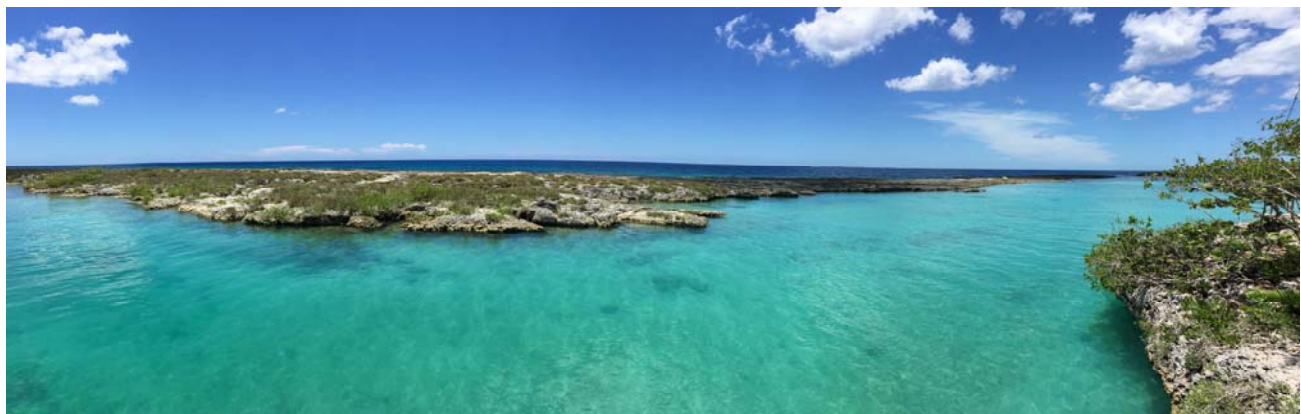
Stygian Owl [Las Salinas, Zapata]; Cuban Vireo [near Calata Buena, Zapata]

The final morning of the tour was intended to be our best opportunity to see Blue-headed, Gray-fronted and Key West Quail-Doves from a blind in a forest reserve at Bermeja, where they are fed by a local guard. In the end, it was a rather disappointing experience due to the logistics – we left our hotel rather late, and the guard who usually puts out food on the trail had been sick and therefore unable to do so. By the time we arrived at 08:00 there was no sign of any Quail-Doves at the hide, nor along the forest trails. On the plus side, we did secure some great views of small family groups of Cuban Vireos with juveniles. On the minus side, I donated large amounts of blood to the voracious mosquitos (a common occurrence during our time in the Zapata area). At 09:30 it was announced that our birding was over and we were heading to the coast for lunch!

To our relief, when we arrived for lunch (at 10:00) we found a quiet dirt road that headed through dry forest inland from the Caleta Buena coastal resort. There we saw some good birds, including excellent views of confiding Cuban Vireos, Cuban Pewees and La Sagra’s Flycatchers. It was very hot, so I eventually retreated to the beautiful and protected cove for a swim in the Caribbean, followed by a dip in the fresh water cenote only meters away. Lovely and refreshing - as were the unlimited cocktails at the bar, where the other attraction was the Cave Swallows nesting in the roof.



Horse and cart tracks alongside a country road [Zapata]



Fabulous swimming cove at Caleta Buena [Zapata]

As the tour drew to a close, we headed off on a long drive through Cienfuegos towards Topes de Collantes and the BirdsCaribbean conference venue located at some 750m ASL in the pleasantly cooler Escambray Mountains. Here the birding was *a la carte*, with opportunities for good birding along the roadsides (starting right outside the Hotel Los Helechos, where half of the conference participants were staying) and along several nearby forest trails.

The only new Cuban endemic I saw at Topes de Collantes was a flock of Cuban Parakeets that flew over the canopy, but I secured better views of several of the endemics and specialities seen earlier on the trip. A highlight - and indeed one of my all-time favourite birding / photography moments - was when a Cuban Tody spent a couple of minutes moving between eye level perches in the forest and allowed me to take almost point blank photos of its amazing blend of green, red, white, pink, and yellow, with a touch of blue. Despite the gloomy lighting conditions and my pumping adrenalin, I managed to find a tree to brace myself against and stay calm enough to take a string of photos to capture the magical moment.



Cuban Emerald (female) [Topes de Collantes]



Cuban Pewee [Topes de Collantes]



Cuban Tody [Topes de Collantes]



Cuban Trogon [Topes de Collantes]

The best hike that I did around Topes de Collantes was the 8km return trip along the Batata trail to a grotto. Whilst birding along the trail with Vision, Adams, Jessica and Jen we saw many of the good birds found in this area, highlighted by close, eye-level views of a Cuban Pygmy-Owl. At the grotto, dozens of White-collared Swifts circled low over the canopy, and two well-secured cables provided handrails to safely access the dark interior - without having to resort to swimming.

The mid-conference field trip to the historical town of Trinidad was interesting, although the high temperatures were not conducive to loitering in the streets. A depressingly large number of caged songbirds - including Cuban Blackbirds, Northern Mockingbirds and many Cuban Bullfinches - hung from porches, prompting Willy's suggestion of submitting an eBird entry for the 'cage birds of Trinidad'.



Cuban Parrot [Topes de Collantes]



Cuban Pygmy-Owl [Topes de Collantes]



View from inside the Batata Grotto; Cuban Knight Anole [both at Topes de Collantes]



Black-whiskered Vireo [Topes de Collantes]

My overall reflections on birding in Cuba? The country holds many fabulous, conspicuous endemics, although a local guide is needed to access some of the key sites in Zapata. The national parks and other reserves protect some excellent birding habitat and the Caribbean waters along the limestone edged south coast are lovely. Travel times around Cuba can be long - exacerbated by relatively slow average speeds, even when travelling on main roads. The food and accommodation varies from reasonable to surprisingly good. Prices paid for goods and services by tourists (who all pay with the CUC - roughly equivalent to a USD) are higher than I expected - often similar to US prices. Whilst Spanish skills are definitely of benefit for enhancing the visitor experience, many people working in the tourist sector speak English or other European languages. There is a low apparent security risk – even when carrying binoculars and cameras. Cultural opportunities in Havana and Trinidad are very interesting, with few overt displays of political propaganda. Finally, the logistical challenges for ‘US persons’ are not a significant impediment to planning a visit - I flew directly into Havana from Miami and departed directly from Cienfuegos to Miami, both on American Airlines. Hopefully I will get the chance to return again and successfully find the remaining 10 endemics!

1. Bird Trip List¹

Confirmed personal sightings only for DJS – excludes birds heard only unless otherwise indicated. As field guide I used ‘Endemic Birds of Cuba’ by Nils Navarro and ‘Birds of the West Indies’ by Herb Raffaele et al. Some names have been updated since the latter guide was published, so birds in the trip list are identified as per ‘The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World’, Cornell, 2007 with updates through December 2010 (online version 6.5), unless otherwise specified.

Locations where species seen in sequence of travel:

H = Havana, including urban birding at sea level around the Malecon and parks near to the Hotel Melia Cohiba (07:00 – 08:30 on July 9th); old-town Havana (10:00-12:30 on July 9th); and two visits to the Jardin Botánico Nacional located in the countryside outside the city (15:00-16:30 on July 8th and 15:00-16:30 on July 9th). The weather was warm, with late-afternoon thunderstorms on both days.

Z = Zapata lowlands (Matanzas province), including a visit to the garden of Bernabe and Juanita’s house in the village of Palpite (16:00-16:30 on July 10th); woodland and palm savannah east and north of Soplillar (17:00-20:30 on July 10th); swamp habitat in the Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata at Santo Tomas, including a boat ride to a submerged board walk (07:00-11:00 on July 11th); the access road to the salt pans at Las Salinas (16:00-18:30 on July 11th); birding around the hotel grounds and beach at Playa Larga (early-afternoons of July 10th and 11th); a brief morning at the Refugio de Fauna Bermeja (08:00-09:30 on July 12th); and birding along a dirt road and on the coastline whilst we waited for lunch at Caleta Buena (10:00-13:00 on July 12th). The weather was very hot, with late-afternoon thunderstorms threatening (but failing to) to wash out our birding on the 10th.

TdC = Parque Nacional Topes de Collantes in the Escambray Mountains (Sancti Spíritus province), including short early-morning and late-afternoon birding sessions along the road downhill from the Hotel Los Helechos at ~ 750m ASL (from afternoon of July 12th through to the afternoon of July 15th), a full morning birding along the nearby La Batata trail (07:30-12:00 on July 16th) and some early afternoon roadside birding at the base of the hills on the outskirts of Trinidad (14:30-15:30 July 15th). The weather was warm, with late-afternoon thunderstorms on several afternoons.

I have added eBird reports for the main sites visited, and what follows is a compilation of the species included in those reports.

American Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* [Z] *: Hundreds in the salt pans.

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* [Z] :

Neotropic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus* [Z] :

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* [Z] *: Both blue and white morphs present in salt pans

Great Egret *Ardea alba* [Z] :

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula* [Z] :

Tricolored Heron *Egretta tricolor* [Z] :

Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens* [Z] : **Near-threatened**. Reddish and white morphs seen in the salt pans.

Green Heron *Butorides virescens* [Z] :

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron *Nyctanassa violacea* [TdC] : Two large juveniles seen being fed in a nest above a small stream. One juvenile was also seen standing on the bank of the stream.

White Ibis *Eudocimus albus* [Z] :

Roseate Spoonbill *Platalea ajaja* [Z] :

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura* [H; Z; TdC] : Ubiquitous across the country. During a pit stop at a gas station near to Nueva Paz en route along the A1 highway from Havana to Zapata, three Black vultures were also seen by some of the trip participants. Apparently there are only a handful of records of Black Vulture for Cuba. Our guide in Zapata, Maydiel Cañizares, had apparently only ever seen Black Vultures twice in all of his trips around Cuba. Does it make me a bad birder that I could not get especially excited about seeing three ‘out of place’ Black Vultures?!

¹ First sighting ever for DJS; **E** = Cuban endemic species; * = photo available

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* [Z] :

Cuban Black Hawk *Buteogallus gundlachi* **E** [Z] : **Near-threatened**. Six seen along the road that bisects the salt pans at Las Salinas. One bird seen nicely perched adjacent to the road flushed just as the bus came to a halt, with camera-laden birders preparing to descend...

Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus* [TdC] :

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis* [TdC] :

Limpkin *Aramus guarauna* [TdC] :

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus* [Z] :

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferous* [Z] :

Willet *Tringa semipalmata* [Z] :

Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla* [Z] :

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* [H; Z] :

Scaly-naped Pigeon *Patagioenas squamosa* [TdC] :

White-crowned Pigeon *Patagioenas leucocephala* [Z] : **Near-threatened**.

Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* [H] :

Common Ground-Dove *Columbina passerina* [Z] :

Ruddy Quail-Dove *Geotrygon montana* [TdC] : **heard only**

Gray-fronted Quail-Dove *Geotrygon caniceps* **E** [Z] : **Vulnerable**. Fortuitously, a pair was encountered as we walked along the 4WD track through the forest at Soplillar. Unfortunately no Gray-fronted, Blue-headed or Key West Quail-Doves were present at the blind at the Refugio de Fauna Bermeja when we visited rather late on our final morning in the Zapata area.

White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica* [H; TdC] :

Zenaida Dove *Zenaida aurita* [Z] :

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura* [H; Z] :

Smooth-billed Ani *Crotophaga ani* [Z] :

Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus* [Z] :

Great Lizard-Cuckoo *Coccyzus merlini* [H; Z; TdC] *: **Raucous**. Seen on most of our walks.

Bare-legged Owl *Margarobyas lawrencii* **E** [Z] *: One seen at its day roost in the trunk of a dead palm tree on the edge of a palm savannah. The palm tree was a 5m tall, multi-level condominium, with nest holes of woodpeckers and a Cuban Trogon in the same tree!

Cuban Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium siju* **E** [Z; TdC] *: Two heard and then seen high up in trees on the edge of the forest at Soplillar. Two more seen at eye level along the trail to the Batata Grotto, however the back-lighting made for challenging photographic conditions...

Stygian Owl *Asio stygius* [Z] *: One flushed from a roadside perch along the Las Salinas road, before perching again directly over the road, delivering walk-away views.

Antillean Nighthawk *Chordeiles gundlachi* [TdC] : A pair initially heard calling before first light over the Hotel Los Helechos continued to circle the area well after dawn.

Black Swift *Cypseloides niger* [TdC] : Seen flying near to the Hotel Los Helechos.

White-collared Swift *Streptoprocne zonaris* [TdC] : Dozens seen circling over the forest canopy.

Antillean Palm-Swift *Tachornis phoenicobia* [H; Z] : First lifer of the trip as more than a dozen swirled around the entrance to the Hotel Melia Cohiba in Havana.

Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae* **E** [Z] *: **Near-threatened**. What a tiny gem! Two reclusive males (that generally perched deep within a flowering bush) and three more confiding females were seen on a visit to the garden of Bernabe and Juanita in Soplillar.

Cuban Emerald *Chlorostilbon ricardii* [H; Z; TdC] *: The only other resident hummingbird, frequently seen on most of our walks in a variety of habitats across the country.

Cuban Trogon *Priotelus temnurus* [Z; TdC] *: Cuba's national bird, and a lovely thing it is with a unique tail silhouette. Surely the easiest trogon in the world to find – I probably saw at least 50 during the trip! One of the distinctive sounds of birding in Cuba, with their calls heard throughout the day and in a wide variety of intact habitat – we encountered them in habitats as diverse as mangroves adjacent to the beach at Playa Larga and in tall forest at 750m altitude in Topes de Collantes. Seemingly quite sedentary, with small groups of 2 or 3 often encountered in adjacent trees. A juvenile was seen perched mid-storey with two adults along the Batata trail.

Cuban Tody *Todus multicolor* [Z; TdC] *: Another gem. Less commonly encountered than the trogon, but its slightly 'stropy' call was heard during most walks through forest habitat in both Zapata and Topes de Collantes. My single most incredible birding / photographic experience of the trip was with an individual moving between eye level perches in the forest at Topes de Collantes. Two green and white/grey juveniles were seen with their parents at Topes de Collantes.

West Indian Woodpecker *Melanerpes superciliaris* [H; Z; TdC] *: Widespread across the areas we visited. A pair in the Jardín Botánico Nacional was attending an apparent nest hole.

Cuban Green Woodpecker *Xiphidiopicus percussus* [H; Z; TdC] *: Much less frequently encountered than the West Indian Woodpecker, but still seen on most walks in forest habitat.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus* [TdC] *: Only one individual seen in a palm tree on the forest edge at Topes de Collantes.

Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae* [Z] *: **Vulnerable**. Only one individual seen – and then at long range – before dusk during a walk across a palm savannah near to Soplillar. The last lifer and Cuban endemic of our first afternoon in Zapata, which had netted us 10 Cuban endemics in 4 hours birding!

Crested Caracara *Caracara cheriway* [Z] :

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius* [H; Z; TdC] *: A range of colours seen, from chestnut breasted individuals in the Jardín Botánico Nacional, to white-breasted ones around Zapata and Topes de Collantes.

Cuban Parrot *Amazona leucocephala* [Z; TdC] *: **Near-threatened**. Seen flying overhead and distantly perched. Seen in the canopy of tall trees during most walks in Topes de Collantes.

Cuban Parakeet *Psittacara euops* [TdC] *: **Vulnerable**. The only Cuban endemic seen only at Topes de Collantes, when a flock of 8 flew over the canopy on our first afternoon there.

Cuban Pewee *Contopus caribaesus* [H; Z; TdC] *: Relatively common and confiding, returning time after time to the same perch between sallies. Juveniles, with incomplete white crescents behind their eye, were seen at several locations.

La Sagra's Flycatcher *Myiarchus sagrae* [H; Z; TdC] *: A few individuals seen, often in close proximity to the more common Cuban Pewee.

Gray Kingbird *Tyrannus dominicensis* [H; Z; TdC] :

Loggerhead Kingbird *Tyrannus caudifasciatus* [H; Z; TdC] *: Readily distinguishable from the widespread Gray Kingbird thanks to its stronger black-white colour contrast and squarer tail.

Cuban Vireo *Vireo gundlachii* [Z] *: Common in dry forest habitat. Often in pairs or small groups, with juveniles seen on several occasions.

Black-whiskered Vireo *Vireo altiloquus* [Z; TdC] *: Seen on several occasions in dry and wet forest habitat.

Cuban Crow (*Corvus nasicus*) [Z] : One seen perched on a dead snag near to Soplillar.

Cuban Martin *Progne cryptoleuca* [H] : Common in urban Havana.

Cave Swallow *Petrochelidon fulva* [Z] : Dozens of nests in the roof of the bar at Caleta Buena.

Zapata Wren *Ferminia cerverei* [Z] *: **Endangered**. One responded to playback at the submerged boardwalk at its type location in the Zapata swamp. Somewhat furtive, although it sang vigorously from various partially concealed perches.

Red-legged Thrush *Turdus plumbeus* [H; Z; TdC] *: Seemingly ubiquitous throughout Cuba. Several individuals with red faces (due to molt?) seen in both Havana and Topes de Collantes. Several birds with juvenile plumages were seen.

Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos* [H; Z; TdC] :

Louisiana Waterthrush *Parkesia motacilla* [TdC] *: Two early returning migrants seen along a stream. Apparently the

first migrants already start heading back south through Florida before the end of June!

Yellow-headed Warbler *Teretistris fernandinae* [E] [Z] *: Small groups seen in dry habitat, including right up to the beach in Playa Larga where Willy and I found our first endemics of the Zapata leg of the trip.

Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus* [H; TdC] : Pairs seen in both locations. Potentially an introduced species.

Yellow-faced Grassquit *Tiaris olivaceus* [H; Z; TdC] *: Widespread, with lots of singing males. No Cuban Grassquits at the sites we visited (supposedly due to extirpation as a result of the cage bird trade).

Cuban Bullfinch *Melopyrrha nigra* [E] [Z] *: Two seen from our punt as we returned along the canal through the Zapata swamp from the Zapata Wren boardwalk. Others saw them at Topes de Collantes, but I did not. During our trip to the historic town of Trinidad, at the base of the Escambray mountains, we saw at least a dozen Cuban Bullfinches in cages hanging from the eaves of houses.

Western Spindalis *Spindalis zena* [Z; TdC] : Small family groups seen on the edge of the Zapata swamp and along the Batata trail. Lovely, but too high to photograph!

Zapata Sparrow *Torreornis inexpectata* [E] [Z] *: **Endangered**. Several responded to playback as we punted along the canal through the Zapata swamp towards the Zapata Wren boardwalk. This is a curiously distributed species, with two other disjunct populations that live in completely different habitats elsewhere in the country.

Tawny-shouldered Blackbird *Agelaius humeralis* [H; Z; TdC] : Widespread in small flocks.

Cuban Blackbird *Dives atrovioleaceus* [E] [H; Z; TdC] : Widespread, often mixed in with the Greater Antillean Grackles, as was the case in the Jardín Botánico Nacional where we got an early opportunity to compare and contrast amongst flocks feeding on the ground.

Greater Antillean Grackle *Quiscalus niger* [H; Z; TdC] *: Widespread, often mixed in with the Cuban Blackbirds, as was the case in the Jardín Botánico Nacional where we got an early opportunity to compare and contrast amongst flocks feeding on the ground.

Shiny Cowbird *Molothrus bonariensis* [H; Z] :

Cuban Oriole *Icterus melanopsis* [E] [Z; TdC] *: Uncommon. Individuals, pairs and small groups generally seen feeding high up at flowers and fruits.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* [H; Z] : **introduced**

Total 79 confirmed species for the trip, of which 30 were lifers for DJS and 17 are considered to be Cuban endemics as per <http://avibase.bsc-eoc.org>, which is also the source for the threatened status assessment included in this trip list.



Opening ceremony of the 21st BirdsCaribbean conference in front of some 240 delegates, Topes de Collantes