

CUBA

24 MARCH – 6 APRIL 2008

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' Jorge (who after several trips with Birdquest is now becoming an avid birder!) and our driver Sergio. The rainy season had started early this year and we experienced some spectacular afternoon thunderstorms in the last few days of the tour, but these did not hamper our birding and had the advantage of bringing the temperature down by a few degrees. The birding was, as always, superb, and we recorded a total of 167 species, including all of 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 but one of the 52 Caribbean specialities that are realistically possible on this tour, the only exception being the Antillean Nighthawk which had still not arrived back from its winter quarters somewhere in South America. Grey-headed and Key West Quail-Dove were easily found in the Zapata Peninsula, but this year the Blue-headed Quail-Dove was definitely playing hard to get, and it was only with considerable perseverance that we eventually found a bird on our last morning in Cuba. Some perseverance was also required for Zapata Wren and Cuban Grassquit, but both eventually showed well, while Zapata Sparrows gave wonderful views on two separate occasions. Other highlights included some very tame West Indian Whistling-Ducks in the keys, a little flock of Masked Ducks on a lake in the Sierra de Najasa, close views of a male Bee Hummingbird foraging in a row of flowering trees, a fine Stygian Owl at its day roost, and no less than 21 species of parulid warblers.

After an early evening arrival in Havana and good night's rest, our birding began 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 couple of hundred Least Sandpipers and a few Grey Plovers, Semipalmated Plovers, Killdeers and Spotted Sandpipers. Other birds here included a few Brown Pelicans, a Magnificent Frigatebird, ten Red-breasted Mergansers, a Peregrine Falcon, lots of Laughing Gulls, and a few immature American Herring Gulls, Royals Terns and 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 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 a few Pied-billed Grebes

and Neotropic Cormorants, a mixed flock of about 60 Ring-necked Ducks and Lesser Scaup, two Ruddy Ducks, and our first Osprey and Belted Kingfisher. We arrived at our very pleasant hotel in time for a short stroll down by the river before lunch. Here, amongst the many Greater Antillean Grackles, Cuban Blackbirds and noisy West Indian Woodpeckers, we found our first of many colourful Cuban Trogons. A gentle walk in the nearby 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 very responsive Cuban Pygmy-Owl, at least eight amazing little Cuban Todies, and half a dozen inquisitive Yellow-headed Warblers. Other common woodland birds that we were to see on many more occasions included White-crowned Pigeon, Cuban Emerald, Crescent-eyed Pewee, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Loggerhead Kingbird, Red-legged Thrush, Black-whiskered Vireo, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Western Stripe-headed Tanager, Tawny-shouldered Blackbird and Greater Antillean Oriole. Migrant warblers were still much in evidence and included several Black-throated Green and Black-and-white Warblers, half a dozen American Redstarts, a Tennessee Warbler and a Black-throated Blue Warbler.

Our main destination the next day was La Güira National Park in an area of forested limestone hills about 60 km west of Soroa. A quick stop for breakfast at a small pond near the autopista produced little other than another Peregrine Falcon, a Purple Gallinule and a few Palm Warblers, but as soon as we arrived in the national park, we began to see birds in abundance. Our two main targets here – the endemic Cuban Solitaire and localized Olive-capped Warbler – both proved easy, responding well to the tape recorder and giving excellent views. In the same area, we found our first Zenaida Doves, Great Lizard-Cuckoos and Cuban Bullfinches, along with several Broad-winged Hawks, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a Red-eyed Vireo and a Louisiana Waterthrush. Well satisfied with the morning's work, we made a short excursion into the lowlands to look for Cuban Grassquits at a poultry farm. There were lots of Yellow-faced Grassquits about, but although we waited around for an hour, their Cuban cousins failed to put in an appearance. However, our time here was by no means wasted as we spotted a male Gundlach's Hawk in its display flight way off in the distance. Not wishing to abandon the grassquit altogether, we decided to try at another site some kilometres away. As soon as we arrived, we saw a pair of Cuban Grassquits flying up from the roadside and off into the forest, but we then had to wait another hour before the birds came back and finally obliged us with good views. Here also we saw our only Scaly-naped Pigeon, but sadly the bird did not stick around. Back at La Güira later that afternoon, we found our first endemic Cuban Vireo along with a Yellow-throated Vireo and a fancy male Baltimore Oriole. On the way back to Soroa, we made a short detour to an area of rice fields where we had superb views of a very responsive King Rail along with a few Black-necked Stilts and Northern Jacanas.

After a fruitless search for owls in the grounds of the hotel early the next morning, we spent half an hour admiring a pair of flashy Cuban Green Woodpeckers at their nest just outside our cabins and then headed off for another walk in the forest. This produced the only Ruddy Quail-Dove of the trip, our first Ovenbird and another Louisiana Waterthrush, along with more Cuban Trogons, Cuban Todies and Yellow-headed Warblers. Driving back to Havana in the afternoon, we stopped off again at the dams by the autopista but found nothing new other than a few Snail Kites and our only Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Back in Havana, we called in at the Plaza de la Revolucion for a bit of sight-seeing from the top of the tower, and then 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 el Jicarita on the northern edge of Zapata Swamp by sunrise. It was still dark when we arrived and we had to wait some time before a very obliging pair of Zapata Sparrows of the scarce nominate race put in an appearance. There were lots of other birds about, including a Least Bittern, our first Northern Crested-

Caracara, a Northern Flicker, a large flock of migrant Tree Swallows, half a dozen Cave Swallows and a Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, but there were no signs of the Zapata Wrens which can sometimes be found here. Perhaps the birds have been 'taped out' at this well-known stake-out. After a couple of hours of pleasant birding in the swamp, we set off on the long drive 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 rich assortment of North American migrants including our first Northern Parulas, Cape May Warblers and Prairie Warblers, and some exceptionally tame Grey Catbirds and Ovenbirds. The highlight, however, was a splendid Stygian Owl at its day roost, shown to us by a very helpful member of the hotel staff.

From Camagüey, it is 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 the next morning and, after picking up Pedro Regalado – a Cuban ornithologist who has been studying the Giant Kingbird for some years – began our exploration of this very rich area. Noisy Cuban Crows were easily found near Pedro's house, and at our first stop at a small lake we found three Anhingas, a small party of colourful Wood Ducks, a lone West Indian Whistling-Duck and our first Cuban Palm Crows – readily distinguishable by their Rook-like calls. At another small lake farther down the road we spotted a group of at least nine Masked Ducks resting amongst the floating vegetation, along with more Wood Ducks, a few Blue-winged Teal and three Least Grebes, and nearby we had great scope views of a pair of Giant Kingbirds building their untidy stick nest in the top of a large sabre tree. Driving back towards Pedro's house, we stopped to admire two pairs of Cuban Parakeets at their nest-holes in dead palms, and finally had a decent view of a Plain Pigeon, several of which we had already seen flying by. This was excellent birding, and by mid-morning we had just about cleaned up on the local specialities. However, the rest of the morning was uneventful, as we tried unsuccessfully to find more Cuban Grassquits at Pedro's stakeout and searched for Fernandina's Flickers at a former breeding site. Apparently, Fernandina's Flicker is decreasing in the Sierra de Najasa, possibly because of competition with Northern Flicker, several of which we saw in the area. By early afternoon it was getting quite hot, and so we headed off to the Visitor Centre in La Belen National Park for a cool drink and a siesta. A short walk in the park later that afternoon produced little other than a few migrant warblers and a couple of introduced Helmeted Guineafowl. However, on the way back to Camagüey, we stopped off at a small dam, and here we found our first Cuban Martin recently back from its winter quarters somewhere in South America.

Leaving Camagüey the next morning, we headed north to the Sierra de Cubitas, where a short walk in the forest produced our first endemic Oriente Warblers, a good selection of migrant warblers and a Summer Tanager. The drive down through the lowlands to the north coast was uninteresting bird-wise, but a short stop at a freshwater lake near Moron produced several more Anhingas and a few Gull-billed and Caspian Terns. The 17km drive out across the causeway to Cayo Coco produced our first Double-crested Cormorants, about 50 Red-breasted Mergansers, several Reddish Egrets and a Lesser Black-backed Gull (a vagrant here from Europe), and a short stop in a patch of mangroves revealed a couple of Yellow Warblers of the resident race 'Golden Warbler'. We finally arrived at our fancy, all-inclusive resort on Cayo Coco in time for lunch. After a short break, we set off on an afternoon excursion to Cayo Guillermo. The saline lagoons at the east end of the island held a nice assortment of waterbirds including a dozen White Ibises, three Roseate Spoonbills, six American Flamingos (the only ones that we saw this year), 50 Blue-winged Teal, 60 Black-necked Stilts, two Willets, 30 Stilt Sandpipers and 120 Short-billed Dowitchers. Here also we saw our first Common Black-Hawk of the very distinctive Cuban race. However, it was in the dense coastal scrub on Cayo Guillermo that we found our main targets – a very obliging Bahama Mockingbird and a pair of pretty little Cuban Gnatcatchers. We rounded off the afternoon with a visit to some small sewage lagoons, but there was little about other than a few migrant warblers.

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 several Great Blue Herons of the uncommon white phase ('Great White Heron') and intermediate phase ('Würdemann's Heron'), and then a little farther on, we had superb views of three Clapper Rails as they came scampering out of the mangroves in response to the tape recorder. Our main target on Cayo Paredon Grande was the very local Thick-billed Vireo, which soon put in an appearance in response to the tape, and showed extremely well at ranges down to a few feet. Nearby we found another pair of Cuban Gnatcatchers and three very obliging Greater Antillean Orioles; there were a few Short-billed Dowitchers and Grey Plovers on the mudflats near the lighthouse, and as we were leaving, a Merlin flew over the bus. Another stop at the rickety bridge on the way back to Cayo Coco produced a large flock of Semipalmated Plovers, more Willets, three Hudsonian Whimbrels and a second Lesser Black-backed Gull, while some serious 'pishing' at the petrol station back on Cayo Coco was rewarded with close views of two colourful Yellow-throated Warblers. After a leisurely lunch back at the hotel, we spent a very enjoyable hour watching a procession of birds coming down to drink at a small pool in the forest near Cueva del Jabali. The highlight was undoubtedly the pair of fancy Painted Buntings, but we also saw our first Yellow-rumped Warbler here and had superb views of Zenaida Dove, Oriente Warbler and Cuban Bullfinch. As things began to quieten down, we moved on to another patch of forest where after a short search we found an extremely confiding pair of the local race of Zapata Sparrow. We concluded the evening's birding with a visit to another all-inclusive resort built around a large mangrove-fringed lagoon and here, from one of the boardwalks, we had superb views of two very tame pairs of West Indian Whistling-Ducks.

A last look around the grounds of our hotel the next morning added Sanderling to our list, and then we said goodbye to our luxurious resort in the keys, and set off back across the causeway towards the mainland. There were lots of birds about today, including several large feeding flocks of Double-crested Cormorants, plenty of Snowy Egrets and Tricoloured Herons, about 15 Reddish Egrets, 30 Roseate Spoonbills and lots of gulls and terns, but the only addition to our list was a couple of Ring-billed Gulls. The long drive to the Zapata Peninsula was uneventful, and by mid-afternoon we had arrived at our hotel at Playa Giron where we met up with our local guide Angel. There was still plenty of time for an evening visit to Bermeja Faunal Reserve, and this was very successful, producing in quick succession great views of a pair of Fernandina's Flickers foraging on the ground, a party of seven Rose-throated Parrots foraging in a fruiting tree, and a beautiful little male Bee Hummingbird foraging in a row of flowering trees. With storm clouds gathering all around us, we returned to our hotel, well satisfied with this excellent start to our stay in the Zapata area.

The main priority on our first morning in the Zapata Peninsula was to try for 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 a very responsive Cuban Nightjar perched up on a dead branch. It was then only a short drive to the Zapata Wren locality at La Turba, and within minutes we had heard two birds singing loudly from the swamp. However, seeing them was a very different matter, and it required some perseverance before we eventually spotted a bird singing from deep within a bush. Fortunately, it stayed just long enough for us to get good views through the scopes, and then it was gone, never to reappear. We heard another Zapata Wren further along the track and also found two Snail Kites and a Northern Harrier, but the only Red-shouldered Blackbirds that we could find were a pair way off in the distance, and so we decided to try elsewhere for this endemic blackbird. This proved to be a good plan, as within moments of arriving at the next site, we had found two pairs of Red-shouldered Blackbirds which responded well to the tape recorder and gave superb views. We rounded off an excellent morning's birding with a short stop at La Boca resort where we found seven Cuban Martins, a Cuban Crow, an assortment of migrant warblers and

some excellent coffee. By mid-afternoon, the storm clouds were gathering again, so instead of heading into the forest, we drove out to a large swamp near Bermeja and here, between the heavy showers, we found a good selection of herons and egrets, a few White Ibises, another two Cuban Martins, more Cave Swallows and another Yellow-rumped Warbler.

Our priority now was the three remaining quail-doves, and so after an early breakfast the next morning, we began our quest in Bermeja Faunal Reserve – an excellent locality for all three species. The morning began well, with great scope views of a Key West Quail-Dove calling from an exposed perch high in a tree and soon after a Grey-headed Quail-Dove walking along the trail ahead of us. But the Blue-headed Quail-Dove – the least common and most secretive of the three – was not so obliging. Long vigils at a section of the trail where the dove had been seen in recent days proved fruitless, as did quiet walks along the network of trails. Fortunately, there were plenty of other birds about to keep us amused, including another Grey-headed Quail-Dove, two small parties of Cuban Parakeets, a pretty little Bare-legged Owl at its nest-hole, two Fernandina's Flickers, a Magnolia Warbler and several Yellow-headed Warblers, as well as the usual Great Lizard-Cuckoos, Cuban Trogons, Cuban Todies and other commoner forest birds. Having drawn a blank with the Blue-headed Quail-Dove in the morning, we returned to the reserve again in the afternoon and tried another long vigil at the recommended section of trail, but this proved equally fruitless. By now we were beginning to suspect that because of the early onset of the rainy season, the birds were already nesting and had gone into hiding. The highlight of the afternoon was undoubtedly the pair of Bee Hummingbirds that Gillian watched for over two hours in the flowering trees outside the reserve.

The next morning we decided to adopt a different strategy and visit two areas to the north of Playa Giron where Angel had seen Blue-headed Quail-Doves in recent weeks. At the first site we found two Key West Quail-Doves, one of which gave good views on the trail, while at the second, we had fleeting glimpses of a Grey-headed Quail-Dove, but the Blue-headed continued to elude us. Again there were plenty of birds about, including a flock of ten Rose-throated Parrots and another Magnolia Warbler, but the only new bird for our list was a distant Wood Stork soaring over the forest. Angel had to leave us at lunchtime, and so in the afternoon we decided to return to Bermeja Faunal Reserve for yet another vigil in the forest. Despite a very cunning strategy of spacing ourselves out at intervals and thus being able to scan long sections of trail, we again drew a complete blank with the Blue-headed Quail-Dove, although we did have great views of two more Grey-headed Quail-Doves. Back at our hotel that evening, we were able to draw some consolation from the fact that three other groups of birders who had been walking the trails at Bermeja that afternoon had also failed to find any Blue-headed Quail-Doves.

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 a couple of hours for one last try for the Blue-headed Quail-Dove at Bermeja. The reserve warden Orlando met us at the gate, and putting our trust in his judgement, we followed him into the forest. Once again a Grey-headed Quail-Dove showed well and then, just as it was approaching the time to leave, a lovely Blue-headed Quail-Dove walked out onto the trail ahead of us – in exactly the area that we had been searching for the past two days. Fortunately, it stayed long enough for all of us to enjoy scope views, before walking back into the forest and out of sight. If ever there was an eleventh-hour bird, this was it! With much shaking of hands to congratulate ourselves on our success, we returned to our hotel, and then within an hour we had checked out and were on our way back to Havana. We arrived in time for lunch and a leisurely stroll around the fascinating old city, but this was hot and thirsty work, and so, like many before us, we eventually gravitated to La 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 not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

PODICIPEDIDAE

Least Grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus*: Good views of three of the nominate race on one of the dams in the Sierra de Najasa.

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*: Several on the dams by the autopista near Havana and also a couple in the Sierra de Najasa. The form concerned is *antillarum*.

PELECANIDAE

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

PHALACROCORACIDAE

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*: Common in the keys, particularly along the causeway where there were dense feeding concentrations totalling at least 2,000 birds. The form concerned is *floridanus*.

Neotropic Cormorant (Olivaceous Cormorant) *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*: Small numbers on the dams by the autopista, in the Sierra de Najasa and at Zapata swamp, and at least 100 roosting on dead trees in the lake near Moron. The form concerned is *mexicanus*.

ANHINGIDAE

Anhinga *Anhinga anhinga*: Three birds at one of the dams in the Sierra de Najasa and another three at the lake near Moron. The form concerned is *leucogaster*.

FREGATIDAE

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*: Common in the keys, where we saw at least 30, and also seen over the sea off Havana, at Niña Bonita Dam by the autopista, and in the Bay of Pigs.

ARDEIDAE

Least Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis*: A single bird flushed from the side of the track at Hato de Jicarita quickly disappeared into the undergrowth.

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*: Seen well on a number of occasions, particularly in the keys where we found four of the rare white morph and a couple of 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*: First encountered at the dams in the Sierra de Najasa, then common in the keys and also found in a freshwater marsh near Bermeja. The form concerned is *ruficollis*.

Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens*: Good views of about 20 of this attractive, if somewhat crazy, heron in the keys. Most individuals were of the dark phase, although we saw a few wholly white individuals.

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*: Recorded in small numbers at most wetland areas (nominate form). The Green Heron is now usually split from the Striated Heron *B. striatus* of South America and the Old World.

Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*: Single individuals over the rice-fields at Los Palacios, in the Sierra de Najasa and at La Turba, and five in the swamp near Bermeja. The race concerned (*hoactli*) is weakly defined and sometimes absorbed within nominate *nycticorax*.

THRESKIORNITHIDAE

White Ibis *Eudocimus albus*: Fairly common in the keys (where we even saw one in the grounds of our hotel), and also seen in the swamp near Bermeja, where there were five immature birds.

Roseate Spoonbill *Ajaia ajaja*: Close views of three immature birds on Cayo Guillermo and distant views of a flock of about 30 off the causeway as we were leaving Cayo Coco.

CICONIIDAE

Wood Stork (American Wood Ibis) *Mycteria americana*: A very distant bird soaring over the forest near Soplillar in the Zapata Peninsula.

PHOENICOPTERIDAE

American Flamingo (Caribbean Flamingo) *Phoenicopterus ruber*: Close views of six richly coloured adults at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo. The large flocks of flamingos that usually frequent the shallow waters off the north end of the causeway out to Cayo Coco were strangely absent this year – perhaps they were off breeding somewhere. The much paler Old World form is now often split off as a separate species, the Greater Flamingo *P. roseus*. The total population of American Flamingo 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*: Distant scope views of a single individual on a tree stump in the marshes by one of the lakes in the Sierra de Najasa, then extremely close views of two pairs on a mangrove-fringed lagoon near our hotel on Cayo Coco. 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.

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*: Good scope views of two little flocks of five and six individuals, respectively, on two of the small lakes in the Sierra de Najasa.

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*: A group of eight at one of the small lakes in the Sierra de Najasa and at least 50 at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*: Distant views of a flock of about 35 at Niña Bonita Dam near Havana, on both our visits.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*: About twenty with the Ring-necked Ducks on Niña Bonita Dam near Havana.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: Ten on the sea off Havana on our first morning, and at least 50 off the causeway out to Cayo Coco. 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*: Surprisingly only a couple this year, both on the dams by the autopista west of Havana.

Masked Duck *Nomonyx dominica*: Good scope views of a group of at least nine resting amongst floating vegetation on one of the small lakes in the Sierra de Najasa. All were females or males in eclipse plumage. Although widespread in South and Central America and the Caribbean, this is a very elusive bird and is easily overlooked.

CATHARTIDAE

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

PANDIONIDAE

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*: Seen well on several occasions, notably at the dams in the Sierra de Najasa, at the lake near Moron and at La Boca in the Zapata Peninsula. All the birds that we saw appeared to be of the North American migrant race, *carolinensis*, which shows a thick dark mask.

ACCIPITRIDAE

Snail Kite *Rostrhamus sociabilis*: At least seven at Coronella Dam near Havana, one on the drive from Camagüey to Cayo Coco, and two at La Turba in the Zapata Peninsula. The race concerned is *plumbeus*.

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonicus*: One seen by Douglas on the drive from Camagüey to Cayo Coco, and one at La Turba in the Zapata Peninsula. Both were 'ring-tails'.

Gundlach's Hawk *Accipiter gundlachi*: Sadly only very distant views of a male in its display flight over the plains near La Güira National Park as we were hunting for Cuban Grassquits. 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).

Common Black-Hawk *Buteogallus anthracinus*: Four individuals in the keys, including one on the roof of a building in our hotel complex. The distinctive Cuban form is considered by Cuban ornithologists to be a separate species, the Cuban Black-Hawk *B. gundlachii*. It differs from the nominate form 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*: Odd individuals and pairs recorded on several occasions during the first half of the tour. The form concerned is *solitudinis*.

FALCONIDAE

Northern Crested-Caracara *Caracara cheriway*: First recorded at Hato de Jicarita, then seen well on a number of occasions in the Sierra de Najasa, in the keys and 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*: A single bird flew over the bus as we were leaving Cayo Paredon Grande. 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*: An immature over the shore at Havana on our first morning, a distant perched adult at our breakfast stop en route to La Güira National Park, and an adult female having a go at a White-crowned Pigeon over the marshes at La Turba in the Zapata Peninsula.

NUMIDIDAE

Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*: Two individuals scurried off through the undergrowth in the forest at La Belen. This species was apparently introduced in the West Indies "centuries ago".

RALLIDAE

Clapper Rail *Rallus longirostris*: Phenomenal views of three individuals (probably a pair and the male from a neighbouring territory) responding well to the tape recorder in the mangroves on our way out to Cayo Paredon Grande. The race concerned is *caribaeus*.

King Rail *Rallus elegans*: Great views of a bird responding well to the tape recorder in the rice fields near Los Palacios – with two other birds calling nearby. The race concerned is *ramsdeni*.

Purple Gallinule (American Purple Gallinule) *Porphyryla martinica*: Seen well on a number of occasions, notably at the dams in the Sierra de Najasa where we found about ten.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: Small numbers in the rice fields at Los Palacios, at the dams in the Sierra de Najasa, and at La Boca in the Zapata Peninsula. The form concerned is *cerceris*.

American Coot *Fulica americana*: About 300 at Niña Bonita Dam near Havana on our second visit, and a single bird on one of the dams in the Sierra de Najasa. The form concerned is nominate *americana*.

CHARADRIIDAE

Grey Plover (Black-bellied Plover) *Pluvialis squatarola*: About ten on the shore in Havana, and four in the keys.

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*: Four on the shore in Havana, and a flock of 40 on Cayo Coco.

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 couple of pairs with tiny chicks.

RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*: About 10 in the rice fields at Los Palacios, two at one of the dams in the Sierra de Najasa, at least 60 at the lagoons on Cayo Guillermo, and five on Cayo Coco. This form, along with several others, is often lumped in Black-winged Stilt *H. himantopus*.

JACANIDAE

Northern Jacana *Jacana spinosa*: Small numbers of the race *violacea* in the rice fields near Los Palacios, at the dams in the Sierra de Najasa, and at La Boca and Bermeja in the Zapata Peninsula.

SCOLOPACIDAE

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*: Ten individuals in the keys, including one group of seven by the causeway.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*: One on the shore near Havana, one in the rice fields at Los Palacios, one on Cayo Guillermo, and a party of five on recent flooding at Playa Larga.

Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaria*: A single bird with the small party of Lesser Yellowlegs at Playa Larga.

Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*: A couple at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo, and four on the mudflats off Cayo Coco. The nominate form breeds in small numbers in Cuba.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*: Small numbers on several occasions: on the beach in Havana, on the drive to Soroa, at San Diego de los Baños and at Cayo Guillermo. A couple of individuals had already assumed their spotted breeding dress.

Hudsonian Whimbrel *Numenius hudsonicus*: Good views of three individuals on the mudflats at the east end of Cayo Coco. The New World form is usually lumped with the Old World form under the name Whimbrel *N. phaeopus*.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: Several small flocks totalling about 30 birds in the keys. The form wintering in the Caribbean is *morinella*, which breeds in low Arctic Canada and north-eastern Alaska.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*: Five on the long sandy beach at our hotel in the keys.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*: At least 200 on the shore in Havana. Unfortunately, the main flock flew off before we had time to search through them for any Semipalmated or Western Sandpipers.

Stilt Sandpiper *Calidris himantopus*: Great scope views of a flock of 30 at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo.

Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*: About 120 at a saline lagoon on Cayo Guillermo and five on the mudflats at Cayo Paredon Grande. The presence of some Long-billed Dowitchers could not be ruled out, but the only calls we heard were those of Short-billed.

LARIDAE

Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*: Common off Havana and in the keys. The race concerned is nominate *atricilla*.

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*: Two adults on the mudflats off the causeway as we were leaving Cayo Coco.

American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus*: Three immatures on the beach in Havana, an immature at the east end of Cayo Coco, and about eight, including at least one adult, off the causeway as we were leaving Cayo Coco. 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 off the causeway on the way out to Cayo Coco and an adult on the mudflats off the east end of Cayo Coco the next day. Both were rather pale and probably *graellsii*. 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 birds that we saw may well have been long-staying individuals also recorded during the 2005 and 2006 tours.

STERNIDAE

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*: Very distant scope views of three individuals at the large lake near Moron.

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*: About 20 individuals in the keys, mostly adults in breeding plumage. This species seems to have become commoner in Cuba in recent years, as Raffaele *et al.* (1998) list it as a "rare non-breeding resident".

Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*: Common off Havana and in the keys. The nominate form occurs in Cuba.

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*: At least six with the Royal Terns off Havana on our first morning, and one on the causeway on our way out to Cayo Coco. The race concerned is *acuflavidus*.

COLUMBIDAE

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

Scaly-naped Pigeon (Red-necked Pigeon) *Columba squamosa*: A single bird flew over as we were waiting for the Cuban Grassquits at the livestock pens near La Güira National Park. This species is restricted to the islands of the Caribbean.

White-crowned Pigeon *Columba leucocephala*: A common and widespread pigeon, seen well at Soroa and again in the Zapata Peninsula. Our best views were at La Turba, where we scoped up a bird at very close range.

Plain Pigeon *Columba inornata*: A total of eight individuals in the Sierra de Najasa, although only a couple showed 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, and on Cayo Guillermo and 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 several occasions.

Zenaida Dove *Zenaida aurita*: Ones and twos (of the nominate form) seen at a number of locations throughout the tour, but most conspicuous when we were searching for quail-doves at Zapata! This species is virtually restricted to the Caribbean.

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*: Superb scope views of a bird calling from high up in a tree in Bermeja Faunal Reserve on our first quail-dove session at Zapata, then good views of a bird on the track in the forest near Punta Perdiz and flight views of a third bird in the same area. This species is restricted to the northern Caribbean.

Grey-headed Quail-Dove *Geotrygon caniceps*: Superb views on several occasions in Bermeja Faunal Reserve, especially on our last morning when one individual stubbornly refused to leave the trail ahead of us. We also found one in the forest near Punta Perdiz. 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*: Good flight views of one flushed from the forest floor at Soroa.

Blue-headed Quail-Dove *Stanoenas cyanocephala*: This “jewel of the Cuban avifauna” can be a very difficult bird to pin down, as we found to our cost this year. A morning and two afternoon sessions in Bermeja Faunal Reserve and a morning session at two other sites known to be good for the species failed to give us even a glimpse of the bird, and it was not until our very last morning, when all hope had almost gone, that a last-ditch attempt at Bermeja came up trumps and provided us with decent, if rather brief, scope views of a single bird on the track ahead of us. 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*: Great scope views of two pairs at their nest holes and three other birds in flight in the Sierra de Najasa, and then decent views of several small parties at Bermeja Faunal Reserve during our prolonged search for the elusive Blue-headed Quail-Dove. 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*: We failed to find any in the Sierra de Najasa, where the population seems to be declining rapidly, but had great scope views of a feeding party of seven on our first evening at Bermeja Faunal Reserve and later found a party of ten by the main road between Playa Giron and Playa Larga. 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 the island, seen well on many occasions, especially in the Zapata Peninsula, and frequently 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*: Very common in open country throughout.

TYTONIDAE

Barn Owl *Tyto alba*: One flushed from a roadside fencepost as we were on our way to the Sierra de Najasa before sunrise. The race concerned is *furcata*.

STRIGIDAE

Bare-legged Owl *Gymnoglaux lawrencii*: Close scope views of one of these cute little owls peering out at us from a hole in a dead stump in the forest at Bermeja. One of Angel's many reliable stake-outs.

Cuban Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium siju*: Many great views of this attractive little owl, including a couple at their nest holes. 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*: Superb views of a bird at its daytime roost in the grounds of Los Caneyes Hotel – pointed out to us by one of the ground staff. 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

Cuban Nightjar *Caprimulgus cubanensis*: Superb views of a bird perched on a dead branch in open woodland at La Turba in the Zapata Peninsula, with another bird calling some way off, 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 our lunch stop at Los Caneyes near Santa Clara, where the birds nest under the eaves of the chalets.

TROCHILIDAE

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

Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae*: Great views of a colourful little male feeding in flowering trees near the entrance to Bermeja Faunal Reserve on our first evening in the Zapata Peninsula. Bored with searching for the dreaded Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Gillian returned to this site a couple of days later and had wonderful views of a pair of Bee Hummingbirds for over two hours. This was definitely her bird of the trip, and indeed equal first (with Cuban Tody) for the group as a whole. 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. As usual, this colourful endemic featured high in the 'Bird of the Trip' contest, but this year had to share first place with that other colourful little endemic, the Bee Hummingbird. The five closely related species of tody comprise a small family confined to the Greater Antilles. Their closest relatives are the Motmots (Mototidae), especially the Tody Motmot of Central America.

ALCEDINIDAE

Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon*: Single birds encountered on many occasions throughout the tour. 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*: A single bird seen well in La Güira National Park. 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 just outside our cabins at Soroa. This is another Cuban endemic, placed in its own monotypic genus.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*: First encountered at Hato de Jicarita and then seen well on several occasions in the Sierra de Najasa, in the keys, and in the Zapata Peninsula. The endemic form *chrysocaulosus* is sometimes treated as a separate species, the Cuban Flicker.

Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae*: Superb views of a pair foraging on the ground near the entrance to Bermeja Faunal Reserve, and several others seen and heard during our quail-dove forays 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. 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 tape.

Giant Kingbird *Tyrannus cubensis*: Great scope views of a pair building a nest in the top of a huge tree in the Sierra de Najasa, and two other birds seen in the same general area. This is a 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*: A single male over one of the dams in the Sierra de Najasa, a group of seven around the resort at La Boca in the Zapata Peninsula, a couple near Bermeja, and at least a dozen in Old Havana on our last day. 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).

Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*: A huge migrant flock of at least 500 over the marshes at Hato de Jicarita and a couple of small groups elsewhere.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*: Unusually scarce this year. Our only sighting was of a single bird with Barn Swallows at one of the dams on our way back from Soroa to Havana.

Cave Swallow *Petrochelidon fulva*: Good views of about half a dozen over the marshes at Hato de Jicarita and a couple over the swamp near Bermeja in the Zapata Peninsula. The form concerned is *cavicola*.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: Small numbers of migrants at several localities throughout the tour.

CORVIDAE

Cuban Palm Crow *Corvus minutus*: We found a total of nine in the Sierra de Najasa, and had great scope views of several individuals. 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 about 50, and also seen briefly at La Boca in the Zapata Peninsula. 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 this much sought after endemic, and we had to wait until we reached La Turba in the southern part of the swamp before we finally came to grips with it. Even here, the wren proved to be very elusive, and although it was not long before we heard a couple of birds in song, it was some time before we spotted one singing from deep within a bush and were able to get the scope onto it. This bird soon moved off and subsequent attempts to lure a third singing bird into view proved fruitless. 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

Blue-grey Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea* (NL): One seen by John at Hato de Jicarita.

Cuban Gnatcatcher *Polioptila lembeyi*: Excellent views of a pair of these pretty little gnatcatchers in dry, coastal scrub on Cayo Guillermo and a second pair on Cayo Paredon Grande the next 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. Certainly not one of Cuba's more colourful endemics, but subtly attractive in its own way. 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. The ten or so in the grounds of the hotel at Santa Clara were especially confiding.

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

Bahama Mockingbird *Mimus gundlachi*: Superb views of a bird in song in coastal scrub on Cayo Guillermo. 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*: A very responsive bird gave extremely close views in dense coastal scrub on Cayo Paredon Grande. This attractive vireo has a strangely fragmented distribution in the western Caribbean.

Cuban Vireo *Vireo gundlachi*: Seen well on several occasions, usually in response either to 'pishing' or to the pygmy-owl tape. This is another Cuban endemic that seems to be fairly common throughout the lowland forest and scrub.

Yellow-throated Vireo *Vireo flavifrons*: Good views of a single bird with a mixed flock in the forest in La Güira National Park. Another winter visitor from North America.

Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus*: A single bird with a mixed flock in the forest at La Güira National Park. This is a passage migrant in Cuba.

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

PARULIDAE

Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina*: One seen well on the Mirador trail near Soroa Villa Hotel.

Northern Parula (Parula Warbler) *Parula americana*: First encountered in the garden at Los Caneyes, and then recorded in small numbers at several localities.

- Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia*: Seen well on several occasions in the mangroves in the keys, and especially obliging in the grounds of our hotel on Cayo Coco. 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*: Singles in scrubby woodland in the Sierra de Najasa, in Bermeja Faunal Reserve and near Soplillar in the Zapata Peninsula.
- Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina*: First recorded in the garden at Los Caneyes, where there were at least a dozen, and then seen on a number of occasions in the Sierra de Najasa, Sierra de Cubitas, the keys and Zapata Peninsula. Some 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, although rather oddly we found only a couple in the Soroa area.
- Yellow-rumped Warbler *Dendroica coronata*: A very dull individual coming down to drink at a small pool in the forest at Cueva del Jabali on Cayo Coco, and an equally dull bird in the swamp near Bermeja in the Zapata Peninsula. This is a common migrant warbler from North America, but one of the earliest to depart in spring.
- Black-throated Green Warbler *Dendroica virens*: Another very attractive wintering warbler, still present in small numbers and seen well on several occasions.
- Yellow-throated Warbler *Dendroica dominica*: A very striking warbler, seen well at the petrol station on Cayo Coco and then on several occasions in the Zapata Peninsula.
- Olive-capped Warbler *Dendroica pityophila*: Easily found in the pines in La Güira National Park, and responding well to the tape recorder. This near-endemic also occurs in the Bahamas.
- Prairie Warbler *Dendroica discolor*: First observed in the garden at Los Caneyes, and then found in the Sierra de Najasa, 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. There seem to have been more about than usual this year.
- American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla*: One of the commonest and most widespread wintering warblers, still present in good numbers and very responsive both to the pygmy-owl tape and to 'pishing'. We found it just about everywhere that we went.
- Worm-eating Warbler *Helmitheros vermivorus*: One, unfortunately very briefly, in scrubby woodland in the Sierra de Najasa.
- Ovenbird *Seiurus aurocapillus*: Still present in small numbers, and seen exceptionally well in the garden at Los Caneyes and at Bermeja in the Zapata Peninsula. Another common winter visitor from North America.
- Northern Waterthrush *Seiurus noveboracensis*: Seen well on several occasions in the keys, notably by the lagoon in the grounds of our hotel on Cayo Coco, and also at La Turba and in the swamp near Bermeja in the Zapata Peninsula. Most of the wintering population had, however, already left.
- Louisiana Waterthrush *Seiurus motacilla*: Great views of one by a tiny dam in the forest in La Güira National Park and a second bird by the stream near our hotel at Soroa. This is one of the earliest migrants to depart in spring.
- Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*: A very common wintering bird, seen well on many occasions. This species seems unable to resist 'pishing'.

Yellow-headed Warbler *Teretistris fernandinae*: A common resident in the woodlands of western Cuba, first seen at Soroa and La Güira and then at Hato de Jicarita and in the Zapata Peninsula. This noisy and inquisitive warbler is a Cuban endemic.

Oriente Warbler *Teretistris fornsi*: We encountered our first in the forest in the Sierra de Cubitas, where the birds responded well to the tape recorder, and then found them on several occasions in the keys. 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*: Seen well on several occasions at Soroa, La Güira, Los Caneyes and 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 exceptional views, especially at Soroa, in La Güira National Park, in the Sierra de Cubitas and in the keys. 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 female responding to the pygmy-owl tape in the Sierra de Cubitas.

CARDINALIDAE

Painted Bunting *Passerina ciris*: Superb views of a pair coming down to drink at a small pool in the forest at Cueva del Jabali on Cayo Coco. A very nice find, especially given the complete lack of Indigo Buntings *P. cyanea* which are generally much the commoner of the two buntings.

EMBERIZIDAE

Cuban Bullfinch *Melopyrrha nigra*: Great views of at least ten in the forest in La Güira National Park, and also seen well on several occasions in the keys, but a rather unobtrusive bird and probably much commoner than our records would suggest. The nominate form occurs on 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*: Our side-trip from La Güira to a poultry farm in the lowlands failed to produce this very scarce and local Cuban endemic, and so in desperation we tried another site a few kilometres away. After tantalizing glimpses of a couple of birds flying away, we were eventually rewarded with scope views of a pair resting in an isolated tree. This pretty little grassquit 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 as we were searching for Cuban Grassquits 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, and exceptionally close views of a pair of the very similar *varonai* race on Cayo Coco. 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*: Very distant views of a pair in the marshes by La Turba track at Zapata, and then great scope views of several very responsive pairs in the marshes by the main road on the way back to 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 good 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*: About 20 in the lowlands near La Güira National Park and four at La Boca resort 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 several occasions, notably in the grounds of our hotel at Soroa, on Cayo Paredon Grande and in the Zapata Peninsula. The form concerned, *melanopsis*, is sometimes treated as a separate species, the Cuban Oriole.
- Baltimore Oriole *Icterus galbula*: Excellent views of a male on the Cueva de los Portales track in La Güira National Park. According to our local bird guide, this was only the second record of this species in the national park.

PASSERIDAE

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

MAMMALS

- Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus*: One on the shore at Havana.

THE BIRD OF THE TRIP

	Total score	No. of lists
=1st Bee Hummingbird	15	4
=1st Cuban Tody	15	4
3 rd Cuban Trogon	12	3
4 th Blue-headed Quail-Dove	9	2
5 th Painted Bunting	6	2
6 th Masked Duck	5	2
7 th Cuban Pygmy Owl	5	1
=8 th American Flamingo	4	1
=8 th Cuban Grassquit	4	1
10 th Cuban Nightjar	3	2