

13-17 June 2011: Bahamas

This was a quick 4-day trip to see all the Bahama specialties. As endemics are spread out, four islands needed to be visited. The summer season was not conducive to seeing migrants, and many local birds seemed to be little active. But in the end, a satisfactory harvest of local and endemic species was achieved.

Itinerary:

13 June: Afternoon arrival in Nassau. As we had missed a potential onward flight to Andros by 5 min, we proceeded to Marsh Harbour on Abaco Island (Ab) instead. With two remaining hours of daylight, we managed to get to Palm Shores Road at c. 20-30km south of Marsh Harbour, perhaps the northernmost point of reliable occurrence of the *Amazona* parrot. As it became darker, we enjoyed our first bird activity of the trip, including our trip's only **West Indian Woodpecker** – a species that seems to be absent or difficult on most other Bahamian islands. A quick excursion into the adjacent pine forest yielded an extremely cooperative **Bahama Yellowthroat** and our first **Bahama Pewee** and **Bahama Warblers**. A last-ditch attempt near the beach finally rewarded us with a single **Bahama Amazon** sitting openly perched in a tree. At nightfall, the ubiquitous and super-abundant **Antillean Nighthawks** were joined by a **Chuck-will's widow** chorus, although the latter were much harder to see well and only allowed brief glimpses of two grunting fly-by's.

14 June: An early-morning flight to Freeport on Grand Bahama Island (GB) was booked out, so we returned to Nassau and proceeded to Freeport from there, arriving in the late morning. A noon visit to the Rand Nature Center provided several local species, including our first **Lucayan Flycatchers**, but nothing extraordinary. A subsequent visit to the pine barrens in the interior of the island along a confusing maze of country tracks proved frustrating, as the monoculture pine stands were lifeless in the heat. Hence we returned to the coast to buy water and snacks and ventured back into the sea of pines when the sun had descended a bit at mid-afternoon. Now the pines were coming back with life, with occasional sightings of **Bahama Warblers**, two sightings of **Olive-capped Warbler** and – at last – a pair of **Grand Bahama Nuthatches**. All the pine-inhabiting warblers (including **Pine Warbler** itself) were characterized by comparatively oversized, massive, long beaks used for bark-probing during treecreeper activity. An **Antillean Nighthawk** sitting on its nest in the center of the track was remarkable. Having exhausted the pines, we returned to Freeport's coast to watch **Wilson's Plovers** and **Least Terns** at their nests and then started searching through coastal urban heath growth, erroneously thinking this would be the best habitat for special mockingbirds. At dusk, we ended up in a stretch of coastal heath where Key West Quail-Dove was calling but resisted our visual search attempts. The inexpensive steamed lobster dinner this evening was a welcome distraction from the predominantly fried food on these islands and proved the best food of the trip.

15 June: We spent a horrible night in the vehicle at Freeport's Garden of Groves, interrupted by our condensed sweat dripping onto our faces from the car ceiling. The Garden's armed warden presumed we were bandits when catching us searching for calling Chuck-will's widows and chased us away to a nearby adjacent parking area. The entire following morning, we looked for a ghost Bahama Mockingbird that did not turn out to be at this garden grove. The Garden's chief guide Erica, an avid bird expert, told us this mockingbird species has become very rare on Grand Bahama and was perhaps driven out from coastal areas by the ubiquitous **Northern Mockingbird**, the only species responding to our tape. Meanwhile, we found two **Mangrove Cuckoos** and a one-legged **Northern Parula** that must be unusual for this month. In the late morning, we cut our losses and proceeded to a mangrove site where certain other targets did not materialize. We were compensated by a bunch of herons and a late **Black-bellied Plover**. At noon, we left the island for Andros (An) via Nassau, arriving there at 5pm and allowing for a scouting walk along a path that gives access to beautiful tangled coastal heath. This path was the toughest birding of the trip, as mosquitoes abounded and ravaged our bodies. Nevertheless, a heroic stalking effort in dense tangles was rewarded by thrilling views of a **Key West Quail-Dove**. Back at the beach road at last light, we heard and then saw a **Bahama Oriole** singing from a casuarina.

16 June: At pre-dawn we admired a night-time rendition of the **Bahama Oriole's** song. We finally spot-lit the bird singing from a backyard tree one hour before sunrise. At dawn we sighted the distant figure of a potential raptor. With each additional ray of sunlight and each approaching step, it slowly morphed into the beautiful shape and color of a **Ridgway's Osprey**, a taxon with an extremely distinct facial pattern. The remainder of the morning was more frustrating in that the heath trail did not yield the species we were looking for while we were getting pounded by mosquitoes. The late morning saw us visit the airport again for obtaining vehicular assistance. After this we headed out along former timber tracks towards the interior of the island, where we were finally rewarded by a pair and then a single **Bahama Mockingbird** and an amazing **Bahama Lizard-Cuckoo**. Back at the coast, we briefly glimpsed our first **Bahama Woodstar**, observed our third and last **Bahama Oriole** and attracted an excited and quite distinct **Bahama Yellowthroat** into view (see Trip List). In the late afternoon, we returned to Nassau on New Providence Island (NP) and set out to the Nassau Youth Camp where we had a better sighting of the **Bahama Woodstar** but not much else in failing light.

17 June: By 8am we made it back to the Youth Camp but only added a bunch of nice **Bahama Woodstar** sightings (including a dazzling male), while the yellowthroat we were searching for remained elusive. With time running out, we explored other options, such as golf courses and the large wetlands and pine barrens east of the airport, but yellowthroats remained out of sight. Instead, we had beautiful observations of introduced species such as **Northern Bobwhite** and **Cuban Grassquit**. New Providence Island seems very developed and may be the poorest choice to look for Bahamian endemics apart from the woodstar, which is certainly easiest here. At noon, we had to be back at the airport for our return.

Trip List:

Abbreviations: Ab – Abaco, GB – Grand Bahama, An – Andros, NP – New Providence,
cm – common

1. Magnificent Frigatebird – 1+1 GB
2. Brown Pelican – GB 1
3. Green Heron – GB, An; the Bahamian endemic *bahamensis* race must be indistinct at best
4. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – GB, NP, An
5. Little Blue Heron – 2 GB
6. Tricolored Heron – GB 1, An 1
7. Great Egret – 1 GB
8. White Ibis – An 1+1
9. Least Grebe – 1 GB; 2 An (at nest)
10. Turkey Vulture – cm
11. **Ridgway's Osprey** – 1-2 An; this distinct osprey taxon has recently spread as a breeding bird from the southern to the central and northern Bahamas; our perched bird seemed distinctly small and had a minimal face mask unconnected to the nape/back
12. Red-tailed Hawk – Ab 1-2; the local race *solitudinis* is also on Cuba
13. American Kestrel – Ab, GB, NP, An; the local race *sparverioides* (also on Cuba) is extremely pale like other Caribbean subspecies
14. Northern Bobwhite – NP 2-3; good views confirmed that at least some of the locally introduced birds have all reddish-dark underparts with no whitish suffusion
15. Clapper Rail – 1 An, local Bahamian ssp *coryi*, seen closely in mangrove habitat
16. Common Moorhen – GB, NP
17. Black-necked Stilt – 2 NP
18. Black-bellied Plover – 1 GB (still in winter plumage)
19. Wilson's Plover – 2 ad. 2 *pulli* GB
20. Laughing Gull – cm
21. Least Tern – c. 15 GB
22. White-crowned Pigeon – NP, GB, An, Ab
23. Key West Quail-Dove – An 1, seen well in coastal heath forest after long pursuit in mosquito-infested tangles; also heard GB
24. Eurasian Collared Dove – common, perhaps genetically intermixed with feral African Collared Dove stock, as some individuals were rather pale
25. Zenaida Dove – 1+1 Ab, 1 An
26. Mourning Dove – 2-3 GB, 2-3 NP
27. Common Ground-Dove – cm; the local ssp *bahamensis* is not strikingly different from others
 - a. [Caribbean Dove – heard only NP]
28. **Bahama Amazon** – 1 seen perched Ab; Russello et al. (2010; Conservation Genetics) showed that Bahamian parrots exhibit borderline species-level

differentiation from Cuban birds, but differentiation within the Bahamas (between Inagua and Abaco) was low; Bahamian birds have a distinct facial coloration; this may justify the present treatment of considering Bahama Amazon as a species of its own.

29. Smooth-billed Ani – GB, An, NP
30. Mangrove Cuckoo – GB 2
31. **Bahama Lizard-Cuckoo** – 1 An; this bird took a lot of searching but eventually showed beautifully; the local Bahamian taxon *bahamensis* is usually lumped with Cuban birds but looks very different, with brown (not gray) upperparts and a bright rufous wing patch (note that drawings are accidentally reversed in some field guides); the sounds currently available on Xeno-Canto for Bahamian and Cuban birds also indicate pronounced differences in pitch and rhythm; Bahamian birds seem to deserve species status as *Saurothera bahamensis*
32. Antillean Nighthawk – common all islands; also often seen and heard in daytime; 1 seen on nest in GB; the local subspecies *vicinus* also ranges to the Florida Keys
33. Chuck-will's-widow – 2 seen Ab; also heard GB
34. **Bahama Woodstar** – 1 male & 3 females NP; 1 male An; all sightings refer to the nominate subspecies from the main Bahamian islands
35. **Cuban Emerald** – Ab, GB, An; the more common one of the two local hummingbirds, although absent on NP
36. West Indian Woodpecker – 1 Ab; the bird seen belongs to ssp *blakei*; birds on adjacent Grand Bahama and disjunct San Salvador are classified as ssp *nyeanus*, but this seems to be geographically implausible; we missed the Grand Bahama population, which seems to be restricted to the far east of the island close to Abaco (*fide* eBird), but it cannot be too distinct considering the continual Pleistocene land connection between Grand Bahama and Abaco
37. Hairy Woodpecker – cm; ssp *piger* was seen on Ab & GB; ssp *maynardi* was seen on An & NP; no difference between them was discerned
38. **Bahama Pewee** – Ab 2, NP 1+1; with only 3 sightings, this species was not as common as we had expected; the pale-grayish Bahamian form *bahamensis* is strikingly different from ochraceous Cuban birds; Xeno Canto recordings also indicate that Bahamian birds differ vocally in terms of the duration of their call note and the number of note elements in the call; it is unclear why Bahamian birds are widely considered conspecific with Cuban birds; they should be split off as *Contopus bahamensis*, as is here done.
39. **Lucayan Flycatcher** (*Myiarchus lucaysiensis*): GB, An, NP; common everywhere, although we missed it during our 2 hours of daytime birding on Abaco; Joseph et al. (2004; Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution) showed that Cuban La Sagra's Flycatcher is closely related to a population of Jamaican *Myiarchus* that is widely classified as Stolid Flycatcher, while Bahamian birds (*lucaysiensis*) seem to be more closely related to Hispaniolan Stolid Flycatchers; all four taxa may be vocally distinct, and it seems preferable to regard each as a species of its own; the Bahamian species (*M.*

- lucaysiensis*) is here named Lucaya Flycatcher, after the Lucaya tribe that used to inhabit the Bahamas
40. Gray Kingbird – cm
 41. Western Loggerhead Kingbird (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus bahamensis*) – Ab, GB, NP; not commonly seen, and usually in more pristine pine habitat than Gray Kingbird; taxonomy follows Garrido et al. (2009; Wilson Journal of Ornithology)
 42. **Bahama Swallow** – Ab, GB, An; many seen on Abaco, much fewer on the other two islands
 43. **Grand Bahama Nuthatch** – 2 GB; took quite a bit of searching in vast pine barrens; appeared much paler than mainland Brown-headed Nuthatches with a snowflake appearance on the crown; their call was much more trilly than the Florida recording I played
 44. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – GB, An
 45. Western Red-legged Thrush (*Turdus plumbeus plumbeus*) – cm; taxonomy is based on results of Ricklefs & Bermingham (2008; Auk)
 46. Northern Mockingbird – cm
 47. **Bahama Mockingbird** (*Mimus gundlachi*) – 2+1 An; required extensive searching; not a common bird; the Bahamian populations sound very distinct from the isolated Jamaican taxon (see Xeno Canto) and are here considered a monotypic species
 48. Thick-billed Vireo (*Vireo crassirostris crassirostris*) – Ab, GB, An, NP; island populations may differ in the extent of yellow on underparts, but much of this may be individual variation; they sounded identical on all four islands
 49. Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo altiloquus barbatulus*) – Ab, GB, An, NP
 50. Northern Parula – 1 GB (injured, missing leg)
 51. Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia gundlachi*) – 1 An (breeding in mangroves)
 52. **Bahama Warbler** (*Setophaga flavescens*) – Ab 2; GB c. 5; impressive tree-creeping warbler of extensive pine barrens with a giant bill
 53. **Olive-capped Warbler** – GB 1+2; another impressive, large-billed, pine-inhabiting warbler, but much more rarely encountered on this trip than anticipated
 54. Pine Warbler (*Setophaga pinus achrustera*) – Ab, GB, An; the endemic Bahamian ssp of this familiar North American warbler also appeared relatively large-billed and engaged in frequent tree-creeping behavior; this seems to be a common theme among the three pine barren warblers of the northern Bahamas
 55. **Bahama Yellowthroat** – difficult: great sighting of 1 responsive individual during our two hours on Abaco; good sightings of 1 on Andros after a long search; but no sightings on New Providence despite hour-long searches; the latter island seems overdeveloped and biologically depauperate, and most eBird sightings entered at the time of our visit were from 10+ years ago; there is interesting taxonomic differentiation in this species, with birds from the northern paleo-island (GB + Ab) having a lemon-yellow line above the mask, while the birds from the southern paleo-island (An + NP + Eleuthera)

- have a gray line; the song we played and heard on Abaco was a repetition of a double motif (“witchew witchew...”) while the song we heard on Andros was a triple motif (“witchew-tee, witchew-tee...” and variations thereof). Birds recorded on New Providence in the last century also have the triple motif (see Macaulay Library), which is in agreement with their paleo connection with Andros; our sightings may therefore turn out to belong to two different species-level taxa, a northern one from Abaco and Grand Bahama (*Geothlypis tanneri*) and a Southern Bahama Yellowthroat from Andros, New Providence and Eleuthera (*Geothlypis rostrata*).
56. Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola bahamensis*) – GB, An, NP; the local subspecies is distinct at least in mtDNA (Bellemain et al. 2008; BMC Evol. Biol.) and is larger, crisper and more snazzy-plumaged than other Caribbean subspecies; I wouldn’t be surprised if future taxonomies started considering this form as an endemic Bahamian species, though I defer doing that here
 57. Western Spindalis (*Spindalis zena*) – birds seen on Ab & GB belong to ssp *townsendi* from the northern paleo-island; birds seen on An & NP belong to nominate *zena*; all *zena* individuals had a black back, while *townsendi* individuals seemed to have a non-black (perhaps maroon or umber) back, so this is an impressive case of intra-Bahamian differentiation
 58. House Sparrow – cm
 59. **Cuban Grassquit** – 1 NP (this species is introduced here, not native)
 60. Black-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris bicolor bicolor*) – cm; seen on NP, Ab, GB; the nominate ssp is endemic to Bahamas and cays off Cuba
 61. Greater Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla violacea violacea*) – GB, An; only a few seen; the nominate ssp is endemic to Bahamas and Caicos Islands
 62. Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus bryanti*) – Ab, GB, An; cm near wetlands; the female of the local endemic ssp looked “off” and seems to have minor plumage differences from North American females
 63. **Bahama Oriole** – 1+1+1 An; this recently split species is much yellower on underparts (all the way up to breast) than depicted in our field guide; all sightings were around houses, with one sighting at dusk, one at night (a nocturnal songster in the flashlight) and one in the late morning