

Western Field Ornithologists trip to Cuba, November 2008

November 3-12, 2008 -- [\[click to view photos taken by Kimball Garrett and Dan Singer\]](#)



Fifteen field

ornithologists joined WFO leader Kimball Garrett, Cuba Bird Studies Program director Gary Markowski and Cuban ornithologist William Suarez on a fascinating field trip to western Cuba 3-12 November 2008. Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean and boasts somewhere between 25 and 35 extant endemic bird species (depending on one's judgments regarding species-level taxonomy). Our group traveled from Habana to the Guanahacabibes Peninsula in westernmost Cuba, then backtracked eastward, visiting the Sierra La Guira and, finally, the abundance of habitats around the Bahia Cochines (Bay of Pigs) and Zapata Swamp area. Unfortunately, a major and very late storm, Hurricane Paloma, caused us to skip the easternmost part of our itinerary, in Camaguey Province (and, with it, species such as Palm Crow, Cuban Gnatcatcher and Oriente Warbler); but the extra time around the Cienaga de Zapata was well worth it.

Highlights were many. Predictably, the hands-down group favorites included Cuban Tody and Cuban Trogon; these endemics were joined as favorites by the spectacular Great Lizard-Cuckoo (also found in the Bahamas) and the endemic Bee Hummingbird and Zapata Sparrow. Two endemic species, the Cuban Grassquit and Zapata Wren, rewarded us after long walks and diligent searching by our Cuban leaders. And the quail-doves behaved like quail-doves, silently laughing at us somewhere safely away from the trails (though most participants eventually saw one or more of the following species: Blue-headed, Gray-fronted and Ruddy). Most species, however, were far more cooperative. A Giant Kingbird captured and ate a grasshopper a mere five meters from our group; a Cuban Solitaire sang and posed just outside Che Guevara's cave; fussy Yellow-headed Warblers (almost certainly not wood-warblers, by the way), graced nearly every mixed flock of insectivorous birds in the woodlands. In the Zapata Swamp a group of three Zapata Sparrows wouldn't leave us alone, and Red-shouldered Blackbirds sang and foraged right next to a highway. Bee Hummingbirds proved easy to find on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula. And endemic Bare-legged Owls and Cuban Pygmy-Owls put in multiple appearances.

Fascinating as well were several taxa that were strikingly different from their mainland North

American counterparts: the dimorphic Cuban (American) Kestrels, the Cuban (Eastern) Meadowlarks with their distinctive songs, and the distinctive Cuban (Northern) Flicker.

Perhaps as impressive as the Cuban and West Indian endemic species was the abundance and diversity of wintering migrants from North America. Wood-warblers were everywhere (Palm and Yellow-throated Warblers, Northern Parulas and American Redstarts were especially common); sparrows included Clay-colored and Lincoln's; cardinalids included Dickcissel, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Indigo Buntings. Migrant waterbirds included a variety of shorebirds, Gull-billed Terns, and (in Habana) one or two Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Cuba has a rich cultural history and remarkable biodiversity. The giant rodents and giant flightless owls, known only from fossils, are long gone, as is the more recently extinct Cuban Macaw and perhaps the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. But an excellent system of reserves has preserved the modern fauna reasonably well. To the spectacular birding one can add the wonderful congeniality of the Cuban people we met, the great and lively music, and the gorgeous mountain and coastal scenery; it is a place nearly all of us vowed to return to.

Kimball Garrett