

## BIRDING WESTERN CUBA: YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE. . . .

by Mark M. Blazis

"You can't do it!" I was told repeatedly. My appeals were failing, and my phone bills to Washington looked like a catalog of government agencies. Years before I had been seduced by Cuba's many intriguing endemics as well as the prospect of finding the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and Bachman's Warbler. I wanted to return with friends to continue the search, but our plans were abruptly aborted after learning of possibly severe penalties. I immediately began inquiries to senators, representatives, the State Department Travel Advisory, the Office of Foreign Assets Control, and finally a definitive spokesman for the Treasury Department. The trip-squelching warning: imprisonment and substantial fines are the possible consequences of contributing to an economy that exports anti-American activities and communist revolution to Angola and Central America. It is clearly not the intention of the Treasury Department to monitor innocuous birders, and realistically, the odds are against detection and prosecution. But the department would probably not disregard us if it became aware of our travels.

One way an American may legitimately study the birds of Cuba is by acquiring a professional research license, as a university professor or graduate assistant working on publishing the results of an approved study. A few special charter companies are actually permitted to carry properly licensed Americans from Florida to Cuba.

Another legitimate way to bird Cuba is to go as an invited guest, but there is just no way the average American birder can legally get to Havana from here, at least for the moment. Today, however, with world communism crumbling at an astonishing pace all around the world, the unrestricted opening of Cuba to American birders appears more and more likely, perhaps imminent.

But there is one other way. It begins with a circuitous excursion north to Canada, where neutral friends can make all of the complex arrangements and unravel some very tangled webs. Consequently, as mine did a few years ago prior to a late morning takeoff from Toronto, your first birding of the trip might focus on a misty, subzero Niagara Falls, teeming with familiar ducks and gulls, mere avian hors d'oeuvres to hold us over on the four-hour Cubana flight to Varadero, Cuba's premier world-class beach resort.

However, for us there was no time to ride the surf or luxuriate on the fine and fabled sand. Our timetable allowed only a brief immersion, barely purging us of our northerly residues, and an abrupt departure. We would eventually, of course, undergo the essential American metamorphosis from goose down to bathing suits, but, more important, we had come to see Cuba's birds.



*Zapata, swamp outlet canal*

*Photo by Bruce A. Sorrie, 1988*

Upon arrival, our anxieties were hardly diminished by the drably uniformed military, facially Castroesque, and by the anti-American posters and billboards. Obviously different, we tried as unobtrusively as possible to pass through lines of Cubans, several of whom were as surprised by our presence as we were cautious of their reaction. Although we were only ninety miles from Florida, we had the feeling of great distance that comes with uncertainty. There is always a degree of stress entering and leaving a foreign country. But now, even more, the passports we uncomfortably held seemed like punctuation marks exclaiming our presence. Our initial apprehensions would, for the most part, prove grossly unjustified, and we would make good friends here.

In the fading light of that first evening, we were whisked away from the north shore for a three-hour ride across the island toward our main route, the southern coast and the Zapata Peninsula. We would drive through a gauntlet of dimly provocative images, not unlike an old *Mission Impossible* set—vintage, pre-revolution Chevrolets, fashionable collectors' items in the States, held together by creative improvisations with who-knows-what parts, Russian Ladas [Soviet cars that resemble Fiats], East German diesels and buses, and once-elegant, confiscated mansions, now peeling in public disrepair. Turkey Vultures and Cattle Egrets, again the first species south of the border to be recorded on our lists. And right out of Dante, sugarcane fields ablaze on the darkening horizon, signaling the beginnings of the January harvest.

In the blackness of an unlit and barely trafficked primary highway, we approached the legendary Zapata, that slipper-shaped, untamed marsh and swamp peninsula, finally arriving at Playa Larga, our unexpectedly comfortable beach retreat, the perfect base for exploring what remains wild and unspoiled in western Cuba.

That first evening, travel-weary and hungry, evaluating Cuban mattresses, Russian television and refrigerators, and preparing for our first late dinner, we hastily dropped everything, grabbed our binoculars and flashlights, and dashed outside our cabañas. An unfamiliar owl was calling just above us—what the Cubans call the Devil Owl! Our beams triangulating, we caught him peering defiantly down at us, head feathers erected like horns, bulging, wild yellow eyes burning the space between us—an avian metaphor denouncing our incongruous

presence. Here was a species, the Stygian Owl, often impossibly difficult to find throughout much of Central and South America, and incredibly, we were surrounded by three of them! Punctually at eight every evening, the *Siguapas* (the Cuban name) would begin calling, stirring enough adrenaline to delay our sleep, and would continue until about five in the morning. Here we were, adjacent to the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion site, with a feeling of excitement at being somewhere we somehow should not be.



*Zapata, swamp forest*

*Photo by Bruce A. Sorrie, 1988*

With the help of Orlando Garrido, Cuba's definitive ornithologist and author of its first and forthcoming field guide, we found almost all of Cuba's specialties. The Cuban checklist totals 388 species, 21 of which are endemic. Garrido has seen or heard just about every bird on the list. The former Wimbledon star regularly impressed us with eyes and ears that often obviated the need for binoculars. Orlando is approaching retirement; hence, any chance to bird with him is a privilege. There is apparently no one of his stature to step in to take his place. From the Cuban Forestry Service came his assistant, Rogelio Garcias, whose knowledge of the forests is intimate. Their help proved essential in cutting through the maze of bureaucracy and special permits, closed dirt roads and the omnipresent military. With their guidance, we exceeded by 6 the previous Canadian record of 147 species seen on one expedition into the Zapata. Considering this earlier record was established in March when a number of additional migrant and breeding birds are to be expected, the accomplishment was quite a surprise, even to Garrido.

Garrido promised us that at this time of year, January, birding would be good all day. He was right. Nevertheless, we attempted to make the obligatory early morning start. Coordinating early breakfasts with early transportation was not always possible. Our birder's hours and standards of synchronization were not de rigueur here. Sometimes we were successful, but it did not matter.

Our itinerary thoroughly and systematically covered all the various essential habitats of western Cuba. Garrido generously revealed his favorite coverts and hot spots. A full week proved adequate to explore this region.

Unfortunately, anyone contemplating birding Cuba on his own has only James Bond's *Birds of the West Indies* as a field guide. Bond serves well enough for most species but lacks details of plumages of races and local distribution.

However, one can see almost all of the island's endemics and rarities by visiting the Zapata National Park, the dry forest of Los Sabalos, the islands, canals, and lake at Laguna del Tesoro, the open dry woods with scattered palms at Bermejás, the mangrove swamps and tidewater flats of Salinas, the dry woods and marsh of Los Lechuzos, Soplillar, the swampy marsh of Santo Tomás, and the hills around Soroa and La Guira.

How rugged is it? We visited in January, the dry season, and it did not rain. We had expected to suffer a little. We did not. Armed with a magnum of Muskol, we never encountered mosquitoes. No deadly snakes. [There are small boas in Cuba, but no poisonous reptiles.] No poisonous plants. We began to wonder whether Cuba's notorious chiggers were merely a myth. If not for a few distant crocodiles, an occasional ride in the back of an army truck, and a death-march-like trek through the Zapata Swamps in search of its three endemics, we might have felt pampered.

During the brief periods that we were not birding, we became acquainted with Cuba's other attractions such as siete-años Havana Club rum, topless Eastern European sunbathers, and Churchill and Upmann cigars. But by and large Cuba offered little else for a visitor to buy or bring home. One evening, however, while making the obligatory rounds of Hemingway's favorite hangouts for setting records (i.e., the most daiquiris and *mojitas* in an evening), I observed a fragment of free enterprise still at work, the marketing of marijuana and of women.



For the most part, there is little need to bring along much extra money. Usually covered in the cost of a trip (about a thousand dollars) are all meals, lodgings, transportation, and guide service. Cuba is a birder's bargain. Food is plentiful, if not gourmet. Thick, rich coffee, red snapper, green tomatoes, light beer, basic chicken, pork, rice, and beans, pineapple, and papaya form the nucleus for a predictable cuisine. But we were there for the birds, not the food.

We did have opportunities to change money illegally on the black market at five times the official rate. We chose not to do so after learning of one American who changed two hundred dollars only to find he could not get a cigar store, liquor store, or restaurant to take any of it. It was all pre-revolution money and totally worthless. More embarrassing, the American was given a telephone number to call if he wanted to exchange more. The number was that of the local police station. Cuba holds many surprises, most of them pleasant, however.

If you are very impatient to bird Cuba, you must be aware that restrictions on travel have been severe. American flights were initially abolished in 1962 after the revolution. Permission for tourism was resumed in 1977, but subsequently halted in 1982 by the Reagan administration, which also stopped a proposed banding project on migrant birds. Nonessential travel to Cuba has been punishable by prison terms and heavy fines—up to \$50,000.

Visas can be obtained only from a Cuban embassy in Canada or Mexico or the Cuban Interest Section of the Czechoslovakian Embassy. Thus, those few Americans who have made it to Cuba have had to be routed through Canada or Mexico for nature-oriented endeavors, primarily bird studies and bass fishing (reputedly some of the best in the world).

Individual travel is difficult and not encouraged. Because of internal travel restrictions (not to mention transportation and accommodation problems and the need for special permits), birding Cuba independently is really not feasible for an American at this time. The degree to which Cuba has opened its door, however slightly, to American birders is largely the result of Canadians, hitherto unhampered by diplomatic problems. With the help of Graeme Gibson of Toronto, Canadian groups have recently gained access to many of the best birding areas in western Cuba. Americans wishing to explore the wilds of Cuba can make arrangements with Graeme Gibson at the following address: The Great Auk, 105 Admiral Road, Toronto, Canada M5R2L7. Through this Canadian connection with the Cubans, one may obtain visas, as well as all of the organizational help for the trip itself.

Amid the political chaos, one American ornithologist, Dr. Jerome A. Jackson, a Mississippi State University biology professor associated with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service banding program, initiated plans in 1987 for banding Cuban birds and studying their migration patterns, one of the first joint ventures with Cuba since their revolution. Jackson is dedicated to the search for

the nearly extinct Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Cuba and the United States. Mississippi, he feels, may possibly be the species' only sanctuary in our country. His American partner in the Cuban project, Paul B. Hamel of the Natural Heritage Program of the Tennessee Conservation Department, is searching for the Bachman's Warbler. Their project with the Cubans and a few Canadian ornithologists is the essence of birding diplomacy. This positive trend has apparently been extended by an agreement between Cuba and the National Geographic Society, and Jackson has been selected as one of the project leaders.

There are other rare or endangered species in Cuba worthy of our concern. We discovered several Fernandina's Woodpeckers in the open, dry palm woods of Berméjas, foraging on the ground like flickers. The Cuban Kite and the Zapata Wren are extremely rare and most likely on the verge of extinction. We never saw the kite. Garrido has seen only one in his lifetime. However, our team did find two of the wrens in the Zapata Swamp at Santo Tomás. Thanks to the preservation of the Zapata Swamp, there remains at least a faint hope for the wren's survival, and one can also still expect to see the beautiful Zapata Sparrow, but only in the Santo Tomás area.

The rare Gundlach's Hawk, like our Cooper's but with bigger feet, has for the last several years nested in Soplillar, according to Rogelio Garcias; and Garrido has seen and collected birds in Casilda, Bilbara, and Cupeyal. The extremely rare Zapata Rail apparently is seen only with divine intervention. It is the only Cuban species Garrido has not seen. Author James Bond is the only person to have both observed and collected specimens. Incredibly, our group heard a single bird in the Zapata Swamp. Use of playback recording might have lured the bird within sight, but the rarity of the species precludes the use of tapes. Single birds were last seen in 1979 and 1980 by individual observers.

Despite being a very poor country, Cuba now has eleven national parks and apparently a serious interest in preventing another Bachman's Warbler or Cuban Macaw (the country's one definitely extinct species) disaster. When Cuban naturalists discovered a nesting pair of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers (*Campephilus principalis*) in 1986, the government promptly instituted regulations prohibiting hunting and harvesting. The species is now found only in Oriente, in an area that is currently off limits. The plan is to expand this sanctuary area as soon as other pairs are found. Intensive research, aid, and support are critical now. If nature-oriented tourism is perceived as worthwhile to promote, this should also help to save Cuba's endangered species and the crucial habitats that are in jeopardy of being developed.

As a wintering ground for many of the birds that breed in our country, Cuba's natural habitats are important to the United States. We were all impressed with the great richness, variety, and numbers of species and individuals. The country's few ornithologists are poorly equipped. Thus far,

most help for training Cuban scientists has come from the Canadian Wildlife Service, World Wildlife Fund Canada, the Long Point Bird Observatory of Canada, and the International Council for Bird Preservation. It is hoped that political change, some Latin version of *perestroika*, will spark significant cooperation from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Greater international awareness, encouragement, and support of their wildlife and conservation programs are essential, while the Zapata is still wild.

**Suggested List of Target Species in Western Cuba (\* = endemics):**

**Greater Flamingo** (*Phoenicopterus ruber*). Hundreds at Salinas in the Zapata National Park. Crocs are likely here as well.

**Masked Duck** (*Oxyura dominica*). We saw only females, which Garrido feels vastly outnumber males.

**Snail Kite** (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*).

**\*Gundlach's Hawk** (*Accipiter gundlachi*). Your best bet for this rare raptor is early spring if a nest site can be staked out; difficult to find otherwise.

**Common Black-Hawk** (*Buteogallus anthracinus*) is called Crab Hawk or Cuban Black-Hawk; regarded by some as a separate species (*B. gundlachii*). None were seen on the trip.

**\*Zapata Rail** (*Cyanolimnas cerverai*).

**Scaly-naped Pigeon** (*Columba squamosa*) is also known as Red-necked Pigeon. More often encountered in hill country. Tough to find.

**Key West Quail-Dove** (*Geotrygon chrysia*).

**Gray-headed Quail-Dove** (*Geotrygon caniceps*).

**Ruddy Quail-Dove** (*Geotrygon montana*). The best strategy to see all quail-doves is to sit quietly near a path, dirt road, or water hole, which they are known to frequent, especially very early and late in the day. They are extremely shy and elusive and tend to run rather than fly just before you get into viewing range. A blitzkrieg approach is definitely counterproductive.

**\*Blue-headed Quail-Dove** (*Starnoenas cyanocephala*). Arguably the most beautiful bird in Cuba and one that most of our group failed to see. Known locally as *perdiz*—meaning partridge.

**\*Cuban Parakeet** (*Aratinga euops*). Local and unpredictable in occurrence; flocks often occur around Santo Tomás.

**Cuban Parrot** (*Amazona leucocephala*). Not an endemic despite its name. Noisy and conspicuous, especially early and late in the day. Often roosts near the crocodile breeding farm.

**Great Lizard-Cuckoo** (*Saurothera merlini*). Not difficult to find.

**\*Bare-legged Owl** (*Gymnoglaux lawrencii*). Be prepared to tap a lot of old palm trees with abandoned woodpecker holes. Garrido sometimes has a

surprise stake-out close to human habitation.

\***Cuban Pygmy-Owl** (*Glaucidium siju*), a crepuscular species, is vocal just before dawn to about six-thirty and again just after sunset. Its loud, accelerating, bouncing-ball call surrounds the cabins at Playa Larga.

**Stygian Owl** (*Asio stygius*). This magnificent and elsewhere difficult to find species punctually called all night from about eight o'clock to five in the morning, often right around the cabins at Playa Larga in between the briefer performances of the Cuban Pygmy Owl. Its call is a deep single-syllable *who!*

**Greater Antillean Nightjar** (*Caprimulgus cubanensis*) may be flushed in forest just after sunset.

**Antillean Palm Swift** (*Tachornis phoenicobia*). Conspicuous as they hawk insects high in the sky.

**Cuban Emerald** (*Chlorostilbon ricordii*) is the most common hummingbird on the island. Often bullied from flowering trees by wintering warblers guarding their feeding territories.

\***Bee Hummingbird** (*Mellisuga helenae*). The male is the smallest bird in the world. This endemic is half the size of the emerald and may be mistaken for an imperfection on a telephone wire.

\***Cuban Trogon** (*Priotelus temnurus*). A spectacular bird of the forested regions, most frequent in mountains. We saw them on several days.

\***Cuban Tody** (*Todus multicolor*) is quite small, sedentary, and inconspicuous. It is very helpful to know its call.

\***Cuban Green Woodpecker** (*Xiphidiopicus percussus*). One of Cuba's most unusual and most beautiful endemics.

**Northern Flicker** (*Colaptes auratus*). A race resident in Cuba.

\***Fernandina's Woodpecker** (*Colaptes fernandinae*). With striking barring, it is equally at home on the ground or on a trunk.

**Greater Antillean Pewee** (*Contopus caribaeus*).

**La Sagra's Flycatcher** (*Myiarchus sagrae*).

**Giant Kingbird** (*Tyrannus cubensis*). We missed this bird in both its preferred pine forest and swamp borders around Soroa and La Guira.



*Cuban Parakeet nips off flower.*

*Photo by Bruce A. Sorrie, 1988*



**Cuban Crow** (*Corvus nasicus*).

\***Zapata Wren** (*Ferminia cerverai*) is a skulker. Only a handful still exist. The best way to see it is to accompany Orestes "Chino" Martinez, the resident guard-guide-naturalist of this swamp reserve and Garrido's heir-apparent. Some regard this trek through the Zapata Swamp as a death march. A tape recording is necessary to lure the bird out, and only the guide is permitted to use it. He does so sparingly. We saw two birds, a feat accomplished only once previously.

\***Cuban Solitaire** (*Myadestes elisabeth*). This beautiful hillside songster is difficult to see. If lucky, you should see one or two in the limestone karst mountains at La Guira.

**Red-legged Thrush** (*Turdus plumbeus*).

**Cuban Vireo** (*Vireo gundlachii*). The conspicuous spot around its eye gives it an unmistakable appearance.

**Bachman's Warbler** (*Vermivora bachmanii*). Our closest contact with this possibly extinct species was being shown the bush where the last Bachman's seen had left droppings before departing.

**Olive-capped Warbler** (*Dendroica pityophila*). Atop the hills of La Guira, look for them high in the pines or at one of Cuba's great warbler hot spots, the trickling sewage seepage behind visitors' restrooms. The wet slope attracts not only numbers of warblers, but also quail-doves.

**Swainson's Warbler** (*Lymnotheryx swainsonii*). Occurs most often in wet spots during the April migration.

\***Yellow-headed Warbler** (*Teretistris fernandinae*). These striking birds were more widespread than the Olive-capped Warblers. We found them even along the main road to Playa Larga.

**Stripe-headed Tanager** (*Spindalis zena*).

\***Cuban Bullfinch** (*Melopyrrha nigra*).

\***Cuban Grassquit** (*Tiaris canora*). Less plentiful than the Yellow-faced.

**Yellow-faced Grassquit** (*Tiaris olivacea*).

\***Zapata Sparrow** (*Torreornis inexpectata*). If you're willing to go on the aforementioned death march into the swamp, this will be the easiest of the Zapata endemics. Caution: heavy birders will sink deeper.

**Tawny-shouldered Blackbird** (*Agelaius humeralis*).

\***Cuban Blackbird** (*Dives atrovioacea*). Common at Guama, the rebuilt Indian village at Laguna del Tesoro.

**Greater Antillean Grackle** (*Quiscalus niger*).

**Black-cowled Oriole** (*Icterus dominicensis*).

MARK M. BLAZIS, has birded every continent except Antarctica and Australia. He has a keen interest in Africa and has organized birding tours to that continent. A dual college major (biology and drama) led Mark into a two-

sided career. He has taught writing and drama at Clark University and has directed classical plays. And he is a science teacher for the town of Auburn. In 1990 Mark was chosen Massachusetts Audubon Society's teacher of the year for his work instructing young teenagers in birding.

**Additional information about Cuba.** Located at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, Cuba is a narrow, irregular crescent 746 miles long, 22 to 124 miles wide, with 2200 miles of coastline—the largest island in the West Indies. The total land area, including Isla de Pinos (1182 square miles) and over sixteen hundred offshore islets, is 44,218 square miles, more than half the area of the entire Antillean chain.

Most of Cuba consists of gentle slopes and rolling land. Two hundred north-south rivers drain its surface. Mountains cover about one fourth of the total area, with large fertile plains separating the mountainous areas. The highest mountain (6578 feet) is in southeastern Cuba. In western Cuba, the area covered in the article above, the highest elevation is 2389 feet, near the north coast.

Cuba's maritime subtropical climate is fairly uniform, and coastal areas are moderated by the trade winds. The mean monthly temperatures range from 70°F in January and February to 81° in July and August. Temperatures above 90° or below 50° are rare, but in mountain areas freezing temperatures have been recorded. Annual rainfall averages 54 inches. Three quarters of this rain falls from May to November with maxima in June and in September, the hurricane month. The wettest area is in the mountains of Pinar del Río, where hurricanes are most probable. Most of the soils have been derived from limestone and are clayey; the famous Matanzas red clay is used for growing sugarcane. Fairly large areas of savanna, where vegetation is sparse due to sandy and gravelly soils unable to retain water, are found in southern Pinar del Río, western Las Villas, and most of Camagüey.

Cuba's formerly forested plains are now fertile agricultural fields, the landscape graced with an occasional wide-spreading ceiba, or silk-cotton, tree, once regarded with awe by rural folk, and dotted with palms, over thirty species, including coconut palm and the useful royal palm, regarded as the national tree. Tracts of semideciduous forest remain, but chiefly in the highlands and mountains. Pine forests occur in Pinar del Río, Isla de Pinos, and some mountains of northern Oriente. Mangroves are found chiefly along the wet southern coast. True tropical rain forest is restricted to a small part of Oriente.

Cuban fauna includes a large arboreal rat (*Capromys pilorides*) called hutia (seen by Blazis' group); a rare insectivorous mammal (*Solenodon cubanus*); twenty-three species of bats, one of which eats fish; manatees, which may come into the mouths of rivers; many species of frogs and lizards, but no deadly snakes; two species of crocodiles; abundant land snails; and a great variety of insects. A wealth of marine life includes over four thousand species of mollusks.

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