

July 2010 Cuba

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A brief report of a family holiday at Havana and Hotel Melia Las Antillas near Varadero with one full day's birding with a guide at Zapata and early mornings round the hotel.

Thursday 15th Jul

Bus journey from airport to Havana: first tick Cuban Martin, very like Purple Martin which does not occur in the summer. Greater Antillean Grackles were common and noisy. Turkey Vultures common, Cattle Egrets and Grey Kingbirds.



Friday 16th Jul Havana

Grey Kingbirds were in residence among the rooftops as were Collared Doves and House Sparrows. In the trees visible from the hotel window were Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds. Lots of Cuban Martins and some Cave Swallows. Turkey Vultures.

Saturday 17th Jul Havana

Good views of Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds showing their wing patches in flight. Purple Martins dipping into the swimming pool a few feet away from bathers.

Sunday 18th Jul Varadero

Drive from Havana to Varadero: 2 White-winged Doves, 2 Killdeer, American Kestrel, 3 Magnificent Frigate-birds. Around the hotel Melia Las Antillas a Double-crested Cormorant feeding on numerous fish in hotel garden ponds as was a confiding

Green Heron. At one point the Cormorant was fishing in the swimming pool feet away from bathers and thankfully caught no fish! The Green Heron was very ingenious in its feeding strategy. People were throwing bread to the fish which were gathering in shoals so the Heron would grab a piece of bread then go fishing! It would drop the bread into the water by the shallows, ready to pounce on any fish which came to feed. Usually the larger fish came in quickly so the Heron would snatch back its bait from these unsuitable prey and pop it back in when the coast was clear. I saw it catch small fish in this way but more often the larger fish pinched the bait!



Mourning Doves, Grackles were common.

Mon 19th Jul

7-8am Around grounds Cuban Emerald. Antillean Palm Swifts common. Common Ground Dove, Cuban Green Woodpecker and from shore Magnificent Frigate-birds, Royal Terns, Sandwich Tern, Laughing Gull,



Tues 20th Jul

650-830am Antillean Nighthawk – 8 flying around giving distinctive croak. On the wide expanses of open grassland with a few scattered pools outside the hotel were 10 Killdeers with at least 1 young, plus a colony of c20 Least Terns, 2 Wilson's Plovers. 6 Black-winged Stilts.



Common Ground Doves, 10 Tawny-shouldered Blackbird, Smooth-billed Ani, White-winged Doves also seen. The most unexpected find was a Brown Noddy sitting on a raised drain cover several hundred metres from the shore! Very approachable and obviously ill. This pelagic species was presumably storm blown and was found dead the next day.



Cracking close immature Common Black Hawk being fed by an adult in the mangroves near the hotel.



Wed 21st Jul Varadero

650-820am Did open plains to mangrove. Heavy squeaking paying off at mangroves with good views of a range of different coloured Yellow Warblers!



Yellow Warblers with varying amount of grey wash over neck and head.



Several totally grey Yellow Warblers.



A proper Yellow Warbler!

Grackles very responsive to squeaking. 3 distant White-crowned Pigeons. Out on bikes seeing immature Little Blue Heron, La Sagra's Flycatcher.

Thurs 22nd Jul

Headed west early to a belt of scrub and trees for Cuban Green Woodpecker, Black-whiskered Vireo, La Sagra's Flycatcher and Smooth-billed Ani.



Sunday 25th Jul Zapata

Set off 345am from Varadero for a 2 hour drive to Playa Largo and met bird guide Chino at 7am by side of the road waving his grey cap as arranged. I had emailed him and phoned him the previous day We drove to Sopillar – an area of woodland for a great morning's birding with the impressive Chino. The trails were enlivened by swarms of mossies and numerous large land crabs in different colours. In the wet season apparently a lot of the swamp areas are unreachable so some key species not looked for. Several Red-legged Thrushes on the tracks driving in.



Both red and yellow land crabs were numerous.

We had cracking views of Cuban Tody – a brilliant little bird and only 1 other seen.



Several sightings of Grey-headed Quail-dove but we failed to find the other 2 species of Quail-dove. A Stripe-headed Tanager was singing from emergent branches and Cuban Vireo, Cuban Peewee were also present.

Wandering off trail, Chino eventually stroked a tree with a stick and 2 Cuban Screech Owls shot out of a roost hole low down, perching up and showing well. A couple of very smart Yellow-headed Warblers were easy but Bee Hummingbird was only seen by staking out some small red flowers – it eventually showed sporting a nice blue mantle; 3 weeks earlier Chino and a Brit birder had spent a fruitless week searching for this species which is difficult at this time of year. Several Black-cowled Orioles were chalked up plus Yellow-faced Grassquits and the petit Cuban Bullfinch with a really chunky bill.



A calling Cuban Scops Owl was seen twice.



Several Cuban Trogons were encountered. Eight West Indian Woodpeckers were seen, Northern Flicker briefly, 2 Cuban Green Woodpeckers and after lots of playback at several sites 2 Fernandina's Flickers capitulated. Cuban Blackbirds were seen plus Great Blue Heron, several American Kestrels and a single Zenaida Dove on the track. Great Lizard Cuckoos were common with 12+ seen and several running across the road.

Finished the day after dropping off Chino – we were surprised by his fees: 2 years ago the going rate was 15cucs per person and we were told on the phone that it would be 30cucs for 3 people from 7am – 2pm but this turned out to be 30cucs each! Need to clarify the costs clearly beforehand. Dipped on Red-shouldered Blackbird near the crocodile farm although did not try too hard in the heat.

Tuesday 27th Jul

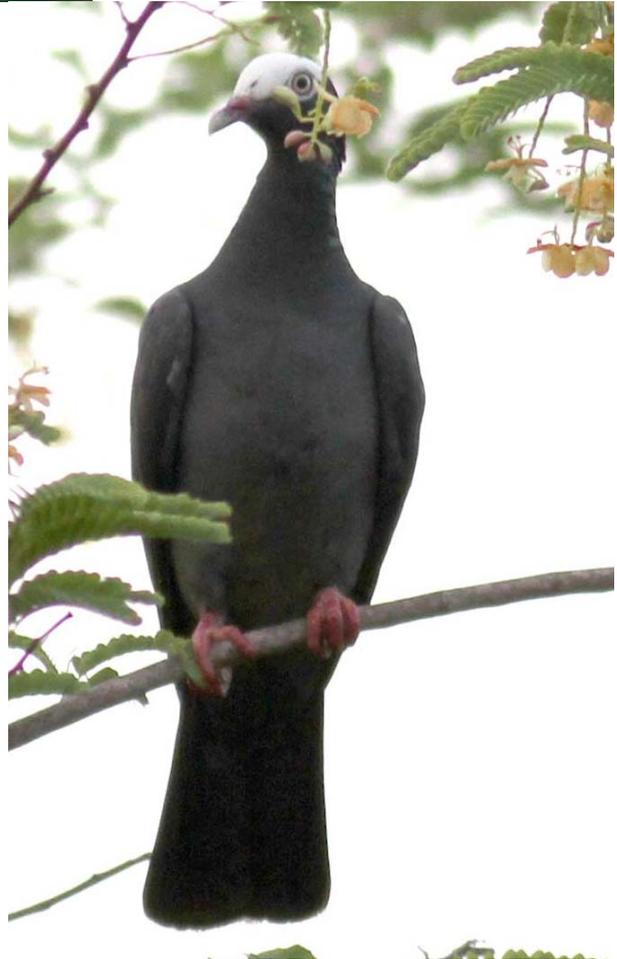


Used the hire car to good effect finding a disused road on the southern side of the main road just past a cement works and a few miles east along the peninsula from our hotel.

An obliging Great Lizard Cuckoo hung around intrigued by my loud squeaking, which was very successful overall.

There were plenty of birds with a Yellow-throated Warbler seen briefly in the mangrove edges – the earliest warbler to head south from the states. Lots of Yellow Warblers and an Osprey.

Several White-crowned Pigeons were feeding on berries. Much better views than the distant flying and perched birds seen previously.



Some close views of the striking but common Cuban Green Woodpecker.



A total of 3 Cuban Peewees with a worn adult and a smart young year bird.



Tuesday 27th Jul

A surprising find was an Antillean Nighthawk resting on the hotel car-park!



One or two Loggerhead Kingbirds were present in the hotel gardens.



Northern Mockingbirds were common.



'Curly tailed' lizards were seen several times.



Several Cuban Emeralds were feeding on flowers in the hotel grounds.



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