

Cuba, July 7 – August 4, 2012, Diederik van der Molen

Summary

I went on a family holiday, but had plenty opportunity to go birding. In this period there are little migrants, but that makes it easier to find endemics. I visited most parts of the country, except for the area east from Santiago de Cuba.

Itinerary

Both the car (Rex, about 75 € pd incl insurance) and most hotels (16 - 26 € pp pn) were arranged by a travel agency (<http://www.outsight.nl/>). They had standard trips which can be used as starting point for a tailor-made trip. The weather was hot (35 °C at day and 25 °C at night), so air condition in the car and rooms is necessary. Furthermore, for family visit, a swimming pool is highly recommended if not staying near the sea. In Havana we rented an apartment (<http://casarolando.com>) and this is easy in other larger towns too (cheaper, but no swimming pool and possibly no airco, more difficult if you don't travel with 2 persons).

We had very little rain and mosquitoes were only occasionally a problem. Cuba is safe, people are friendly and a lot of them speak English. We used bottled water, but that is probably only necessary around Santiago de Cuba.

Roads may be terrible. You are better off if your rental car doesn't look good from the start. Roads are also used by everyone, even highways, especially for waiting for public transport. There isn't much traffic and people drive safe. There are almost no road-signs, but apart from cities finding your way is not a problem. Buy a map in advance and a rough guide with city maps is advisable.

There are 2 currencies: Cuban and convertible pesos. One convertible peso (CUC) is about 90 eurocent and 24 Cuban pesos (CUP). A lot of products can only be bought with CUC's, but we paid most lunches (pizza) and fruit with CUP's. Food and drinks are cheap to EU standards, especially when prices were in CUP's. It is advisable to ask for menu's and see prices, otherwise you often pay more than needed.

I used Birds of Cuba (2008, Garrido and Kirkconnel), downloaded birdsounds on my Blackberry and used 3 trip reports of other summer visits.

July 7: We flew from Amsterdam to Varadero International Airport. It's a 1 hour and 75 CUC drive by taxi to Havana. First bird was 'our' House sparrow and most numerous were Turkey Vultures – because of them I probably missed several hawks because I didn't look up anymore. Cuban swallow and Antillean palm-swift were seen from the apartment and Magnificent frigatebird and Brown pelican over the sea.

July 10: We drove as far west as possible to Maria la Gorda (5 h). Maria la Gorda was some tourist-apartments near the sea, a bar and a restaurant, but many more apartments were under construction. Heaven for snorkeling and plenty of birds too: Yellow-crowned night-heron, Zenaida dove, Plain dove, Cuban green and West-indian woodpecker, Cuban emerald, Cuban peewee, Cuban bullfinch, Cuban crow, La Sagras flycatcher, Gray kingbird, Stripe-headed tanager. All along the coastal until 1 km from Maria la Gorda. 15 km before Maria la Gorda was starting point for a guided birding trip at Guanahacabibes. Without prior arrangements we could spend a couple of hours with Osmani (?) (10 CUC each including entrance fee). Good in English and his whistling bird sounds were sometimes better than my Blackberry could produce. We saw Bee hummingbird, Yellow-headed warblers, Black-cowled (Hispaniolan) oriole and Cuban vireo within 2 m and Cuban pygmy owl at 5 m. Furthermore Magnificent frigatebird, White-crowned pigeon, White-winged dove, Loggerhead Kingbird, Tawny-shouldered blackbird, etc.

July 13: We drove to Vinales (3,5 h). On our way near La Fe a Gundlach's hawk in a cloud of angry smaller birds crossed the road. The Vinales valley is beautiful and a guided walk was interesting. In the evening around 40 Antillean nighthawks hunted around the swimming pool. 15 km west from Vinales, just before El Moncada there is a sign on the right hand side leading to a walking track in the forest. It should be a 5 km loop and no guide is needed, but it's advisable to mark your way (rain proof). I had to turn around after 2 h. Apart from Cuban solitaire (also nearby thank to my Blackberry), Cuban grassquit, Cuban trogon and Red-legged honeycreeper. Cave swallows in the cave in El Moncada.

July 17: Zapata, the best birding location on the island. A 6 h drive and some problems to find our way near Havana. We stayed 2 nights in hotel Playa Larga. Birding trips can be arranged in park-office of Playa Larga (coming from Havana right and 100 m before the road bends to the left). I spent almost a day with the excellent guide Esdrey and a Flemish couple (20 CUC each including entrance fee). It was a terrible experience for my rental car, but we've seen plenty. Zapata wren and Red-shouldered blackbird (near the park entrance), Crested caracara, Anhinga, Northern jacana, egrets, Gray-headed quail-dove, Cuban parrot, Cuban tody, Fernandina's and Northern flicker (near Soplittar). La Salina did not produce so much because the water level was high: Common Blackhawk, White ibis, Greater

flamingo. We also stayed 2 nights at Guama. A beautiful island in a natural lake, but difficult to get around. Neotrophic cormorant, Limpkin and several egrets. One night or a day trip should be enough.

July 20: Cienfuegos (2 h). No birding.

July 21: Trinidad (1,5 h). We stayed in the all-inclusive Costa Sur hotel at the Ancon peninsula nearby some brackish pools that produced: Least-, Sandwich- and Royal terns, Reddish egret, Tricolored-, Little blue- and Green heron, American avocet, Black-necked stilt, Least sandpiper, Wilson's plover, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs. A seeing of a group Bridled or Sooty terns at sea was the only time that I missed a telescope. Snorkeling was good, but a hike in mountainous forest to waterfall's (Topes de Collantes) was disappointing.

July 24: Camaguey (5 h). No birding. When leaving rice fields near Bayamo looked promising, but no time to see more than Double-crested cormorants and Glossy ibis.

July 26: El Salton, in the Sierra Maestra between Bayamo and Santiago de Cuba. Interesting guided walk of 3 hours (8 CUC each). Especially to visit a local family in a forest house, but Ricardo was good in birds, as well as plants and languages (even Dutch). Black-whiskered vireo, Scaly-naped pigeon, Ruddy quail-dove, Louisiana waterthrush.

July 31: Guardalavaca (3,5 h). All-inclusive hotel Las Brisas, not so bad as we could upgrade our reservation to apartments. There was a beautiful natural coastline east of the hotel, but birding was limited because of the high temperature. Terns, egrets and common birds. Migration was starting and I could add Spotted sandpiper as the last bird on the list. We left from Holguin.

Bird List (birds not mentioned previously have been seen at more than 2 locations)

1. <i>Anhinga anhinga</i>	Amerikaanse Slangenhalvogel	Anhinga
2. <i>Fregata magnificens</i>	Amerikaanse Fregatvogel	Magnificent Frigatebird
3. <i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	Bruine Pelikaan	Brown Pelican
4. <i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>	Bigua-aalscholver	Neotropic Cormorant
5. <i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	Geoorde Aalscholver	Double-crested Cormorant
6. <i>Ardea albus/modesta</i>	Grote Zilverreiger	Great Egret
7. <i>Egretta thula</i>	Amerikaanse Kleine Zilverreiger	Snowy Egret
8. <i>Egretta caerulea</i>	Kleine Blauwe Reiger	Little Blue Heron
9. <i>Ardea herodias</i>	Amerikaanse Blauwe Reiger	Great Blue Heron
10. <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Koereiger	Cattle Egret
11. <i>Butorides virescens</i>	Groene Reiger	Green Heron
12. <i>Egretta rufescens</i>	Roodhalsreiger	Reddish Egret
13. <i>Egretta tricolor</i>	Witbuikreiger	Tricolored Heron
14. <i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>	Geelkruinkwak	Yellow-crowned Night Heron
15. <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Kwak	Black-crowned Night Heron
16. <i>Plegadis falcinellis</i>	Zwarte Ibis	Glossy Ibis
17. <i>Endocimus albus</i>	Witte Ibis	White Ibis
18. <i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	Flamingo	Greater Flamingo
19. <i>Cathartes aura</i>	Roodkoppier	Turkey Vulture
20. <i>Accipiter gundlachi</i>	Cubaanse Sperwer	Gundlach's Hawk
21. <i>Buteogallus anthracinus</i>	Zwarte Buizerd	Common Black-hawk
22. <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Visarend	Osprey
23. <i>Caracara plancus</i>	Zuidelijke Kuifcaracara	Southern Caracara
24. <i>Falco sparverius</i>	Amerikaanse Torenvalk	American Kestrel
25. <i>Numida meleagris</i>	Helmparelhoen	Helmeted Guineafowl
26. <i>Aramus guarauna</i>	Koerlan	Limpkin
27. <i>Jacana spinosa</i>	Jacana	Northern Jacana
28. <i>Charadrius wilsonia</i>	Dikbekplevier	Wilson's Plover
29. <i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	Killdeerplevier	Killdeer
30. <i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>	Lachmeeuw	Laughing Gull
31. <i>Sterna antillarum</i>	Amerikaanse Dwergstern	Least Tern
32. <i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	Grote Stern	Sandwich Tern
33. <i>Sterna caspia</i>	Reuzenster	Caspian Tern
34. <i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	Noordamerikaanse Kluut	American Avocet
35. <i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>	Amerikaanse Steltkluut	Black-necked Stilt
36. <i>Actitis macularia</i>	Amerikaanse Oeverloper	Spotted Sandpiper
37. <i>Calidris minutilla</i>	Kleinste Strandloper	Least Sandpiper
38. <i>Tringa flavipes</i>	Kleine Geelpootruiter	Lesser Yellowlegs
39. <i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>	Grote Geelpootruiter	Greater Yellowlegs
40. <i>Columbina passerina</i>	Musduif	Common Ground-dove
41. <i>Columba livia</i>	Rotsduif	Rock Dove
42. <i>Geotrygon caniceps</i>	Grijskopkwartelduif	Grey-headed Quail-dove
43. <i>Geotrygon montana</i>	Bergkwartelduif	Ruddy Quail-dove
44. <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Turkse Tortel	Collared Dove
45. <i>Patagioenas inornata</i>	Wijnrode Duif	Plain Pigeon
46. <i>Patagioenas leucocephala</i>	Witkapduif	White-crowned Pigeon
47. <i>Patagioenas squamosa</i>	Roodhalsduif	Scaly-naped Pigeon
48. <i>Zenaida asiatica</i>	Witvleugeltreurdruif	White-winged Dove
49. <i>Zenaida aurita</i>	Antilliaanse Treurdruif	Zenaida Dove
50. <i>Zenaida macroura</i>	Treurdruif	Mourning Dove
51. <i>Amazona leucocephala</i>	Cuba-amazone	Cuban Parrot
52. <i>Coccyzus merlini</i>	Cubaanse Hagediskoekoek	Great Lizard-Cuckoo

53. <i>Crotophaga ani</i>	Kleine Ani	Smooth-billed Ani
54. <i>Glaucidium siju</i>	Cubaanse Dwerguil	Cuban Pygmy-Owl
55. <i>Chordeiles gundlachii</i>	Antilliaanse Nachtzwaluw	Antillean Nighthawk
56. <i>Tachornis phoenicobia</i>	Cubaanse Palmgierzwaluw	Antillean Palm-Swift
57. <i>Chlorostilbon ricordii</i>	Cubaanse Smaragdkolibrie	Cuban Emerald
58. <i>Mellisuga helenae</i>	Bijkolibrie	Bee Hummingbird
59. <i>Priotelus temnurus</i>	Cubaanse Trogon	Cuban Trogon
60. <i>Todus multicolor</i>	Cubaanse Todie	Cuban Tody
61. <i>Colaptes fernandinae</i>	Cubaanse Grondspecht	Fernandina's Flicker
62. <i>Colaptes auratus</i>	Gouden Grondspecht	Northern Flicker
63. <i>Melanerpes superciliaris</i>	Bahamaspecht	West Indian Woodpecker
64. <i>Picus percussus</i>	Cubaanse Groene Specht	Cuban Green Woodpecker
65. <i>Hirundo fulva</i>	Holezwaluw	Cave Swallow
66. <i>Progne cryptoleuca</i>	Cubaanse Purperzwaluw	Cuban Martin
67. <i>Contopus caribaeus</i>	Bruinbuikpiewie	Cuban Pewee
68. <i>Myiarchus sagrae</i>	La Sagra's Tiran	La Sagra's Flycatcher
69. <i>Tyrannus caudifasciatus</i>	Bahamakoningstiran	Loggerhead Kingbird
70. <i>Tyrannus dominicensis</i>	Grijze Koningstiran	Gray Kingbird
71. <i>Ferminia cerverai</i>	Zapatawinterkoning	Zapata Wren
72. <i>Myadestes elisabeth</i>	Cubaanse Solitaire	Cuban Solitaire
73. <i>Turdus plumbeus</i>	Roodpootlijster	Red-legged Thrush
74. <i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	Spotlijster	Northern Mockingbird
75. <i>Teretistris fernandinae</i>	Geelkopzanger	Yellow-headed Warbler
76. <i>Parkesia motacilla</i>	Louisianawaterlijster	Louisiana Waterthrush
77. <i>Cyanerpes cyaneus</i>	Blauwe Suikervogel	Red-legged Honeycreeper
78. <i>Vireo altiloquus</i>	Black-whiskered Vireo	Black-whiskered Vireo
79. <i>Vireo gundlachii</i>	Cubaanse Vireo	Cuban Vireo
80. <i>Corvus nasicus</i>	Cubaanse Kraai	Cuban Crow
81. <i>Spindalis zena</i>	Westelijke Spindalis	Stripe-headed Tanager
82. <i>Passer domesticus</i>	Huismus	House Sparrow
83. <i>Melopyrrha nigra</i>	Cubaans Dikbekje	Cuban Bullfinch
84. <i>Tiaris canora</i>	Kleine Cubavink	Cuban Grassquit
85. <i>Tiaris olivacea</i>	Grote Cubavink	Yellow-faced Grassquit
86. <i>Agelaius humeralis</i>	Bruinboegtroepiaal	Tawny-shouldered Blackbird
87. <i>Agelaius assimilis</i>	Roodschoudertroepiaal	Red-shouldered Blackbird
88. <i>Dives atrovioleaceus</i>	Cubatroepiaal	Cuban Blackbird
89. <i>Icterus dominicensis</i>	Hispaniolatroepiaal	Hispaniolan Oriole
90. <i>Molothrus bonariensis</i>	Glanskoevogel	Shiny Cowbird
91. <i>Sturnella magna</i>	Witkaakweidespreeuw	Eastern Meadowlark
92. <i>Quiscalus niger</i>	Antilliaanse troepiaal	Greater Antillean Grackle

Other species

There are only a few mammals; maybe partly because the huge amount of crabs found near the sea. I identified the Bushy-tailed Hutia (*Mysateles melanurus*) at the Ancon peninsula near Trinidad. One snake (locals called it Culebra Ciega, but internet photo's did not match with the white snake we've seen) in El Salton. Many lizards, such as brown anole (*Anolis sagrei*), Allison's Anole (*Anolis allisoni*), knight anole (*Anolis equestris*) and Northern Curly-tailed Lizard (*Leiocephalus carinatus*). The Cuban tree frog (*Osteopilus septentrionalis*) is widespread including in the apartments of hotel Playa Larga. I've seen probably more fish species than birds...

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