

# Turks & Caicos Islands

## Birding trip report

### 13-27 March 2011

#### Introduction

The Turks & Caicos Islands are a British Overseas Territory and form the eastern part of the Bahamas archipelago, south east of Florida, east of Cuba and north of Hispaniola (Haiti/Dominican Republic). The western group, the Caicos Islands covered by this report, comprise a group of low-lying limestone islands and cays, with generally poor soils and mainly scrubby woodland and mangrove-ringed ponds and south-facing shores. The islands (especially Providenciales or 'Provo') are a significant up-market tourist and winter-resident destination.

As regards birds, the islands are best known for their concentration of water birds (a significant part of the area is a Ramsar site), migrant American warblers and some regional specialities. The latter include Key West Quail-Dove, Bahama Woodstar, Thick-billed Vireo and Greater Antillean Bullfinch, which are reasonably easy to find, and West Indian Whistling Duck, Western Spindalis (formerly known as Stripe-headed Tanager) and Kirtland's Warbler, which aren't!

On this visit from 13-27 March 2011, I visited the following islands: Provo 13-17 and 22-27 March, Middle Caicos 17-20 March and North Caicos 20-22 March. I did not visit the Turks Islands, well known for seabirds. Travel round the islands was mainly by bicycle; each is of a manageable size. A total of **67 species** was recorded in a fortnight; a species list is given at the end.

#### Trip report

This visit was primarily a visit to friends, so birding was interspersed with other pleasurable activities like eating, chatting and snorkelling. On Provo, I stayed at Turtle Cove, in the centre of the north coast, on North at Pelican Beach Hotel, Whitby and on Middle at Sundial Villa, near Turnup Pond.

Turtle Cove, like most of Provo, has a mix of native scrub forest (to about 2-3m tall) and development including gardens. The palm trees round the marina held **Palm Warbler**, **Yellow-throated Warbler** and **Smooth-billed Ani**, and **Ruddy Turnstones** queued up on the rails of the restaurant for titbits. The marina also held **Green Heron** (a widespread species) and **Belted Kingfisher**, whilst the coast introduced us to **Brown Pelican**. The surrounding area, with its numerous undeveloped plots towards Richmond Hills, held a variety of warblers including migrant **Northern Parula** and resident **Yellow Warbler**, species that would become well-known over coming days such as **Thick-billed Vireo** (heard singing all over the islands), **Bahama Woodstar**, **Common Ground Dove** and **Northern Mockingbird**, plus a good sighting of a **Mangrove Cuckoo**. One of the memorable points of the visit was the number of birds that gave stunning views.

The two most productive areas for birds on Provo were at either end, Wheeland beyond Blue Hills to the northwest and the golf course between Grace Bay and Leeward to the east. In general, the southern part of the island was unproductive at that time of year; the far west (off-tarmac) was not visited. The pools at Wheeland, beyond Blue Hills (and past the excellent Sailing Paradise Restaurant) on the coast road, were surprisingly good despite their small size and illicit dumping. Good views of two **Clapper Rails**, **White-cheeked Pintail** and **Blue-winged Teal** and adult and juvenile **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** complemented a good range of herons and waders. The small pier at Blue Hills held the only gulls seen, obviously newly arrived on 24 March, while in the area round the rubbish dump (sorry, solid waste management facility) on the other side of the Millennium Highway were the only **Indigo Buntings** of the trip.

The golf course with its numerous pools was very productive for water birds, including **Greater Flamingo**, **Ruddy Duck**, both grebes and one **Hooded Merganser**. Further east, pools between

Leeward and the ferry terminal held passage waders and close by the only **Bahama Mockingbird** seen on Provo – these birds prefer less developed areas.

The ferry (passengers and bikes) to Sandy Point on North passes a string of cays and the awful abandoned development on Dellis Cay. Further abandoned buildings disfigure the coast at Sandy Point, but beyond North and (especially) Middle are enjoyably quiet. After passing quickly through North (like Alice through the third square, in our case by pickup truck), experiencing the only real rain and the first **Cuban Crow** of the trip, we crossed the hurricane-battered causeway to Middle Caicos.

Middle has only some 270 inhabitants, although the property speculators would encourage more to come. Vegetation ranges from a low maquis-like scrub on the north coast to low forest in some areas. The most convenient places to bird are the designated trails, especially at Haulover Plantation, and at Turnup Pond, by the road just before Bambarra. The Washing Pond trail was particularly good for butterflies. It seems likely that, in season, warblers can be found just about anywhere on the islands, although thinly distributed; the eastern part of Middle is said to be where the very rare Kirtland's Warbler winters (I didn't find any). However, the nice dry forest at Haulover produced the only warblers I identified on Middle, **Prairie Warbler** and **Black-and-white Warbler**. It was from a viewing platform here that the only **White-tailed Tropicbirds** were to be seen, distantly but unmistakably, over the coast to the north.

Much more easy to find is the delightful **Greater Antillean Bullfinch**, seen in various locations including at Turnup Pond. It was here that, while watching one really close, I became aware of a whirring and, lowering the bins, realized I was being investigated by a **Bahama Woodstar** hovering about a foot away. It was also near here that I first heard the **Cuban Crow** – it really does sound as ridiculous as they say in the books. The pond itself held a good range of waders, herons and ducks, while the flamingoes were found on adjacent Montpellier Pond, where I nearly stood on another **Clapper Rail** in the mangroves. The area round Conch Bar and Mudjin Harbour produced the usual coastal species, including **American Oystercatcher** not seen elsewhere, but Village Pond, a site for the elusive West Indian Whistling Duck, yielded nothing of interest on this occasion.

Whilst North is a little more populous than Middle, its better soils support higher forest that is particularly good for birds. This is best seen at Wades Green Plantation (for which access currently requires climbing a wall), especially around the well and the trail beyond the Great House (mosquito repellent would have been particularly useful here). **Key West Quail-Dove** can be located by call, and the forest at the well provided a good view of **Pearly-eyed Thrasher**. The highest concentration of warblers on the islands were around here, including **Magnolia Warbler**, **Cape May Warbler** and **American Redstart** not seen elsewhere. Another notable bird was a wintering **Yellow-throated Vireo**.

Despite various pools with water birds (including Flamingo Pond with thousands of **American Coot**), no other location on North held interesting concentrations of species. Kew, the village nearest Wades Green, provided **Zenaida Dove** and the trees round the pond in the centre are said to be good for warblers. North is supposed to be the best island for Western Spindalis, but I failed to find it – my guide on North had only seen it once, and that in the 'pineyards' (pine woodland) which have in recent years been decimated by a scale insect and are under severe threat. One other record was the only **Wilson's Snipe**, dead on the road near the causeway. The 'ones that got away' were also near here – a couple of pigeons; neither White-crowned Pigeon nor White-winged Dove were identified on the trip. At Sandy Point on the way back to Provo, a **Barn Swallow** was the only hirundine and the only definite passage migrant seen.

## Conclusion

TCI is not high on birders' target destinations, partly because it is quite expensive and partly because it has no endemic species and relatively low numbers. It does however provide a relaxing and peaceful location with really good views of some great birds. The time of year makes a considerable difference, with the islands having significant numbers of both winter and summer visiting species in addition to passage birds and residents. Late March provided mainly wintering and resident species.

## Species list

Abbreviations: PR (Provo), MC (Middle Caicos), NC (North Caicos)

<i>Common name</i>	<i>Species</i>	<i>Where recorded</i>
Least Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus dominicus</i>	Widespread on ponds
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	Golf course PR; Whitby NC
White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	N of Haulover MC, several, 19/3
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	Widespread on the coast
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	Widespread
Great Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>	Widespread on ponds
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	Wheeland PR; Turnup Pond MC
Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	Golf course & Wheeland PR
Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>	Widespread on ponds
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Widespread
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>	Widespread
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>	Wheeland PR; Turnup Pond MC
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	Widespread on ponds
White-cheeked Pintail	<i>Anas bahamensis</i>	Widespread on ponds
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>	Widespread on ponds
Hooded Merganser	<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>	Golf course PR, 1, 25/3
Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	Golf course PR
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Widespread on coast
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	Common throughout
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Kew NC, 1, 22/3
Clapper Rail	<i>Rallus longirostris</i>	Wheeland PR, 2, 16/3; Montpeller Pond MC, 1, 17/3
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Golf course PR; Turnup Pond MC
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	Widespread on ponds
Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	Widespread
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	Pond at Leeward PR, 1, 17/3
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	Turnup Pond MC; causeway NC
American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>	Mudjin Harbour MC, 1, 18/3
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>	Widespread on ponds
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>	Widespread on ponds
Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>	Widespread on ponds
Willet	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>	Wheeland PR
Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularia</i>	Wheeland & golf course PR
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	Widespread on coast, PR
Stilt Sandpiper	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>	Pond at Leeward PR, 1, 17/3
Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>	Wheeland PR
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>	Causeway NC, 1 dead on road, 21/3
Laughing Gull	<i>Larus atricilla</i>	Blue Hills quay PR, 16, 24/3
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	Blue Hills quay PR, 1 sub-adult, 24/3
Royal Tern	<i>Sterna maximus</i>	Widespread on coast
Zenaida Dove	<i>Zenaida aurita</i>	Kew NC; Wades Green NC
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	Widespread, PR and NC
Common Ground-Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>	Common throughout
Key West Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon chrysia</i>	Wades Green NC
Mangrove Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus minor</i>	Turtle Cove PR, 1, 14/3; Wades Green NC, 1 heard, 20/3
Smooth-billed Ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>	Widespread
Bahama Woodstar	<i>Calliphlox evelynae</i>	Widespread, PR and MC
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alpyon</i>	Widespread
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Sandy Point NC, 1, 22/3
Cuban Crow	<i>Corvus nasicus</i>	Widespread, MC and NC
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>	Common throughout
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	Common on PR, also MC and NC

Bahama Mockingbird	<i>Mimus gundlachii</i>	Leeward PR; Conch Bar & Haulover MC
Pearly-eyed Thrasher	<i>Margarops fuscatus</i>	Wades Green NC
Thick-billed Vireo	<i>Vireo crassirostris</i>	Common throughout
Yellow-throated Vireo	<i>Vireo flavifrons</i>	Wades Green NC, 1, 22/3
Northern Parula	<i>Parula americana</i>	Turtle Cove PR
Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>	Turtle Cove & golf course PR
Magnolia Warbler	<i>Dendroica magnolia</i>	Wades Green NC
Cape May Warbler	<i>Dendroica tigrina</i>	Turtle Cove PR; Wades Green NC
Yellow-throated Warbler	<i>Dendroica dominica</i> ,	Turtle Cove & golf course PR
Prairie Warbler	<i>Dendroica discolor</i>	Haulover MC; Wades Green NC
Palm Warbler	<i>Dendroica palmarum</i>	Turtle Cove PR; Bottle Creek NC
Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>	Haulover MC
American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	Wades Green NC
Bananaquit	<i>Coereba flaveola</i>	Common throughout
Indigo-bunting	<i>Passerina cyanea</i>	Blue Hills dump PR, small flock, 24/3
Greater Antillean Bullfinch	<i>Loxigilla violacea</i>	Turnup Pond & Conch Bar MC

## References

UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum: report on TCI wildlife

<http://www.ukotcf.org/pdf/TCIRamMP/Parts%20One%20and%20Two.pdf>

(Note: the report incorrectly lists Antillean Nighthawk as resident, whereas it is a summer visitor arriving in April. It is reportedly easily seen in season.)

Bruce Hallett: Birds of the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands (Macmillan Caribbean Natural History)