

# BIRDING IN WESTERN CUBA

MARCH 4-11, 2024



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## BIRDING IN WESTERN CUBA

Immerse yourself in the vibrant nature and birdlife in La Guira National Park, Soroa, Zapata Nature Reserve and Havana. Engage with and support Cuban naturalists, birders and private entrepreneurs as you search for endemic bird species and experience the colorful culture of Cuba.

### ITINERARY SUMMARY

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- Independent arrivals at Jose Marti International Airport, Havana
- 2 Nights in Soroa, Privately Owned B&B
- 3 Nights in Playa Larga, Privately Owned B&B
- 2 Nights in Havana, Grand Aston Hotel
- Independent departures from Jose Marti International Airport, Havana

**Group Size: Maximum 8 guests per guide, up to 2 groups per motorcoach**

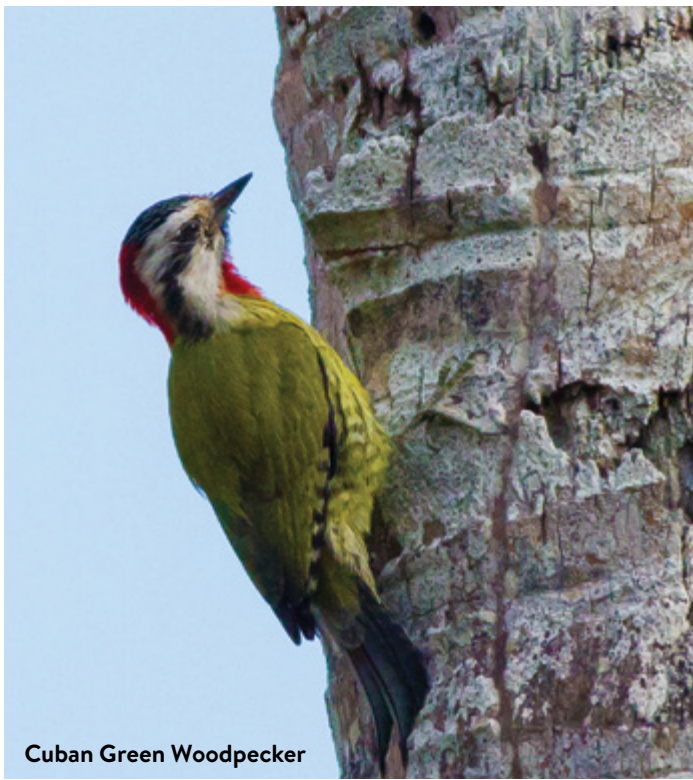
### HIGHLIGHTS

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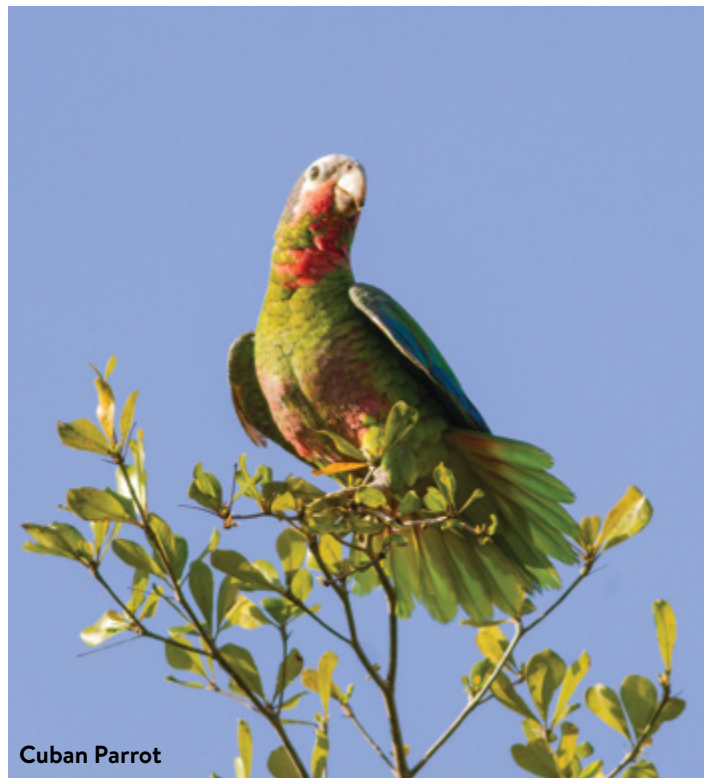
- Immerse yourself in the vibrant nature and birdlife in La Guira National Park, Soroa, Zapata Nature Reserve in the company of expert Cuban naturalists.
- Search for endemic bird species such as the Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Vireo and more.
- Discover the best of Havana while meeting and supporting Cuban people from all walks of life.
- Learn about conservation and the ecology of the Zapata Wetlands with a Cuban Naturalist.
- Search for endemics in a variety of habitats: mixed forest, dense forest, mangrove, marsh and open wetlands.
- Possible sightings include Cuban Parrot, Cuban Bullfinch, Bare-legged Owl, the threatened Cuban Parakeet, Fernandina's Flicker and Blue-headed Quail-Dove.







Cuban Green Woodpecker



Cuban Parrot

#### **Day 1, Monday, March 4, 2024:**

##### **Arrival in Havana / Transfer to Soroa**

Independent arrivals on early morning flights to Havana José Martí International Airport by 10:00 am. Once you've cleared immigration, collected your baggage and cleared Customs, you'll be met at the airport exit by your self-employed Cuban guide.

We depart the airport to head west. Your Cuban Guide will lead introductions and provide a welcome briefing with important information for our time in Cuba. Your Cuban birding expert will provide an overview briefing on Cuba's birdlife.

First, we'll stop at **Las Terrazas**, a pioneering ecovillage that began in 1968 as a reforestation project, and is now a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Here, we will begin observing birdlife and have lunch in a *paladar*.

Continue to the town of Soroa, and check in at our privately owned B&B accommodations. Take some time to freshen up.

In the late afternoon, we'll head to **Soroa Orchid Garden** where we may find the Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Cuban Emerald, Antillean Palm-Swift, Loggerhead Kingbird, Greater Antillean Grackle and Cuban Oriole.

This evening we'll have our Welcome Dinner in a *paladar* – privately owned restaurant.

Included meals typically feature three courses, with a limited selection from

which to choose. Meals typically include two beverages: House welcome cocktail then a choice of one additional beverage: bottled water, Cuban soft drinks or beer, or a glass of house wine. Coffee (espresso) is not included but may be purchased individually. One of the most enjoyable aspects of dining in a *paladar* is the personal connection you'll make with the owner and staff, as they share their personal stories. Learn how private enterprise in Cuba functions on an individual level, as well as how the *paladar's* ingredients are sourced and the chef's inspiration for the food they serve. **Meals Included: L, D**

#### **Day 2, Tuesday, March 5:**

##### **Birding in La Güira National Park**

We're up and out early this morning, to drive one hour to La Guira National Park where we'll spend the day. Following forest trails on foot, we'll cover at least a couple of miles. We're looking for endemic birds: Cuban Grassquit, Cuban Tody, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Yellow-headed Warbler.

We'll end our day birding in the grounds of Hacienda Cortina, a former estate built in the 1920s. The endemic Fernandina's Flicker and Giant Kingbird have been recorded here.

We'll return to Soroa and have dinner in a *paladar*. **Meals Included: B, L, D**

#### **Day 3, Wednesday, March 6:**

##### **From Soroa to Playa Larga**

After an early breakfast, we'll depart on our journey (3.5 hour drive) to Playa Larga, where we'll stay in privately owned B&B accommodations.

After a delicious home-cooked lunch, we'll check in to our rooms, then have a presentation by a local Cuban naturalist on La Ciénega de Zapata. Known for its size, as well as for being the best-preserved wetlands in all of the Antilles, the area is designated as a "Wetland of International Importance" by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in 2001. The wetlands are home to 258 bird species, 28 of them endemic, including the endangered Cuban Parrot.

Dinner this evening is on the rooftop terrace of the *paladar*. **Meals Included: B, L, D**

#### **Day 4, Thursday, March 7:**

##### **Zapata Wetlands**

Over the next two days we'll explore the different areas of **La Ciénega de Zapata**. Depending on the conditions on each day, we'll have different areas to focus our time:

Bermejas, for birding in mixed forest habitat. Here we'll search for Bee Hummingbird, Gray-fronted Quail-Dove, Key West Quail-Dove, Ruddy Quail-Dove, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Blackbird, Cuban Bullfinch, Loggerhead Kingbird, Bare-legged Owl



Cuban Pygmy Owl



Grey-headed Quail Dove

and Cuban Pygmy Owl. The threatened Cuban Parakeet, Fernandina's Flicker and Blue-headed Quail-Dove are sometimes seen here.

In Cueva de los Peces, our goals are views of the colorful Blue-headed Quail Dove and other endemics. The site is named for one of Cuba's largest underwater saltwater caves, where we'll cool off with a swim after birding.

We'll meet residents in the community of Los Hondones, an eco-village where organic farming and fruit trees attract many endemic birds such as the Cuban Parrot, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Great Lizard Cuckoo, Cuban Emerald and many migrants.

Las Salinas Trail, a varied habitat that includes low, dense forest, mangrove, marsh and open wetlands. Here we are looking for the endemic Cuban Black Hawk as well as shorebird, seabird and waterbird species which could include American Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbills, Reddish Egret, Wood Stork and Clapper Rail.

Enjoy dinner in a local paladar. After dinner this evening, we head out for some evening birdwatching to look for Stygian Owl, Bare-legged Owl, Cuban Pygmy Owl and the Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjar. **Meals Included: B, L, D**

#### **Day 5, Friday, March 8: Zapata Wetlands**

We'll continue our birding adventure in the early morning, covering more of Zapata's areas.

Late morning, we drive to Playa Giron for lunch in a paladar then a visit to the Playa Giron museum, where we learn about the Bay of Pigs invasion from the Cuban perspective.

Enjoy dinner in the casa and a special presentation of live Cuban music.

**Meals Included: B, L, D**

#### **Day 6, Saturday, March 9:**

##### **Drive to Havana, Hemingway's Finca Vigia**

We're up and out early today, taking a box breakfast with us, as we check out of our B&B. First, we'll stop one final time in Zapata Wetlands National Park in Santo Tomas, for birding from the water via pole-powered boats. This area, with its sawgrass tussocks is a great place to see the Zapata Sparrow and Zapata Wren. Also be ready to spot species such as the White-crowned Pigeon, Great Lizard Cuckoo, Smooth-billed Ani, Cuban Tody, Cuban Bullfinch and Purple Gallinule.

Depart to Havana. Our drive will be approximately 3 hours, and we'll arrive on the outskirts of the city in time for lunch in a paladar.

After lunch, continue to San Francisco de Paula to Hemingway's former home, Finca Vigia. Here, we'll meet a Cuban who works as a private interpreter and will provide insights to the interesting memorabilia and stories of the famed writer's life in Cuba. Continue to Havana and check in at the hotel.

After you freshen up, we'll depart to dinner. We've made a reservation, but this dinner is left at your own expense so that you may choose what you like from the menu.

Return to the hotel. **Meals Included: B, L**

#### **Day 7, Sunday, March 10:**

##### **Meet the People of Havana**

After an early breakfast we have a special visit at the home and private ornithological collection of **Orlando Garrido, Cuba's greatest living naturalist**. Sr. Garrido is a retired and venerable former curator of birds at the National Museum of Natural History in Havana, and co-author of the Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba as well as hundreds of scientific publications.

We begin our exploration of Havana and meetings with Habaneros - the people of Havana. We'll begin in **Old Havana** at a fresh produce and meat market, where we converse with the market vendors and learn about their products. We continue our walk with our Cuban Guide, to explore Old Havana's four main plazas and meet the self-employed entrepreneurs in business along the winding streets.

We begin in Plaza Vieja. Originally laid out in 1559, this plaza is Havana's most architecturally eclectic square, where Cuban Baroque nestles seamlessly next to Gaudi-inspired art nouveau. Continue to Plaza de San Francisco which faces Havana harbor.





Havana



Greater Flamingos



Oriente Warbler



Cuban Emerald



Zebra Heliconian



Cannonball tree flower





in traditional costumes are eager to earn their living by posing for photos in exchange for a few dollars. Continue to Plaza de Armas, Havana's oldest square. Learn about the history and rich heritage of the buildings in this charming plaza - the site where Havana was founded. Our Cuban Guide facilitates conversations with the famed booksellers, some of Cuba's original entrepreneurs, who trade in authentic books and memorabilia that commemorate the Revolution.

At the end of our exploration of Old Havana, climb aboard classic cars for an exhilarating drive around Havana. The driver shares his story of how he acquired and maintains his marvelously preserved automobile from the 1950's. Pass the recently renovated Capitol Building, the Grand Theater, and Central Park along Paseo Prado (the wide avenue separating Old Havana from Centro Havana) and continue along the Malecon, passing the reopened U.S. Embassy. We'll drive through the western neighborhood of Miramar, passing along Fifth Avenue, lined with old mansions. Some are still private houses, but many are now Embassies or Ambassadors' residences. Stop at Revolution Square, where crowds have gathered to hear speeches by Fidel, the Pope and more.

Return to the hotel with time to refresh before dinner. We'll cap off our stay

This plaza came to importance in Havana in the 16th century when Spanish galleons stopped by at the quayside on their passage through the Indies to Spain. The Plaza is anchored by the Basilica San Francisco de Asis and Cuba's first 'Wall Street.'

We'll interact with small business owners along Calle Obispo. As we meet and support Havana's *cuentapropistas* who sell handmade crafts, books and art, we'll learn about Cuba's dual-sector economy, in which private and government-owned businesses operate.

There are many choices of paladars nearby where you have time on your own for lunch.

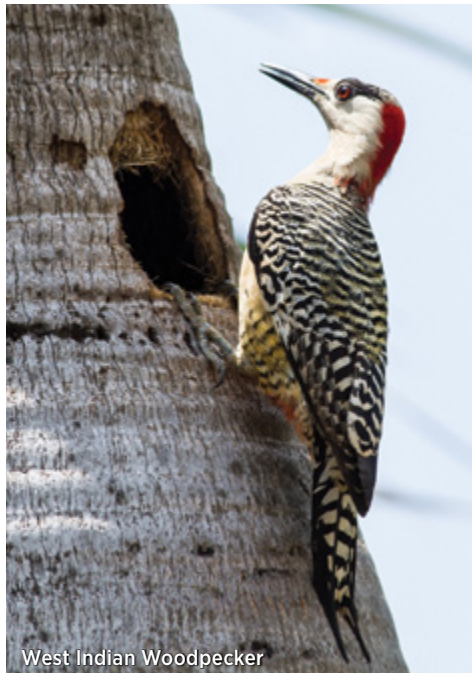
This afternoon, we'll meet the individual entrepreneurs at a unique community project, Arte Corte - or the Street of Barbers.

Continuing our stroll through Old Havana, we arrive at Plaza de la Catedral. Notice here the traditional Baroque style in the anchoring Cathedral de la Habana. Outside in the Plaza, local Habaneros dressed





Yellow Warbler



West Indian Woodpecker

**MARCH 4-11, 2024**

**\$3,425 per person**

based on double occupancy

**\$3,867** single rate

**Deposit:** \$600 per person

**Deadline to register and final payment:**

December 4, 2023

**Register online at**

**<https://conservancytravel.org/>**

**Cancellation Fees:** All cancellations are effective from the date that written notification is confirmed as received by Conservancy Travel

- Reservation - 90 days prior to tour start date: \$600 per person.
- 89 - 40 days prior to tour start date: 50% of total order.
- 39 - 0 days prior to tour start date: 100% of total order.

with an included special Farewell Dinner.

Finally, we'll retrace the history of the Mafia in Havana on a night drive past some of the most famous hangouts of Myer Lansky's crowd. Step inside the Hotel Nacional to view the memorabilia and take in the view from the gardens, before returning to our hotel for the night. **Meals Included: B, D**

**Day 8, Monday, March 11: Departure**

After breakfast, transfer to the airport

for check-in and return flight home. Your transfer time will be confirmed in Havana by your Cuban Guide, and will be scheduled to arrive at the airport approximately three hours prior to flight departure. Please ensure your passport and Cuban visa are in hand for check-in procedures. **Meals Included: B**

**Please Note: This itinerary is preliminary and may be adjusted according to conditions on the day of operation.**

**INCULSIONS:**

- Accommodations and activities as described in the itinerary
- Expert private Cuban guide and vehicle as per itinerary
- Expert Cuban specialist birding guide
- Certification of participation in a pre-planned, fully scheduled program of support for the Cuban people travel to Cuba under the U.S. Department of the Treasury general license
- Meals as per noted in the itinerary (B,L,D)
- 2 drinks per each included lunch and dinner (local beer, bottled water, soft drinks, house wine if offered by the restaurant)
- Bottled water while touring with the guide
- Gratuities for included meals and luggage handling
- Gratuities local specialty guides when required

**EXCLUSIONS:**

- International airfare
- Passport/visa fees
- Meals not mentioned in the program as included
- Coffee with included meals, cocktails other than welcome drinks, live music venue entrance fees, unless specifically noted as included in the itinerary
- Optional activities that are not stated as included in the itinerary
- Tips for hotel housekeeping and live music during meals
- Other expenses of a personal nature
- Cuban tourist visa, required for entry and departure - \$90 per person additional when issued by Conservancy Travel
- Airline Baggage fees
- Travel insurance
- Any other items not specifically mentioned as included
- Gratuity for Cuban Guide, suggested at \$20 per person/per day

**ACCOMMODATIONS**

Privately own Bed & Breakfasts – *casas particulares* – in Soroa and Playa Larga

**Havana**

**Grand Aston Hotel**

The Grand Aston La Habana Hotel is a new hotel located in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana. Situated on the Malecón – Havana's famous waterfront promenade, the hotel combines modern design in an urban oasis of lush gardens.

The hotel offers an outdoor terrace and garden; swimming pool, restaurant, bar, fitness center, 24-hour front desk and room service. WiFi is available in public areas and costs US\$5 per 24 hours. Spa services at the Ubud Spa are available at additional cost. Check-In: 4:00 p.m. Check-Out: 12:00 p.m.







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