

Cuba

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Havana, drive to Soroa

Day 2/3 Soroa / La Guira NP

Day 4/6 Zapata Peninsula

Day 7/8 Camaguey / Najasa NP

Day 9/11 Cayo Coco

Day 12 Havana and depart

Day 13 Arrive London

Departs

February / March

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code CUB01) or brochure

Grading

A/B. Easy day walks, but some long travel days.

Focus

Birds

Highlights

- Over 20 endemic bird species
- Plus North American passage migrants
- Enjoy birdwatching in the warmth of the Caribbean
- Experience Cuba's Socialist idyll
- Escorted by one of Cuba's top ornithologist guides



Bee Hummingbird, Kevin Elsby



Cuban Parrot, A. Kirkonell



Cuban Tody, Byron Palacios



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Introduction

Cuba is just 90 miles from the southern coast of Florida but in almost every respect it provides a complete contrast with its affluent neighbour, not least in the Socialist ideology which has shaped



Cuban Grassquit, Byron Palacios

the island way of life for over 40 years. The avifauna is typical of the Greater Antilles but what makes Cuba a particularly attractive birdwatching destination is the presence of 21 endemic species on the island plus a number of distinct subspecies. Added to the impressive selection of resident species is an array of North American passage migrants seeking food and rest before continuing their journey across the Straits of Florida. In February and March these can include many of the colourful wood-warblers resplendent in breeding plumage as they flit after insects through the canopy of a Cuban forest. Wetland birds are also well represented on the island and compete for attention with resident pelicans and frigatebirds along the coastline. The diversity and abundance of the birdlife is complemented

by a largely unspoilt landscape and a relaxed, easygoing atmosphere which combine to make Cuba a very enjoyable, and ornithologically productive, holiday destination.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Havana

We leave London on a flight to Havana in Cuba (either direct or indirect depending on available flight schedules). After we have collected our bags and meet our local guide, we will then drive 1.5 – 2 hours to our lovely hotel in Soroa, our base for 3 nights. It will likely be a late arrival, but the following day will be a relaxed one.

Day 2

Soroa

Located in the Sierra de los Órganos, a mountain range to the west of Havana, our hotel in the village of Soroa, is in a serene wooded valley with beautiful grounds in which to explore. We will see the first of the Cuban specialties here such as Cuban Blackbird, Greater Antillean Grackle, Northern Mockingbird, Palm Warbler, Red-legged Thrush, West Indian Woodpeckers and Mourning Doves all likely to be seen in the garden.

Heading out further afield we are likely to see some interesting endemics such as Cuban Emerald, Cuban Oriole, the gorgeous Yellow-headed Warbler, Cuban Pewee, and hopefully our first sighting of the exquisite Cuban Trogon.



Cuban Emerald

After lunch we will head a little bit further afield to a higher elevation and wonderful views across this forested landscape. Keeping eyes on the sky we can expect to see raptors such as Turkey Vulture, Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawk and American Kestrel, as well as Cuban Martins and Antillean Palm Swifts darting overhead. In the trees we will keep our eyes peeled for White-crowned Pigeon, Cuban Oriole, Black-throated Green Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, American Redstart, Loggerhead and Giant Kingbird, as well as Cuban Tody and Cuban Trogon.

Day 3

La Güira National Park

Our birding destination is an hour to the west: La Güira National Park. This area of verdant montane forest was once a refuge for the legendary revolutionary, Che Guevara and the limestone caves where he hid from the government soldiers are now something of a tourist site. Our prime concern however, will be the feathered inhabitants of the forest-clad hills and among these are several of the island endemics.

A burst of rich metallic-rhythmic song may lead us to a Cuban Solitaire, arguably one of the best songsters in Cuba and one we have a good chance of hearing in La Güira. The sober plumage of the Solitaire is less impressive than his song but the reverse is true of another forest resident, the very colourful but vocally-challenged Cuban Trogon, as well as the tiny per gorgeous Cuban Tody! The smart Olive-capped Warbler is something of a La Güira specialty found amongst the Caribbean pine woodland which we may not see anywhere else and the endemic Yellow-headed Warbler could also enrich our bird list. Other endemics like Cuban Grassquit and Cuban Emerald are also possible to see here.



Cuban Trogon

Day 4

Zapata Peninsula

Today we embark on a long drive to the Zapata Peninsula, made famous by the 'Bay of Pigs'. This area holds fantastic local habitats which will produce more endemic birdlife for us. Depending on time, we will hope to make a couple of birding stops on route (including a lunch stop) before checking in to our accommodation in Playa Girón, our base for the next three nights.

Days 5 - 6

Zapata Peninsula

The vast Ciénaga de Zapata National Park embraces swamps, forest, scrub and many other habitats ensuring a wealth of places to visit from our coastal base. Each type of vegetation harbours its own island speciality; in the dry open forest we will look for Fernandina's Flicker, Bare-legged Owl and the very beautiful Blue-headed Quail-Dove, one of several members of this genus to be found in



Bee Hummingbird, Byron Palacios

Zapata. In tracts of moist, tropical forest we may discover the incredible Bee-Hummingbird, the smallest bird in the world looking more like an insect as it zips around the canopy. Elsewhere we will wade through swamps in an attempt to tempt a Zapata Wren to appear from cover, look at the recently split Red-shouldered Blackbird and search through congregations of herons and waders feeding alongside the richly-coloured island race of American Flamingo on the salinas. Zapata is an outstanding area for birding but it is a very large area with limited access and not all the residents are easy to locate. We will fully occupy our time visiting different areas each day and with a measure of luck should manage to locate many of the very special inhabitants of Cuba's premier reserve, a list which includes; Wood Stork, White-crowned Pigeon, Grey-headed, Key

West and Ruddy Quail-Doves, Stygian Owl, Greater Antillean Nightjar, Cuban Emerald, West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Loggerhead Kingbird and Cuban Oriole.

Each visit to the coast will be greeted by the omnipresent frigatebirds with perhaps a few seabirds offshore if a stiff breeze develops and in such conditions a spell of sea-watching could be rewarding.

Day 7

Camagüey

Today we will be taking a long drive to continue our journey eastwards into the interior of the island, towards the town of Camagüey, where we spend one night. Travelling through vast open savannah and agricultural fields, we will get an insight in to rural life in Cuba. As with our drive from La Güira to Zapata, we shall stop frequently for comfort breaks and birding, enjoying lunch at a fabulous restaurant in Santa Clara, before arriving at our hotel in the late afternoon.

Day 8

Camagüey

Driving south from Camagüey to the environs of the small village of Najasa, we spend much of today looking for some of the unique birds which live in the Sierra de Chorillos, a small mountain ridge across the Najasa Mountains. Endemics will be to the fore as we search for the very rare Giant Kingbird, a huge Tyrant-flycatcher which dwarfs the more familiar members of this powerfully-built

genus; Cuban Parrot, Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Plain Pigeon, Cuban and Cuban Palm Crows are also some of the specialties it is possible to see here.

The Cuban appellation is an indication of the number of birds peculiar to the island and already at this early stage of the tour we are likely to have seen half a dozen or more species with this prefix.

We then backtrack on ourselves and head north to our next destination, Cayo Coco, where we stay for three nights. The journey along a mostly deserted highway will take us through the beautiful Sierra de Cubitas Mountains, a beautiful mountain ridge

which offers a rich Caribbean evergreen gallery- forest located 30km north of Camagüey, great habitat for some endemics such as Cuban Bullfinch, Oriente Warbler, and with a bit of luck the rarities Cuban Gnatcatcher and Gundlach's Hawk.



Cuban Pygmy Owl, Byron Palacios

The road continues into agricultural heartland of Cuba where fields of sugar cane and tobacco are tended by workers from the local State Farms. Turkey Vultures soar effortlessly on upturned wings over these fields and little parties of Smooth-billed Anis sit like so many conspirators along the fence posts or follow one another from bush to bush uttering cries that sound uncommonly like Eurasian Curlews! Eastern Meadowlarks and Mourning Doves are also common in the farmland but the most interesting birdwatching is to be found in the plantations of shade trees which invariably surround the occasional roadside service stations or restaurants. Here the resident Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds and Red-legged Thrushes share the leafy cover with northern travelers such as Cape May, Palm and Black-throated Blue Warblers, all taking advantage of these sylvan oases.

Days 9 - 10

Cayo Coco



Zapata Sparrow, Byron Palacios

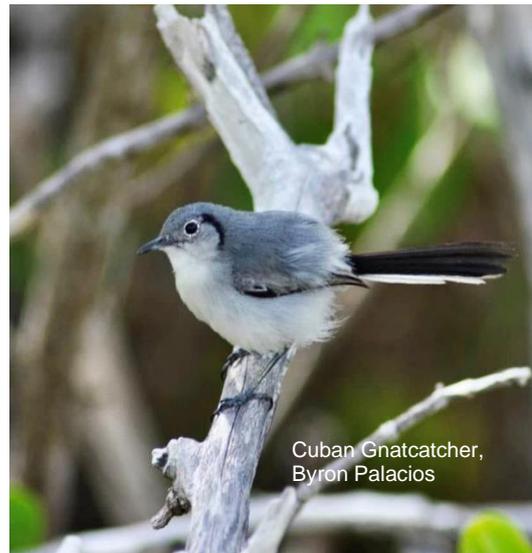
We spend the next couple of days exploring the different habitats in this delightful area and no doubt retiring to the hotel bar from time to time for some liquid refreshment! Cayo Coco is situated on an island off the north coast of Cuba connected to the mainland by a causeway. The chaos of islands here are part of a jumbled archipelago which extends for a considerable distance along the coast providing an infinite variety of remote sandy beaches to lure sun worshipers. Mangrove thickets and tangles of scrub conceal a number of interesting birds, and expanses of mudflats revealed by the retreating tide are a magnet for waders. Swamps and

coastal lagoons complete a fascinating mix of habitats which we plan to fully explore during our stay at the comfortable tourist hotel on Cayo Coco.

Birds we hope to find in the bushy areas include Bahama Mockingbird, Zapata Sparrow, Cuban Vireo and possibly a sighting of the rare Gundlach's Hawk. A visit to La Cueva del Jabali (Wild boar Cave) should also be productive where we can hope to see La Safra's Flycatcher, Cuban Bullfinch, Oriente Warbler and many other interesting species,

Species that frequent the tidal mudflats along this stretch of the coastline include American Flamingos, Northern Shovellers, Blue-winged Teal, Roseate Spoonbill, Willet, Grey and Wilson's Plovers, Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants, Tricoloured Herons, Short-billed Dowitchers, Western Sandpiper and many other waders. There will also be Brown Pelicans, terns and the ever present Magnificent Frigatebirds, forever on the lookout for an unfortunate victim to harass.

We shall also bird the coastal scrub next to the lighthouse as it is the only place in Cuba to see Thick-billed Vireo and is also a top spot for the endemic Cuban Gnatcatcher – a superb little gem, Oriente Warbler and Mangrove Cuckoo. The beach may also have Piping Plover and this is a hot migration site, so anything could turn up!



Cuban Gnatcatcher,
Byron Palacios

Day 11

Havana

This morning we depart this delightful stretch of coastline and travel back to Havana (via Santa Clara for a lunch stop and other birding stops), arriving in the late afternoon. We have the evening to enjoy the nightlife of this fantastic and unique city.

Day 12

Havana and return flight

On this final day in Cuba we have the opportunity to see some of the faded colonial elegance of Havana, once the jewel in Spain's imperial crown. We will spend the morning exploring Old Havana on foot, stopping at the city's fortifications, various squares such as the Plaza de Armas, Plaza San Francisco, the Capitolium & Plaza Mayor, the iconic Plaza de La Revolution Plaza and Plaza de la Catedral, where we will stop for lunch in view of the cathedral.

We return back to our hotel where we have the opportunity to freshen up before making our way to the airport for an evening flight back to the UK (either direct or indirect depending on available flight schedules).

Day 13

Arrive UK

We arrive back in London.



Tour grading

This tour is graded 'A / B'. This is a traditional birdwatching tour with a moderate amount of walking, but owing to the widespread nature of the sites we'll visit, there will be some long travel days.

Weather

Hot and sunny with negligible risk of precipitation.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All meals and accommodation are included in the holiday cost except snacks in transit at Havana Airport.

Extra expenditure

Items of a personal nature such as drinks, laundry etc., tips (allow £10 per day). In addition there is a charge for a tourist visa which is currently £20.

Cuba & the US

In January 2021, the US inexplicably added Cuba to its State Sponsors of Terrorism list (which also contains North Korea, Iran and Syria), meaning that anybody who has travelled to Cuba since this date is not eligible to apply for an ESTA, and therefore has to apply for a US visa instead. Quite often Cuban immigration staff do not stamp tourist passports and are not doing so currently, but that does not matter, as an ESTA application would still be rejected. Please contact us to discuss further if you intend to travel to or through the US in the next few years.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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