

The Birds of Puerto Rico

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly San Juan

Day 2 Hatillo

Day 3/4 Maricao

Day 5/6 Fajardo

Day 7 Old San Juan

Day 8 Old San Juan; depart

Day 9 Arrive UK

Departs

March – see website

Focus

Birds, plus a little culture and marine life

Grading

A. Day walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PRI01)



Puerto Rican Emerald



Puerto Rican Woodpecker



Puerto Rican Tody



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Introduction

When Christopher Columbus first set eyes on Puerto Rico back in November 1493, during his second voyage to the New World, he would have seen a tropical paradise looming out of the clear blue Atlantic Ocean – a mountainous, forested island inhabited by the indigenous Taíno people. Nowadays, Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the United States and, while largely overlooked by the European holiday market and by birders, it is a tempting winter destination, offering 17 endemic birds and numerous Greater Antillean and Caribbean specialities, as well as a pleasing variety of North American breeding species that winter on the island. Additional appeal lies in the island's good infrastructure, short travel distances and a welcome dose of winter sunshine!

We will begin this new holiday by exploring the northern karst belt of Puerto Rico, of which a striking feature are the giant, haystack-like mounds of eroded limestone. Here we should encounter our first endemic birds, including the suitably if unimaginatively named Puerto Rican Vireo, Puerto Rican Tody, Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Puerto Rican Flycatcher, Puerto Rican Lizard-cuckoo, Puerto



Rican Spindalis, Puerto Rican Bullfinch, Puerto Rican Oriole and Puerto Rican Emerald! The rugged Rio Abajo State Forest, just to the south, is the site of the most successful reintroduction of the critically endangered Puerto Rican Parrot. The sight of wild parrots wheeling through the forest (we will need a slice of luck to see them!), and the sound of their squawking, is used effectively here to stimulate captive birds to breed. Nearby, feeders attract the island's two endemic hummingbirds, Puerto Rican Emerald and Green Mango, in addition to Antillean Mango. Next we will drive to Maricao State Forest to look for the endangered Elfin Woods Warbler, which was only discovered in 1968, before heading onward to the dry forests of the far south-west in search of Puerto Rican Nightjar and Yellow-shouldered Blackbird. Our journey continues on to Fajardo in the north-west of Puerto Rico, where we will look for Antillean Crested Hummingbird and Green-throated Carb,



and enjoy some exceptional snorkelling over pristine reefs (with a dive possible for any PADI-certified guests). We will conclude our winter break in the sun with a visit to El Yunque National Forest (the only tropical rainforest in the US national forest system) and a final night in Old San Juan, the best-preserved of all the Spanish colonial cities.

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 San Juan

We leave Heathrow on a flight to either Madrid or a US gateway, switching planes for the onward flight to San Juan, arriving in the evening local time. We will pick up our tour vehicles and transfer the half hour or so to a comfortable hotel on the edge of the old city.

Day 2

Northern karst belt; Hatillo

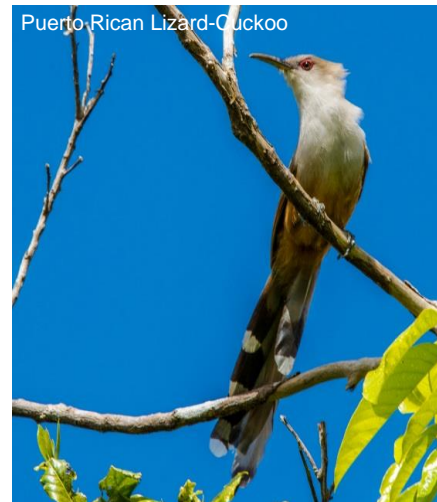
After an early breakfast in the hotel (the time difference will aid us in rising early!) we will bird the northern karst region of Puerto Rico, driving from San Juan to Manatí, about 40 miles to the west, stopping along the way to look for Puerto Rican endemics plus many Caribbean specialties. We will be on the road by about 0645.

Karst, a landscape characterized by eroded limestone, covers more than one third of the island's territory. The northern karst is located primarily in the subtropical moist forest life zone.

The karst region originated in a marine environment, as many as 140 million years ago. Geological processes have created spectacular landforms, such as the haystack hills, or *mogotes*, which are unique formations within the United States. Due to its rugged topography the karst region of Puerto Rico holds the most



Puerto Rican Flycatcher



Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo

extensive forest canopy cover on the island. The karst region also harbours the richest biodiversity in Puerto Rico, with more than 1,300 species of plants and animals found here. It is prime habitat for most of the native and endemic species of wildlife, including 30 federally listed threatened and endangered species. Many of these species are only known from karst ecosystems. More than 75 species of Neotropical migratory birds use the karst as wintering habitat. The northern karst belt of Puerto Rico has also been identified as a viable release site for the establishment of the second wild population of the endangered Puerto Rican Parrot. Considering local bird movements and sightings, and weather, we will choose which of Tortuguero Lagoon Natural Reserve, Cambalache State Forest and Caño

Tiburones to visit today, looking for Adelaide's Warbler, Puerto Rican Vireo, Puerto Rican Tody, Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Puerto Rican Flycatcher, Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo, Puerto Rican Spindalis, Puerto Rican Bullfinch, Puerto Rican Oriole, Puerto Rican Emerald, Green Mango and Puerto Rican Screech-Owl along the way.

Due to the heat and humidity we never have picnic lunches in Puerto Rico but instead we will choose from a variety of local eateries each day, generally offering Puerto Rican/criollo cuisine, with the soups, seafood, chicken, pork and rice dishes being excellent. There are always vegetarian options too.

We overnight at a comfortable hotel in Hatillo, where the swimming pool will offer an inviting dip before dinner.

Day 3

Rio Abajo/Hacienda Juanita

Rio Abajo State Forest is the home of the most successful population of the extremely endangered Puerto Rican Parrot and will be our first stop this morning, just under an hour's drive from our hotel.

El Yunque National Forest in the north-east of Puerto Rico was the last place the parrots survived in the wild, and biologists had long believed the parrots should be reintroduced there. But after years of frustrating attempts to establish a healthy population at El Yunque, they decided to try another site, selecting Rio Abajo, a region of rugged terrain 60 miles to the west. Parrots disappeared from Rio Abajo in the 1920's following the loss of primary forests, but today the area supports dense second-growth woodlands suitable for the birds. In 2006, scientists introduced a new flock to the region. "The population in Rio Abajo has taken us by surprise," said Tom White, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist with the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program. "We had no idea it would work so well."

In 2017, after 9 releases totalling 133 birds, the Rio Abajo flock numbered at least 72 and perhaps as many as 134. The lower figure is the number positively identified during the last official count, but parrots can disappear into this rugged terrain for weeks without being seen. At least 69 birds have fledged from wild nests. Many continue to settle around the aviary, creating a flock of captive and wild birds. The sight of wild parrots wheeling through the forest and the sound of their clown-horn squawks stimulate captive birds to breed and lay eggs.

On our walk in the peaceful Rio Abajo forest, we'll be hoping to hear, and possibly see, the parrots (although we'll need a healthy dose of luck – please keep expectations in moderation) and we will also look for Ruddy Quail-Doves along the road plus any endemics we didn't connect with yesterday.

After Rio Abajo we will visit a garden with hummingbird feeders which regularly attract the island's 2 endemics: Puerto Rican Emerald and Green Mango, plus the Antillean Mango.

In the afternoon we have a drive to the tropical forest in the hills above Maricao in the south-west of Puerto Rico. We have two nights at this lovely base, from which we hope to devote one evening to the Nightjar and one to the Bioluminescent Bay to see one of the most spectacular natural shows. Bioluminescent Bay (often called Bio Bay) is one of the Puerto Rico's key tourist attractions. The water luminescence is triggered by dinoflagellates, oceanic plankton which is able to generate an emerald green and ultramarine illumination when water is physically disturbed. Dinoflagellates are incredibly delicate microorganisms and are very sensible to environment conditions such as balance of salt in the water, local climate, water depth, air and water pollution, etc.

Day 4

Maricao

Our targets here the Elfin-woods Warbler and Puerto Rican Tanager, plus any additional endemics that we may not have seen so far.

The Elfin-woods Warbler was first observed in 1968 by Cameron and Angela Kepler while they were conducting observations on Puerto Rican Parrot and Puerto Rican Tody. On May 18, 1971, a specimen was captured in El Yunque National Forest. A year later Kepler and Parkes described and named the species making it the most recent addition to the large and familiar genus *Setophaga*. It was the first species described in the Caribbean since 1927 and the first Puerto Rican species described in the 20th century. The species name, *angelae*, is a tribute to Angela Kepler. Reinita de Bosque Enano (little queen of the dwarf forest) is the Spanish name.

The Puerto Rican Tanager isn't really a tanager at all. Rather, it is placed in an endemic family, *Nesospingidae*, of which it is the sole member, making it a very special endemic bird!

Meanwhile, down near the coast, we will look for another endemic – the very local and endangered Yellow-shouldered Blackbird.

We spend a second night at our hotel in the hills.

Day 5

Cartagena Lagoon/Fajardo

After breakfast, our first stop this morning is the Cartagena Lagoon, 20 minutes' drive from our hotel. Laguna Cartagena National Wildlife Refuge offers unique scenery that mixes wetland with dry forest and one of the oldest geological formations in the Caribbean. Once we enter the dirt road that signals the way to the refuge we enter a mosaic of habitats. First there are some hay and cattle farms, where we can find farmland species such as doves, swallows, grassquits and some established exotic finches. In the background we will see the rocky outline of the Sierra Bermeja, home to the endangered Puerto Rican Nightjar and a very unique flora with high endemism. Then we will reach the lake which is bisected by a dyke and surrounded by mudflats and extensive reedbeds. There is also an observation tower but no other facilities here.

We will explore this wildlife refuge looking for West Indian Whistling-Duck, Masked Duck, herons, egrets, waders and other species before departing to search for the endangered Plain Pigeon in the central mountains in Cayey en route to Fajardo in the north-east of the island. The Plain Pigeon area is also home to Puerto Pico's famous 'lechonerías' with spit-roasted pork being a delicious local speciality (with veggie options too).

Upon arrival in Fajardo we will settle in to our comfortable hotel and perhaps have a swim before dinner.

Day 6

Fajardo/cayos

This morning we have a morning boat trip booked, which will enable us to do some sea-watching (the most common species are Brown Boobys, Bridled Terns and frigatebirds) and some snorkeling over some outstanding reefs. If you are a PADI-certified diver please let us know in advance to book your dive in. There will be some snacks on board (usually pineapple chunks, tortilla chips, dips and soft drinks, etc) and we'll be back to shore in the early afternoon.



In the afternoon we will look for Antillean Crested Hummingbird and Green-throated Carib if we missed them yesterday, and possibly explore some of the stunning local coastline, before a swim and dinner.

Day 7

El Yunque



El Yunque National Forest is the only tropical rain forest in the United States National Forest System. It is located on the slopes of the Sierra de Luquillo, encompassing 28,000 acres of mostly steeply forested slopes. It is much loved by Puerto Ricans and foreign visitors alike.

This forest is commonly known as *El Yunque*, which may be attributed to either a Spanish approximation of the aboriginal Taíno word *yu-*

ke which means "white lands", or the word "anvil," which is *yunque* in Spanish.

The forest has a number of trails although at the time of writing it is currently partially closed until due to the effects of Hurricane Maria which passed through in September 2017.

If everything has gone to plan up until this point, we should have already seen most or all of our target birds, so this will be a day of gentle exploration, viewpoints, light birding and a chance to enjoy some of the trails and impressive waterfalls in this tropical rainforest. It may be possible to take a dip in one of the waterfalls but if not, we may call in at Luquillo beach on the way back for a dip – one of Puerto Rico's most beautiful beaches. An hours' drive back to our hotel on the outskirts of Old San Juan follows and, this evening, we'll have a farewell dinner and a chance to stroll around the atmospheric old colonial streets.

Day 8

Old San Juan/in flight

Today we have a walking tour of Old San Juan, taking in the world heritage site of El Morro and the picturesque streets and art galleries, plus the Puerta de San Juan, Governor's Mansion, Catedral de San Juan, Capilla del Cristo and more. Our holiday ends with an authentic Puerto Rican lunch in Old San Juan as well as a Piña Colada – where this much loved cocktail was first invented.



Then we have the short transfer to the airport for our flight home.

Day 9

UK

We land back in Heathrow this morning.

Tour Grading

Grade A - This holiday is a relatively straightforward birding tour, with good accommodation and food and no tough walks. There will be some early starts.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included, except any meal required in San Juan on day 1 and any food required post-lunch on day 8. We also include bottled water, although encourage you to take your own refillable bottle which can be topped up from our supplies.

Transport

Our tour leaders (and guides) require everyone's assistance in ensuring that there is a rotation of seats around the tour vehicle(s) to allow each tour member to enjoy approximately equal time in the front. In order to be fair to all participants, we regret that we are unable to guarantee a perpetual front seat to those who might suffer from motion sickness or other concerns.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: all items of a more personal nature such as alcoholic drinks, laundry and souvenirs.

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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