

Eastern Cuba: Birding & Natural History Tour

13 days and 12 nights



Day 1 Arrivals into Havana

Arrive at Havana airport. Transport by taxi (20 minutes) to Havana city, where participants will be lodged in a hotel or in a comfortable private house (“casa Particular”), depending on the client’s preference, group size and availability.

This evening we shall meet up for a welcome dinner and talk over our plans for the forthcoming tour of this much maligned (unfairly!) Caribbean Island.

Havana

La Havana was founded in 1514 named after the daughter of a famous Taíno chief. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine you are there. Old Havana and the Fortification System was Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO on 1982.

Day 2 AM Flight to Holguin – Transfer to Pinares de Mayarí; PM Birding La Mensura National Park

Today after an early breakfast, we will make our way to the Havana international airport, to catch our Flight to Holguin.

Once we land in Holguin, we will start driving toward Pinares de Mayarí, a drive of about 3 hours until we get to La Mensura National Park. You will soon recognize the place by its unique landscape featuring original pine forests, charrascal and evergreen forests, among others. One of the most interesting regions in Cuba thanks to the richness of its endemic species, with more than 445 different species. The biodiversity of the fauna includes more than 90 species of birds reported, 21 of them endemic to Cuba.

After Lunch, we will resume our birding, the main targets for this afternoon will be Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Vireo, Great Lizard Cuckoo, Cuban Solitaire and many of the winter visitors. As in many other places on the East, it is always possible to see the resident subspecies of the Sharp-shinned Hawk. It will be time to see many species of herps, particularly anole lizards (Guantanamo Twig Anole, Pineland Bush Anole, Blue-eye Twig Anole, Oriente Bearded Anole, and many others), which are unique to these mountain ranges, butterflies like the Gundlach’s Swallowtail, and enjoy a beautiful landscape covered with rain forests.



Today we should also get great views of Salto del Guayabo, what is consider the highest waterfalls in Cuba with just over 330 feet.

At night we will walk around for nocturnal creatures like the Cuban Tree Frog, the Gracile Banded Trope, the Giant Trope (kind of pygmy boas), and owls (Stygian Owl, Bare-legged Owl).

Tonight we will stay at Villa Pinares de Mayarí, located on the Pinares Plateau in Mayarí within the Sierra de Nipe and more than 2300 meters above sea level.

Day 3 AM Birding at La Mensura National Park; PM Transfer to Humboldt National Park

Today we will have breakfast at 6:30 AM, and we hope to leave the hotel by 7 AM.

One more time we will explore La Mensura National Park, looking for species that we may have overlook yesterday, again the targets for this morning will be Cuban Pygmy Owl, Oriente Warbler, Cuban Blackbird, Olive-capped Warbler, Cuban Bullfinch, Cuban Emerald, the elusive Gundlach's Hawk is always a possibility, so keep your eyes in the sky, Cuban Pewee, Cuban Solitaire, Western Spindalis, and many others. There are interesting endemic plants like the Cuban Dragon-tree a rare endemic of enigmatic origin. Cuban Side-blotched Curlytail are possible lizards all around the area.

By mid-morning, we will continue our way to the Humboldt National Park thru the north circuit and along the Atlantic coast, with a few stops along the way, where we can get some ducks and egrets, along with some shorebirds. On the way stop briefly in the entrance of La Melba sector and look for Bee Hummingbird.

In the afternoon we will explore for the first time Humboldt National Park, home of the famous Endemic and endangered Painted Snail *Polymita picta*, considered by many experts as the most beautiful land snail in the planet, its exclusive quality lies in its unique polychrome shells. The very name of these snails describes this special and distinctive feature: the word polymita is formed from two Greek roots—"poly" which means many and "mitos" which means thread or stripes. The beautiful perfect lines come in many colors, except blue.

Tonight and tomorrow we will stay at the beach front bungalows at **Villa Maguana**.



Day 4 Full Day at Humboldt National Park - Balcón de Iberia

Today will be an exciting day, full of surprises, after breakfast, we will start our drive to the Monte Iberia, home of the smallest frog in the Northern Hemisphere, the Monte Iberia Eleuth or Monte Iberia dwarf frog with less than 1/2 an inch.



Alejandro Humboldt National Park is one of the most important Caribbean “hot spots” of biodiversity. Its complex geology and varied topography have given rise to a diversity of ecosystems and species unmatched in the insular Caribbean and created one of the most biologically diverse tropical island sites on Earth, with lot of locally endemic species and very rare relicts like the the secretive Cuban Insectivore which looks like a giant shrew. The native Cuban flora numbers approximately 6,350 species, 51 percent of which are endemic. Among the endemic species, 15 percent are found mainly at low elevations, whereas approximately 75 percent are found in highland regions. One of the regions with the highest percentage of endemics is the Nipe-Sagua-Baracoa mountain system. The park is one of the most important sites in the Western Hemisphere for the conservation of endemic flora, 16 of Cuba's 30 plants formations (habitats) occur in the park. The Sagua de Tánamo Anole is one of the endemic lizards at Humboldt Park.

Among our targets for today will be the Oriente Warbler, Cuban Crow, Cuban Parrot, Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Green Woodpecker, West Indian Woodpecker.



By late afternoon we would make our way back to our bungalows, where we will review our checklist and sightings for the day.

Tonight we stay at **Villa Maguana**.



Bee Hummingbird (smallest bird in the world)



Day 5 AM Survey El Yunque; PM explore Baracoa and late evening explore Yumuri River

Plan to be at breakfast by 6:00 AM, and please have your bags packed for departure at that time. We will load the vehicle at 6:45 AM. At 7:00 AM, we will depart for Baracoa, the most eastern part of the island, about one hour away. Along the way, we will stop to conduct the first surveys of our tour, in El Yunque.

El Yunque is a mountain found 6 miles away from Baracoa. This formation, can be seen from every point of the city, it is part of the biosphere of Cuchillas del Toa, getting the category of Outstanding Natural Element, with a height of 1837 feet, its characterized because its top is flattened due to the erosion, reason why Christopher Columbus described it as an anvil to hit metals.

Here we will be aiming for birds like Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Crow, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Emerald, Western Spindalis, Cuban Green Woodpecker and Cuban Bullfinch. We will learn the story of the Tetí, small fish (*Sycidium* sp.) which is one of the typical plates in Baracoa. This goby has an interesting life history. The rivers hold the best protected populations of the Joturo, a kind of cichlid fish, a very endangered endemic species. There are interesting invertebrates all around, like the Gundlach's Swallowtail and many other butterflies, the Baracoan Vinegaroon (*Matigoproctus baracoensis*) a kind of rare arachnid that strongly smell like vinegar as self-protection.

Our port for lunch will be the beautiful Baracoa, after the sun goes down, time will allow us to get a glimpse of this amazing city that is Baracoa. It is a unique place with the feel of a small-town atmosphere. Most houses are simple wooden structures, and the flat layout of the town makes for an interesting and easy stroll in whichever direction you take.

Baracoa was one of the first places the Europeans reached in the new world. In 1490 Christopher Columbus recognized the value of the harbor here and christened the town as Porto Santo. 21 years later Diego de Velazquez founded Baracoa for the Spanish. Thankfully, despite their best efforts, the Spanish never wiped out the indigenous population completely meaning there are direct descendants living here, which adds to the town's diversity and pride.



The Yellow-ringed Giant Millipede

Tonight we will continue our way to the Yumuri River Canyon. A variety of reptiles such as the endemic Cuban Boa and Giant Anoles are common to this habitat. Because Cuba is a paradise of many invertebrates there are possibilities to see many species of landsnails, Giant millipedes, and also small vertebrates like frogs, lizards, and snakes of different species. Our main focus will be the Maisi Frog and Boca de Yumuri Frog. The Cuban Spotted Toad will be another potential addition.

Tonight we will stay in the historic, coastal town of Baracoa.

Baracoa Giant Anole



Cuban Boa

Day 6 AM Baracoa to Guantánamo Bay; PM San Antonio del Sur and Salina de Baitiquiri

From Baracoa, we will continue our way toward Guantánamo Bay, along the strikingly scenic Via Mulata, which is the only place with the possibility to try for the Cuban Kite and the Cuban endemic subspecies of Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Cuban subspecies of Broad-winged Hawk. This mountain range includes both temperate and arid zone habitat. In essence, this drive takes us from Cuba's wettest region to its driest region.

Our afternoon birding will be focused near the San Antonio del Sur area on Guantánamo's semi-desert south coast. Stop on the way in La Salina de Baitiquiri to look for shorebirds. Brief stop to look



Gundlach's Swallowtail

for the Cuban endemic butterfly, the Gundlach's Swallowtail. The route to the south coast is amazing, because it is possible to see the transition between the rain forests of the most humid part of Cuba to the semidesertic and very dry habitats near the ocean, with marine terraces, scrubs, and many cacti.

Tonight and tomorrow we will spend the night in Guantánamo City.



Cuban Grassquit



Cuban Parrot

Day 7 AM Bird Survey in Baitiquiri, Mid-Morning Boquerón Reserve; PM Los Monitongos

Today is an early breakfast departing to La Chivera and Baitiquiri to watch several endemics. This area has a unique coastal thicket habitat (semi-desertic area) where is found one of the three endemic subspecies of Zapata Sparrow that occur on the island, the *Torreornis inexpectata sigmani*, plus Cuban Gnatcatcher, Cuban Grassquit, Oriente Warbler. After, we will focus the areas of Boquerón Reserve where you can watch ducks (among them White-cheeked Pintails) and shorebirds and egrets. This is a great area to enjoy reptiles, like many Curly Tail Lizards, anoles, and colorful ball-fingered geckos of the genus *Sphaerodactylus*.



Zapata Sparrow



Cuban Gnatcatcher



Broad Banded Geckolet

After Lunch, and around 3PM we will visit Los Monitongos, a geologic formation constituted more than 50 million years ago. The stranger forms of these hills have originated as a consequence of the elements, that softens their rocks, for the fluvial erosion and for the wind, factors that destroy the conglomerate.

The fauna in this place contains a great variety of birds, some reptiles, jutías, deer and other mammals that are protected in the caves and hollows that are plentiful in the area.



After a very productive afternoon, we will return to our hotel, to enjoy a nice evening followed to a review of our sighting for the day.

Tonight we will stay again in Guantánamo City.

Day 8 AM Baconao Biosphere Reserve; PM Gran Piedra

Today make sure you are packed and ready to leave by 6:45 AM as we continue our way to La Gran Piedra.

Our first place of study will be the Baconao Biosphere Reserve, a 500 square miles reserve between Santiago de Cuba and the Río Baconao.

Encased in a shallow chasm fenced in by the Sierra Maestra on one side and the placid Caribbean on the other, Baconao's biodiversity is nothing short of remarkable. There are more than 1800 endemic species of flora – from craning royal palms to prickly cliffside cacti. Fauna includes many types of endangered bats and spiders.

Baconao is also famous for its crabs. From mid-March to early May, tens of thousands of large land crabs fill the coast beyond Playa Verraco.



It is possible to see the vulnerable and elusive Cuban Rock Iguana in this area. The semi-desertic conditions of the southern coast of Guantánamo favor the development of many species of cacti particularly *Melocactus harlowii*, a locally endemic species.

By Late afternoon we should make our way to La Gran Piedra where we will spend the night.



Day 9 AM Survey at Gran Piedra Reserve; PM Explore Santiago de Cuba

After breakfast we will focus our efforts trekking to la Gran Piedra, while we get magnificent views of the coast and surrounding mountains.

Formed most likely from a volcanic rupture, the “Gran Piedra” (the Grand Stone) is an enormous rock measuring 51 yards long and 25 to 30 yards wide. With a calculated weight of 63,000 tons, this boulder is situated on the summit of a mountain rising 4020 feet above sea level.

The gigantic stone mass was perhaps a witness to the volcanism of the Paleocene, just like all of the geology of the Sierra Maestra Mountains, where strata of this type of rock are present composed of layers of volcanic lava. This mass is famous not only within the frontiers of the island, but also all across the Caribbean since it is the largest such stone in the entire region.

It is a natural watch tower from where the whole mountain range of the Sierra Maestra can be observed; likewise, almost the entire southeastern coast can be seen from here.



Lunch at the historic French coffee plantation, a Unesco World Heritage site bestowed in 2000 upon the First Coffee Plantations in the Southeast of Cuba is this impressive two-story stone mansion, with its three large coffee-drying platforms, built in the early 19th century by French émigrés from Haiti. It's a 2km hike beyond



Black Orchid



This afternoon we will take a more cultural approach, after breakfast we will engage in a cultural experience of the City of Santiago. We will visit places like the Revolution Square, Moncada Barracks, and visit some of the main squares. We will also visit Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca, a Unesco World Heritage site since 1997, the San Pedro fort sits impregably atop a 195 feet-high promontory at the entrance to Santiago harbor, 6 miles southwest of the city. The stupendous views from the upper terrace take in the wild western ribbon of Santiago's coastline backed by the velvety Sierra Maestra.

We will overnight in the city of Santiago de Cuba



Day 10 AM Survey El Saltón; PM Travel to Marea del Portillo

Today we will have another early breakfast, make sure you are packed and ready to go by 6:30 AM.

Our first birding will begin at El Saltón, a tranquil mountain escape in the Tercer Frente municipality, north premontane slope of Sierra Maestra. Hills that once echoed with the sound of crackling rifle fire now reverberate to the twitter of tropical birds. Secluded and hard to reach, it consists of a lodge, a hilltop *mirador* (viewpoint) and a 100 feet cascading waterfall with an adjacent natural pool ideal for swimming.

Our main target here will be the endangered Fernandina's Flicker and White-collared Swift, as well as many forest birds.



Fernandina's Flicker

After Lunch, we will continue our way to Marea del Portillo, a drive of about 3.5 hours.

We will have a few stops along the way, targeting birds like Cuban Gnatcatcher, during the right time of the year White-tailed Tropicbird, Oriente Warbler, several of the migrant warblers among many other forest and coastal birds. We will be attentive to find species of anoles, geckos, snakes like the Cuban Lesser Racer or the Cuban Racer, and many others.

Tonight we stay at Marea del Portillo.

Day 11. AM Survey Desembarco del Granma National Park; PM Bayamo city

Breakfast at the hotel. Early departure to Cabo Cruz, one of the easternmost locations of Cuba. This extraordinary place holds a unique flora and fauna and is one of the most important centers of endemism in Cuba. It is also an important scenario of different historical events and an aboriginal settlement. We will visit El Guafe, a trail which is representative of the local biodiversity and landscape. The Cueva del Agua have one of the aborigine idols sculpted on rock. One of the living treasures of the area is the Cuban Night Lizard that belongs to a primitive family of saurians (Xantusiidae), and a representative of one of the oldest vertebrate lineages in the Cuban archipelago. There are also many species of anoles and curly-tailed lizards, and among them the Cuban Blue-green Anole is particularly conspicuous. Cabo Cruz is also the habitat of the Cone-shaped Tree Snail.



Cuban Night Lizard a Cuban jewel, one of the oldest vertebrates in the whole Caribbean region.

From the coast it is possible to see the White-tailed Tropicbird. Marine terraces are a typical elements of the landscape.



Cuban Blue-green Anole



Eastern Giant Toad, a member of a toad's lineage endemic to the Caribbean Islands



Cone-shaped tree snail. In Cabo Cruz one half of the population has shells turned to the right and the other to the left.

After lunch, we will continue our way to the historical city of Bayamo, a drive that will take us most of the afternoon.

Night in Bayamo City.

Day 12. AM Explore Bayamo city; PM Flight to Havana

In the morning, we will have time to explore Bayamo city, before we start driving toward Holguin, for our flight to Havana.

Elegant and old, this relatively hush city spells oasis to the traveler weary of confrontation. Predating both Havana and Santiago, it has been cast for time immemorial as the city that kick-started Cuban independence. Yet self-important it isn't. The *ciudad de los coches* (city of horsecars) is an easygoing, slow-paced, trapped-in-time place, where you're more likely to be quoted literature than sold trinkets. Cuba's balmy provincial capital, it resounds to the clip-clop of hooves; nearly half the population use horses for daily travel.

We will have time to visit some of the most iconic places in this city as Parque Céspedes, Catedral de San Salvador de Bayamo, Bayamo's Boulevard and you can not leave Bayamo without taking a horsecart around the central park.

After Lunch we will start driving to Holguin, to catch our afternoon flight to Havana.

Tonight we spend the night in Havana.

Day 13. Departures from Havana

No matter the time of your departure, we will arrange transfers for the group to support getting to the airport three hours before your international flights.