

Cuba Birding

Dec 2-12, 2020

with Cuban ornithologist
Maikel Cañizares Morera
& JB Journeys' **Eric Stager**

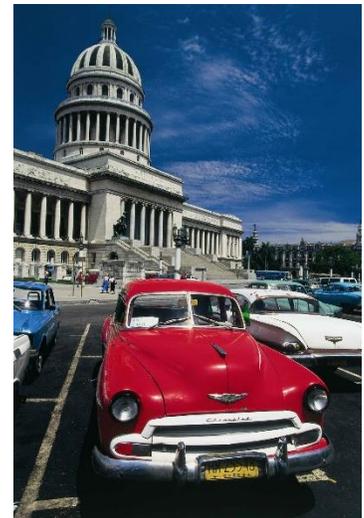


For more than 50 years, Cuba has been largely off the radar for US birders, but now with restrictions eased, the island is becoming more accessible. For birders, the time is now. JB Journeys has been running fully legal tours to Cuba since things relaxed in 2014, and we keep up with changes to verify that all regulations are followed. As of June 2019, we are still following all new regulations and restrictions.

*Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean and supports an incredible variety of habitat - from tropical and montane forests to extensive wetlands and mangroves. The bird list contains somewhere under 400 species, of which 26 are currently listed as endemic. Our itinerary may not produce a huge list, but we have a very good chance of getting as many as 20 of the endemics, including the world's smallest bird, the **Bee Hummingbird**, the lovely **Cuban Trogon**, and the adorable **Cuban Tody**. Our birding will be focused in the western province of Pinar del Rio, the Zapata Swamp area, and Lomas de Banao.*

In addition to the opportunity to bird Cuba, we will begin with a couple of nights in amazing and exciting Havana. In this time of great change, you really owe it to yourself to take some time to learn about the history of the island, the current situation, and contemplate the future through the insight of local experts. This cannot be done without learning more of the shared history of Cuba and the US.

*We have been fortunate to travel most of the island and to bird much of it ourselves and pleased to offer this exciting itinerary under the guidance of one of the best birders in Cuba, **Maikel Cañizares Morera**. JB Journeys' own **Eric Stager** will escort the group and assist Maikel.*



DEC 2 - Wednesday (Day 1) - arrive Havana (D)

On flight arrival you will be met by our local host and driven to your *casa particular* in Havana for 2 nights.

Casas Particulares are similar to what we call a Bed & Breakfast. In 1997, the Cuban government allowed Cubans to rent out rooms in their houses or apartments to tourists, providing Cuban families with new sources of income, and you the visitor, the chance to see what life is like in a Cuban home. Many families have added rooms to their homes for this purpose, almost like a small hotel, so that several people can stay in one house. We've stayed in some very modern but simple rooms that have nice baths, A/C, electricity. Depending on group size, we may be housed in a couple of casas. All rooms in casas that we use will have private bath with hot water.

Once the group settles in, we'll meet up again for dinner in a local *paladar*.

Paladares (from the Spanish word for palate) are private restaurants in people's homes, and like

casas particulares, they represent the new entrepreneurship growing among Cubans as they find an opening within the economy at large, as well as introducing new and exciting food. Over the last decade, Havana has transformed itself from a food desert to one of the most exciting foodie experiences around. Close to 2,000 *paladares* have opened in Havana alone, adding greatly to private sector jobs. While many are still in private homes, a number are stand alone in public buildings. Among those we dined in are like San Cristobal (where the Obamas dined) and La Guarida, famous from the Oscar nominated foreign language film, *Fresa y Chocolate*).

DEC 3 – Thursday (Day 2) – Old Havana / New Havana (B,L)

This morning we'll begin with a guided walking tour of Old Havana, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982. **Habana Vieja** is a living museum, filled with over 3,000 buildings in varying stages of renovation. The old colonial city boasts several squares of historic significance. **Plaza Cathedral** is dominated by the 18th century Cathedral of Havana. **Plaza de Armas** is the oldest square, used for military exercises by the Spanish from the 16th century. The Palacio de los Capitanes Generales on the western side of the square was the seat of Spanish authority, then became the headquarters of US military governors, and finally the presidential palace after the Republic of Cuba was born in 1902. **Plaza San Francisco** (1628) was once the commerce hub, where Spanish galleons came for supplies for their transatlantic journeys. The former Basilica de San Francisco is today a concert hall. **Plaza Vieja** was established in the 16th century as a market square and remained so until 1835.

In the afternoon, we'll see a bit of Modern Havana - or should we say Mid-Century Modern? We'll cruise around the Vedado neighborhood, maybe stop at the Hotel Nacional, famous as a hangout for gangsters and mafia figures.

Dinner on your own tonight – try something new!

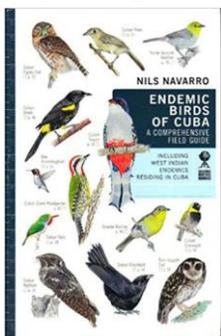
DEC 4 – Friday (Day 3) – Habana to Viñales (B,L,D)

After breakfast, we depart for Viñales, Pinar del Rio province. The drive is about 200 km, but we'll make birding and comfort stops along the way, starting at Las Terrazas, a UNESCO designated Biosphere Reserve. We'll continue to Viñales where we will spend two nights in in a local hotel or *Casa* of the region

Viñales is situated in Sierra de los Organos and is a delightful small town in a beautiful valley with a distinctive landscape of steep-sided limestone "mogotes." About 100 bird species have been reported from the area. Target species: **Cuban Grassquit**, **Cuban Solitaire**, and Olive-capped warbler. (endemics will be listed in bold) Pinar del Rio is also known as the pace where the best tobacco is grown.



Depending on his schedule, we plan a visit to the studio of **Nils Navarro**. Nils is author and illustrator of *ENDEMIC BIRDS OF CUBA A Comprehensive Field Guide*, which features illustrations as well as photographs and provides detailed and invaluable information describing habitat, distribution, behavior and physical characteristics of Cuba's 26 endemic birds, and another 22 species endemic to the West Indies.



DEC 5 – Saturday (Day 4) Full day in Viñales. (B,L,D)

Las Maravillas is by far the most important trail in Viñales area. Our target species here is the **Cuban Solitaire**, but there we also can see the Olive-capped Warbler (the Cuba-

and-Bahamas warbler), Western Spindalis, the lovely **Cuban Trogon**, **Cuban Tody**, **Cuban Pygmy Owl**, **Cuban Vireo**, and Red-legged Honeycreeper. Besides this list, Maravillas is home of many warblers and more common birds like Yellow-faced Gracquit, Northern Mockingbird, **Cuban Blackbird**, White-crowned and Scaly-napped pigeons.



DEC 6 – Sunday (Day 5) – Vinales to Zapata Peninsula . (B,L,D)

After breakfast, we will depart for Playa Larga on the Zapata Peninsula, in total about 5 hours drive with comfort stops and maybe some birding along the way.



The Zapata Peninsula has always been a sparsely populated area of Cuba, so it was possible for the Cuban government to create the Zapata Peninsula National Park. The park was declared a world biosphere reserve in 2000 and a Ramsar site in 2001. The park covers an area of over 1,930 square miles and is the largest, best-preserved wetlands in the Caribbean islands. It is a regional, national, and world natural preserve, with fragile ecosystems and important natural resources.

The vast majority of Cuba's birds can be found on Zapata throughout the year, including many of the current 26 endemics. Among the birds you may see are Wood Stork, American Flamingo,

Magnificent Frigatebird, Green Heron, Little Blue Heron, Neotropical Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Brown Pelican, Northern Jacana, **Cuban Black-Hawk**, **Grey-fronted Quail-Dove**, **Blue-headed Quail-Dove**, Key West Quail-Dove, Zenaida Dove, **Cuban Lizard-cuckoo**, Smooth-billed Ani, **Bare-legged Owl**, **Cuban Pygmy-Owl**, Stygian Owl, **Cuban Nightjar**, **Bee Hummingbird** (the world's smallest bird!), Emerald Hummingbird, **Cuban Trogon**, **Cuban Tody**, West Indian Woodpecker, **Fernandina's Flicker**, **Cuban Green Woodpecker**, **Cuban Parakeet**, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Peewee, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Loggerhead Kingbird, **Cuban Vireo**, Yellow-throated Vireo, Striped-headed Tanager, Cuban Crow, **Zapata Wren**, **Cuban Gnatcatcher**, **Cuban Solitaire**, Red-Legged Thrush, American Redstart, Black-and-white Warbler, Palm Warbler, **Yellow-headed Warbler**, **Cuban Bullfinch**, **Zapata Sparrow**, **Red-shouldered Blackbird**, **Cuban Blackbird**, Greater Antillean Grackle, and **Cuban Oriole**.



The bay here is *Bahía de Cochinos*, but you may know it from history as the **Bay of Pigs**. A small museum in Playa Girón tells the story of the Bay of Pigs invasion from the local perspective, and billboards and monuments in the area mark significant sites. The museum is certainly worth a visit.

In Playa Larga, we will stay in local *Casas Particulares* for 3 nights. These are small towns with a welcoming feel and they are dependent on tourism.



DEC 7/8 – Monday/Tuesday (Days 6/7) . (B,L,D)

With Playa Larga as our base, we will spend the next two days exploring scrub, mangrove swamp, and coastline in some of these areas:

- La Turba (30 minutes drive) a marsh habitat, where we will be looking for **Zapata Wren**, **Zapata Sparrow**, and **Red-shouldered Blackbird**.

- Las Salinas Refuge (30 minutes drive, flat, dry dirt roadway). Habitat is varied among low, dense forest, mangrove, marsh, and open wetlands. Here we are likely to encounter the endemic **Cuban Black Hawk** as well as numerous shorebirds like American Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, White Ibis, Reddish Egret, and various ducks and shorebirds.
- Sopillar - Target species: endemic quail-doves and owls. We will also be looking for Neartic migrants, such as Swainson's Warbler and Worm-eating Warbler.
- Los Sábalos for the exclusive quail doves like **Grey-headed Quail-dove**, Ruddy Quail-Dove, **Gray-fronted Quail-Dove** and Key West Quail-Dove
- And one evening, we can head out to look for the **Cuban Nightjar**, Stygian Owl, and **Bare-legged Owl**.

DEC 9 – Wednesday (Day 8) Playa Larga to Trinidad . (B,L,D)

This morning we'll leave Zapata after birding Bermejas, a fauna refuge with national significance, an open area with royal and cabbage palms, brush, and shrubbery, and flat, easy walking trails. Excellent chance here for the **Bee Hummingbird**, **Fernandina's Flicker**, **Blue-Headed**, Grey-fronted, **Key West** and Ruddy quail-doves, Cuban Parrot and the threatened **Cuban Parakeet**. **Cuban Blackbird**, **Cuban Bullfinch**, Loggerhead Kingbird, **Bare-legged Owl** and **Cuban Pygmy-Owl** are also likely.



Then we'll take off for Trinidad on the southern coast of Cuba, one of the best-preserved colonial cities in Cuba and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The scenic drive is about 230 km, which should take about 3 hours. We may make a stop to look for the **Yellow-headed Warbler** and the **Cuban Gnatcatcher**.

After dinner you may be interested in a visit La Casa de la Trova or La Casa de La Música.

DEC 10 – Thursday (Day 9) Trinidad to Lomas de Banao . (B,L,D)

Today we head to Banao (about 1 hour's drive) to visit the preserve there, an excellent and easy place for birding. Your guide, Maikel Cañizares, previously served as director and chief biologist here, and this is the site of some of his nest box research. We'll look for the vulnerable **Cuban Parakeet** and the near threatened Cuban Amazon Parrot. Banao has won awards for ecotourism efforts in Cuba and we'll overnight in the comfortable lodge at the preserve.

DEC 11 – Friday (Day 10) Banao to Havana . (B,L,D)

We have time for a last morning of birding as we return to Havana. We stop in the small fishing port of Tunas de Zaza to see flamingos and shorebirds and then continue the drive to Havana, a total of about 5 hours.

After checking into the hotel or *casa* and a time to freshen up, we will have a final dinner together in one of Havana's fine private restaurants.

DEC 12 – Saturday (Day 11) – Adios Havana (B)

Departure from the hotel will be about three hours before flights to allow sufficient time for check in.

NOTE: *The order and sites visited may vary due to weather, road conditions, and other factors beyond our control.*

About your guides:

Maikel Cañizares Morera, MSc. is a Ph.D. candidate in a joint program between Universidad de la Habana, Cuba, and Universidad de Alicante, Spain. He is working on his dissertation, "Breeding ecology and conservation of **Cuban Parakeet** (*Aratinga euops*).” Much of what is known about **Cuban parakeets** in the wild comes from Maikel’s research.



Maikel worked on conservation projects in protected area of Lomas de Banao in Central Cuba. While there, he completed his Master's degree in Ecological Studies on the Conga *hutia*, a species of rodent endemic to Cuba. Currently, he is a researcher at the Institute of Ecology and Systematics (IES) in Havana and specializes in ecology, management and conservation of forest birds, with emphasis on the conservation and management of Cuban *psittacines*. He is a scientific advisor at the National Forestry Directorate for Cuban Wildlife Policy and is currently President of the Cuban Society of Zoology.

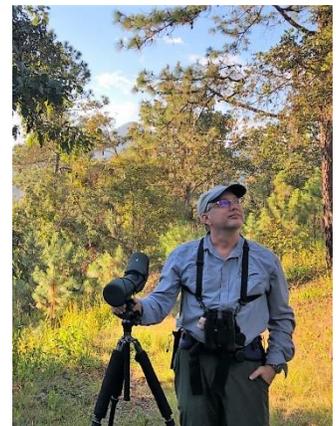
He has designed and implemented different models of nesting boxes for parrots that are successfully used in various Cuban locations and has collaborated with other conservation projects in Panama, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. His work has always been linked to local communities, aware that they are a key element in biodiversity conservation.

He has published more than 16 papers on these topics, is chapter author of six books, and has attended 45 national and international congresses. He has organized events in his own country including the XVII Congress of the Mesoamerican Society for Biology and Conservation (MSBC) in Havana in 2013 and the XXI Conference of BirdsCaribbean in Topes de Collantes in 2017.

Maikel is also a member of the Cuban Botany Society and of BirdsCaribbean, and was the president of the Cuban Chapter of the MSBC from 2007-2017.

He has great skills in the field as a birding guide, managing logistics and preparing for field and survival expeditions. Maikel is a native Spanish speaker and is fluent in English. And he’s a lot of fun!!

Eric Stager grew up on the Upper Texas Coast where he was bitten by the birding bug in 1981 at the age of 13. Although detrimental to his teenage social life, his obsession with birds was spurred on by kind mentors and nourished by the excitement of growing up in one of North America’s top birding locations. While still in high school, Eric was leading field trips for the local bird club, compiling his local Christmas Bird Count, and operating the Texas Coast Rare Bird Alert (in the days of cassette tape answering machines). Eric left the coast to attend the University of Texas and has lived in Austin ever since. He has expanded his sights with birding trips in South America, Africa, Asia and Australia. In Austin, Eric leads field trips and teaches birding classes for Travis Audubon Society, and also serves on the board of directors. He works as a Senior Environmental Scientist for the City of Austin, Texas.



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- Escorted by JB Journeys' birder, Eric Stager
- Cost **estimated for 2020**: \$3295 per person in double occupancy, based on 10; (with 8: \$3595; with 6: \$3995)
- Single supplement \$250 (very limited) (singles are either a double on your own, or a smaller room for one person)
- No refunds for unused tour parts of the tour

Included:

- Airport transfers on arrival/departure days only
- Local transportation by A/C bus or van, depending on group size
- 10 nights lodging with taxes
- Excursions as listed with any entry fees
- Meals as listed
- Basic gratuities in restaurants
- Basic gratuities for van/bus driver
- Bilingual birding guide
- Cuban medical insurance*

Not Included:

- Airfare***
- Visa**
- Meals not listed
- Drinks during meals
- Gratuities to local guide (suggested \$10+/day per person)
- Gratuities to lodging (suggested \$3-5/day)
- Comprehensive travel insurance*

NOTE TO PHOTOGRAPHERS: *The purpose of this tour is to see as many of Cuba's birds as possible, especially the endemics and other rare species. We love having good photos of the birds and the trip and we welcome you to bring your camera.*

This is not a trip for learning bird photography. If that is your goal, we are happy to connect you with companies who specialize in bird and wildlife photo tours.

****Cuban medical insurance** covers for many needs but is not inclusive. For example, medical evacuation is not included. We recommend comprehensive travel insurance coverage and are happy to make suggestions as to companies offering coverage for travelers in Cuba. Like everything else regards travel in Cuba, it's a whole other story.*

*** **Visas** to visit the island are required. Your airline may offer this service to you. If you want us to obtain your visa, the cost is US \$100 per person(subject to change). This is our cost with no mark-up.*

**** At the time of publishing, United and American offer daily flight schedules from Austin to Havana, with connections through Houston-Bush and Miami, respectively. Other carriers may offer services and we'll check as we get closer.*