

Cuba Birding 2021

Nov 30- Dec 12

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



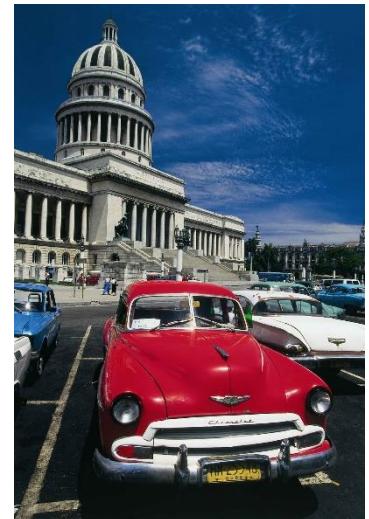
**JB
Journeys**

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 just 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 Tropicbird**, and the adorable **Cuban Tody**. Our birding will be focused in the western province of Pinar del Rio, the Zapata Swamp area, Topes de Collantes National Park, and finally the beautiful Cuban Keys.

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 we are 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.



NOV 30 - Tuesday (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 offer 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. 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 few decades, Havana has transformed itself from a food desert to one of the most exciting foodie experiences around. More than 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.

DEC 1 – Wednesday (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.

After lunch in a local restaurant, this 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! If interested in seeing a show at the legendary Tropicana, we can arrange that at an addition cost.

DEC 2 – Thursday (Day 3) – Habana to Viñales (B,L,D)

After breakfast, we depart for Viñales, Pinar del Rio province. The drive is about 200 km (124 miles), 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 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 place where the best tobacco is grown.



In the afternoon we'll bird near the *mogotes*, the unique karstic formations in Viñales. The **Cuban Solitaire**, **Olive-capped Warbler**, **Cuban Tropicbird**, **Cuban Trogon** and **Cuban Tody** may appear. On our way, we may have time to visit a local tobacco farm and see the tobacco drying sheds.

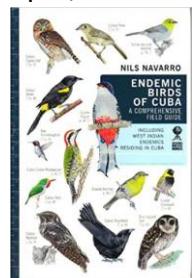
Overnight casa in Vinales

DEC 3 – Friday (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 Tropicbird**, **Cuban Tody**, **Cuban Pygmy Owl**, **Cuban Vireo**, and Red-legged Honeycrepper. Besides this list, Maravillas is home to many warblers and more common birds like Yellow-faced Grassquit, Northern Mockingbird, **Cuban Blackbird**, White-crowned and Scaly-naped pigeons.

Depending on his schedule, we hope to visit to the studio of **Nils Navarro**. Nils is author and illustrator of *ENDEMICK 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.

Overnight casa in Vinales



DEC 4 – Saturday (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.



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 Tropicbird**, 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.

Overnight casa in Playa Larga

DEC 5/6 – Sunday/Monday (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-minute drive) a marsh habitat, where we will be looking for **Zapata Wren**, **Zapata Sparrow**, and **Red-shouldered Blackbird**.
- Las Salinas Refuge (30-minute 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 wading birds 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 Nearctic 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.
- One evening, we can head out to look for the **b** and the nocturnal raptors: Stygian Owl; **Cuban Pygmy-Owl** and **Bare-legged Owl**.

Overnight casa in Playa Larga



DEC 7 – Tuesday (Day 8) Playa Larga to Topes de Collantes . (B,L,D)

This morning, we'll leave Zapata after birding Bermejas, a wildlife 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.

In the afternoon, we'll continue the trip to Topes de Collantes, one of



Cuba's most beautiful areas, an extraordinary natural landscape of 200 square kilometers within the Guamuahaya mountain range. This area features imposing peaks, lush valleys, exuberant vegetation, unique flora and fauna, cave systems, beautiful vistas, and pure, transparent rivers and streams that form natural



falls and pools. And, of course, there are fantastic forest birds, including the iconic **Cuban Trogan** and **Cuban Tody**. The drive is 150 miles and should take about 3 hours.

Overnight at Los Helechos Hotel or similar

DEC 8 – Wednesday (Day 9) Topes de Collantes (B,L,D)

In the morning you will visit Guanayara Park and we will walk through Centinelas del Rio Melodioso, a fairly easy round-trip hike of about 4 miles. The trail begins in cool, moist coffee plantations and descends to the stunning **El Rocio** waterfall. The microclimate in Topes makes it possible to see more than 100 species of birds, including many of the endemics, such as the **Cuban Tody** and the **Cuban Trogan**.

Overnight at Los Helechos Hotel or similar

DEC 9 – Thursday (Day 10) Topes to Cayo Coco . (B,L,D)

Before heading to the beautiful Cayo Coco, we'll make a stop at Tunas de Zaza to have a typical Cuban lunch and observe some of the local species. We should have excellent views of the Greater Flamingo and some shore birds. The drive is about 160 miles and should take about 4 hours, but we should see many water birds on the way to Cayo Coco.

Overnight Melia Cayo Coco or similar

DEC 10 – Friday (Day 11) Los Cayos (B,L,D)

Cayo Coco and nearby offshore keys on the northern (Atlantic) coast provide great habitat for a diversity of waterbird species, including the West Indian Whistling-Duck, migrants, and restricted-range and endemic subspecies. Since 1988, Cayo Coco has been connected to the mainland by a 17-mile, causeway. The islands offer pristine white-sand beaches, mangrove flats, low coastal scrub and crystal clear waters; however, the area is being rapidly developed for "sun and sand" tourism and the habitat of many important species may become threatened.

Cayo Paredón Grande, the most northeastern key in the archipelago and is one of Cuba's important migratory landfalls. You will search for the Bahama Mockingbird, **Cuban Gnatcatcher**, **Oriente Warbler**, **Gundlach's Hawk**, Scaly-naped Pigeon, and Mangrove Cuckoo. Thick-billed Vireo and a subspecies of **Zapata Sparrow** are also target birds for the archipelago.



In the afternoon, we visit Cayo Guillermo area to look for the **Thick-billed Vireo** and **Bahama's Mockingbird** as well as shorebirds in lagoons and marshes on the way.

Overnight Melia Cayo Coco or similar

DEC 11 – Saturday (Day 12) Return to Havana (B,L,D)

This morning we'll visit Cueva de los Jabalíes, a great place to spot Key West Quail-Dove, Zenaida Dove, **Cuban Tody**, **Oriente Warbler**, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Red-legged Honeycreeper and any migratory warblers hanging around. We will look for **Zapata Sparrow** in a very different habitat from Zapata.

Then we head back to Havana, a drive of about 350 miles, around 7 hours. After checking into the hotel or *casa* and a short time to freshen up, we will have a final dinner together in one of Havana's fine private restaurants.

Overnight at a casa or hotel in Havana

DEC 12 – Sunday (Day 13) – 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 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. 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 Panamá, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. His work has always been linked to local communities, aware that they are a key element in biodiversity conservation.

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 past President of the Cuban Society of Zoology. 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, was the president of the Cuban Chapter of the MSBC from 2007-2017, and currently serves on the board of BirdsCaribbean.

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 as president of the board of directors. He works as a Senior Environmental Scientist for the City of Austin, Texas.

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- Cost \$4795 per person in double room with 10. With 8: \$4895; with 6: \$5195.
- Single supplement \$425 (*very limited*) (*singles are either a double on your own, or a smaller room for one person*)
- Minimum 6; maximum 12.
- To confirm your spot, please complete [this reservation form](#). Deposit is \$500 per person and final payment will be due August 30, 2021.
- Cancellation: After 30 days, deposit is non-refundable. Up to 90 days prior to departure, 50% refundable. Inside 90 days, non-refundable. Name change may be allowed. There is no refund 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
- 12 nights lodging with taxes
- Excursions as listed with any entry fees
- Meals as listed
- Basic gratuities for group lunches and dinners
- Basic gratuities for van/bus driver
- Bilingual birding guide
- Escorted by JB Journeys' Eric Stager
- Cuban medical insurance*

Not Included:

- Airfare
- Visa**
- Meals not listed
- Drinks during meals
- Gratuities to local guide (suggested \$10-15/day per person)
- Gratuities to lodging (suggested \$3-5/day per room)
- Gratuities for breakfasts (suggested \$1-2/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 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.