

Cuba Birding 2023

March 28-April 5

with Cuban ornithologist **Maikel Cañizares Morera**

& JB Journeys' **Eric Stager**



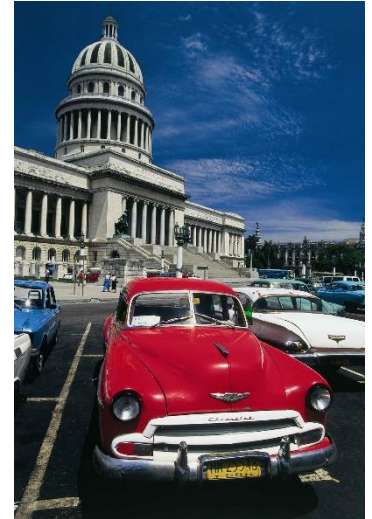
JB
Journeys

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 early 2022, 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 28 are currently listed as endemic. We'll bird in Viñales in western Cuba, surely the island's most beautiful region, and the Zapata Peninsula, aka The Bay of Pigs and the most biologically diverse part. Our trip may not produce a huge list, but we have an excellent 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**.*

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.*



MAR 28 – 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, a 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 shower; sinks may not have hot water. Also, you may wish to bring your own soaps, washcloth, etc.

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, as a restaurant.

MAR 29 – 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. The four plazas offer an excellent overview of **Habana Vieja** as a living museum, filled with over 3,000 buildings in varying stages of renovation. We will probably see **Plaza Cathedral**, dominated by the 18th century Cathedral of Havana; **Plaza de Armas**, the oldest square, used for military exercises by the Spanish from the 16th century; **Plaza San Francisco** (1628) once the commerce hub, where Spanish galleons came for supplies for their transatlantic journeys; and finally **Plaza Vieja**, established in the 16th century as a market square and remained so until 1835. Each of the squares tell a piece of Cuba's history.

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. (Let us know as soon as possible)

MAR 30 – 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 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." Pinar del Rio is also known as the place where the best tobacco is grown. You will walk the paths through fields of tobacco and sugar cane, meeting the farmers and talking with them to learn about rural family life amidst the tobacco fields and traditional buildings of this region. But don't worry, there are birds everywhere.

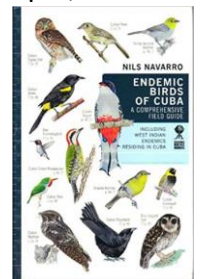
About 100 bird species have been reported from the area. Target species: **Cuban Grassquit**, **Cuban Solitaire**, and **Olive-capped Warbler**. Some of the specialties to be found in this area are **Gundlach's Hawk**, **Cuban Trogon**, **Cuban Tody**, **Cuban Green Woodpecker**, Northern (Cuban) Flicker, **Fernandina's Flicker**, **Giant Kingbird**, **Yellow-headed Warbler**, **Cuban Bullfinch**, Olive-capped Warbler, a species found only in Bahamas and Cuba, and the superb singer, the **Cuban Solitaire**. (endemics will be listed in bold)

Overnight casa in Vinales

MAR 31 – 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 Trogon**, **Cuban Tody**, **Cuban Pygmy Owl**, **Cuban Vireo**, and Red-legged Honeycreeper. Besides this list, Maravillas is home to many warblers and more common birds like Yellow-faced Grassquit, Northern Mockingbird, **Cuban Blackbird**, and White-crowned and Scaly-napped pigeons.

Depending on his schedule, we hope to 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 endemic birds, and another 22 species endemic to the West Indies.



Overnight casa in Viñales

APR 01 – 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 hour 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. It 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 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, Giant 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.

Overnight casa in Playa Larga

APR 02/03 – 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 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

APR 04 – Tuesday (Day 8) Playa Larga back to Havana. (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. A local family works to keep the area safe for the hummer and we'll interact with them and learn about their work.



Then we head back to Havana, a drive of about 4 hours, depending on stops for birding and comfort. After checking into our *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

APR 05 – Wednesday (Day 9) – 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

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*. Much of what is known about Cuban Parakeets in the wild comes from Maikel's research.



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 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 Central and 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.



Cuba Birding 2023 – March 26-April 05

- Cost \$2995 per person in double room with minimum 10. With 8: \$3295; with 6: \$3495.
- Single supplement \$275 (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 January 15, 2023.
- 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

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.

Included:

- Airport transfers on arrival/departure days only
- Local transportation by A/C bus or van, depending on group size
- 8 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 \$15-20/day per person)
- Gratuities to lodging (suggested \$3-5/day per room)
- Gratuities for breakfasts (suggested \$1-2/day)
- Comprehensive travel insurance*

**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*

*** 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.*