

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

CUBA

March 30-April 9, 2016



Cuban Pygmy-Owl, *Glaucidium siju*. Photo: D. Ascanio.

Leader: David Ascanio

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No matter how many consecutive times I lead a Cuba tour there's always an excitement accompanying me as if this was my first time ever guiding in this amazing island. Maybe because its uniqueness or its endemic birds, or probably the mix of Neotropical warblers, perhaps its amazing art deco architecture mixed with a unique contemporary history or quite surely the mix of all of it.

Part of this excitement comes from the fact that each tour has its own personality, its own dynamic and its own pace. This time, we practiced an old saying, one that worked very well: "continuous effort pays back, and sometimes pays back well!" Right from scratch in Los Caneyes we were nailing

superb views of one of the most difficult-to-see endemic Cuban birds, the Gundlach's Hawk. Later, in Cayo Coco we worked out the way to see Cuban Gnatcatcher and the ever-comical Cuban Tody. I am sure that the real surprise wasn't only the endemic birds but a secretive species that's sometimes almost impossible to see: the Bahamas Mockingbird.



Later, we enjoyed astonishing views of the Cuban Trogon (the national bird of Cuba) and the Greater Antilles Oriole (sometimes treated as a Cuban endemic). The best was still to come in the Bay of Pigs where we nailed three species of quail-doves (Blue-headed, White-fronted and Key West) as well as the rare and secretive Zapata Wren, one that we enjoyed singing at eye level! After shocking views of so many endemic Cuban birds we had to bet for a full swing in the Zapata Peninsula and for that we nailed the smallest bird in the world, Bee Hummingbird.

In our last birding day we were missing only few birds and chances for seeing the Giant Kingbird were low. But again, luck comes with effort. With the support of our driver and Gustavo, our local guide, we took an hour drive to Hacienda Cortina and just before the deadline time reached our clocks there was a magnificent Giant Kingbird perched atop of a tree. What a big slam! Back to our regular route we visited Las Terrazas enjoying views of several males and females Cuban Grassquit in the afternoon. Seeing the Cuban Grassquit we rounded-up a perfect tour combining birds, architecture and people.



Now that you have learned and appreciated much of Cuba's flora, fauna and people, I want to invite you to join us in other destinations, equally interesting and beautiful but remarkably different from that of the Greater Antilles.

The Amazon Cruise

We sail aboard a small ship to explore the Amazon and its tributaries. We use two skiffs to reach the flooded forest and other distinctive Amazonian habitats such as the sedimentary river islands. We also offer an optional walk in terra firme forest. Non-birding spouses like to join this cruise because of the variety of wildlife including several species of primates and encounters with local people along the river. We offer at least one optional visit to a community. You can enjoy the photos and the video of our 2016 Amazon Cruise in:

Photo album

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157663616158820>

Video link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b3xYG0cPSo>

The Panama Canal: *a relaxed and easy tour.*

Panama offers a unique opportunity to enjoy first class birding at a relaxed and easy pace. We spend most of the nights in a small inn located in the town of Gamboa, by the Panama Canal. Short walks around the town plus a boat trip to the Chagres River and a visit to the famous Pipeline road offers views of a nice mix of hummingbirds, tyrant flycatchers, tanagers, woodpeckers and honeycreepers. We offer an optional visit to the Canopy Tower where we can see canopy species at eye level. You can enjoy the photos and the video of our 2015 Panama Canal tour in:

Photo album

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157648765567967>

Video link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgnkUxwd5kw>

Costa Rica: *a relaxed and easy tour.*

Our *relaxed and easy* Costa Rica tour is for those who wish to bird various altitudinal levels, from cloud forest to lowland rain forest, and still do it in a slow pace. In this tour we include a ride along the aerial tram and besides seeing birds we also learn about the flora and other fauna of this spectacular country. This tour is designed for seeing gaudy species such as tanagers and honeycreepers as well as many hummingbirds. For that, we visit various hummingbird feeder stations. See the photos and video of our 2015 in:

Photo album

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157659475059484>

Video link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzgD6NfVNSE>



MAP OF LOCATIONS
VENT Cuba Tour
March 30 - April 9, 2016
Prepared by David Ascanio



VENT CUBA 3, 2016

March 30 – April 9, 2016

Leader: David Ascanio.

ITINERARY

30 March. Miami.

31 March. Arrival to Santa Clara. Los Caneyes. Drive to Cayo Coco.

01 April. Jardines del Rey: Cayo Coco, Cayo Paredon Grande & Cayo Guillermo.

02 April. Cayo Coco, Trinidad & Topes del Collante.

03 April. Topes del Collante to Zapata Peninsula.

04 April. Zapata Peninsula: Bermejas & Santo Tomas.

05 April. Soplillar, Havana & Soroa.

06 April. Viñales.

07 April. La Guira, Las Terrazas & Havana.

08 April. Old Havana.

09 April. Departure.

THE BIRDLIST

The order, and common and scientific names are those given by the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) Checklist of North American Birds, 7th edition with all current updates.

Photo album: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157667725359372>

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIRHvBljzdl>

Waterfowl / Anatidae

West Indian Whistling-Duck. *Dendrocygna arborea*. Cayo Coco.

Red-breasted Merganser. *Mergus serratus*. Along the causeway to Cayo Coco.

Grebes / Podicipedidae

Least Grebe. *Tachybaptus dominicus*. Along the Causeway to Cayo Coco.

Flamingos / Phoenicopteridae

American Flamingo. *Phoenicopterus ruber*. Observed in cayo Guillermo and along the causeway out of Cayo Coco.

Storks / Ciconiidae

Wood Stork. *Mycteria americana*. Bermejas, Zapata Peninsula.

Frigatebirds / Fregatidae

Magnificent Frigatebird. *Fregata magnificens*. Seen in a couple of locations.

Cormorants / Phalacrocoracidae

Neotropic Cormorant. *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*. Few were observed in Cayo Guillermo.

Double-crested Cormorant. *Phalacrocorax auritus*. Common in Cayo Paredón Grande.

Anhingas / Anhingidae

Anhinga. *Anhinga anhinga*. Only one was observed along the road from Santa Clara to Cayo Coco.

Pelicans / Pelecanidae

American White Pelican. *Pelecanus erythrorhynchus*. Some participants reported a pair near Viñales.

Brown Pelican. *Pelecanus occidentalis*. Seen almost daily.

Hérons, Egrets and Bitterns / Ardeidae

Great Blue Heron. *Ardea herodias*. Common in Cayo Coco and other keys.

Great Egret. *Ardea alba*. Cayo Coco and vicinity.

Snowy Egret. *Egretta thula*. Seen only around Cayo Coco.

Little Blue Heron. *Egretta caerulea*. Seen around Cayo Coco.

Tricolored Heron. *Egretta tricolor*. A common species seen almost every day.

Reddish Egret. *Egretta rufescens*. A white morph individual was observed near Cayo Paredón Grande.

Cattle Egret. *Bubulcus ibis*. Seen daily.

Green Heron. *Butorides virescens*. Seen sporadically in Cayo Coco.

Ibises and Spoonbills / Threskiornithidae

White Ibis. *Eudocimus albus*. Cayo Coco is named after this species (locally called coco). Various pairs were seen in Cayo Coco and the neighboring keys.

Glossy Ibis. *Plegadis falcinellus*. Reported by Steve near Moron.

Roseate Spoonbill. *Platalea ajaja*. Seen only in Cayo Guillermo.

New World Vultures / Cathartidae

Turkey Vulture. *Cathartes aura*. Seen daily.

Osprey / Pandionidae

Osprey. *Pandion haliaetus*. A single individual was seen near Soroa.

Hawks, Eagles and Kites / Accipitridae

Gundlach's Hawk (E). *Accipiter gundlachi*. We were astonished to find a female in the nest in Santa Clara. We have checked this nest for years and finally we saw it!

Snail Kite. *Rosthramus sociabilis*. More than a dozen individuals were observed near Soroa. Several juveniles were observed.

Cuban Black Hawk (E)(Common Black Hawk). *Buteogallus anthracinus*. Seen in Jardines del Rey and specially common in Cayo Guillermo. Nowadays treated as an Cuban endemic, Cuban Black Hawk *Buteogallus gundlachii* by most taxonomists.

Broad-winged Hawk. *Buteo platypterus*. This is resident and widespread in the Antilles. One individual was seen in Topes del Collante.

Red-tailed Hawk. *Buteo jamaicensis*. Topes del Collante, Soplillar and Soroa.

Rails, Gallinules and Coots / Rallidae

Clapper Rail. *Rallus crepitans*. We enjoyed superb views of a pair swimming along the edge of a channel edged by Red Mangrove.

Purple Gallinule. *Porphyrio martinicus*. Hacienda Cortina.

Common Gallinule. *Gallinula galeata*. Boca de Guama.

Limpkin / Aramididae

Limpkin. *Aramus guarauna*. Heard in Topes del Collante and later seen in Soroa.

Stilts and Avocets / Recurvirostridae

Black-necked Stilt. *Himantopus mexicanus*. Observed in three locations.

Plovers and Lapwings / Charadriidae

Black-bellied Plover. *Pluvialis squatarola*. We had a flash view in Cayo Coco.

Killdeer. *Charadrius vociferous*. Hotel Playa Largo grounds.

Sandpipers and Allies / Scolopacidae

Lesser Yellowlegs. *Tringa flavipes*. Cayo Coco.

Whimbrel. *Numenius phaeopus*. Playa Larga.

Gulls, Terns and Skimmers / Laridae

Laughing Gull. *Leucophaeus atricilla*. A common species in Cayo Coco and vicinity.

Herring Gull. *Larus argentatus*. Few were seen in breeding and non breeding plumage.

Royal Tern. *Thalasseus maximus*. Common in Cayo Coco and other keys.

Pigeons and Doves / Columbidae

Feral Pigeon (I). *Columba livia*. Common in urban areas.

Scaly-naped Pigeon. *Patagioenas squamosa*. Scoped in Topes del Collante.

White-crowned Pigeon. *Patagioenas leucocephala*. Soroa.

Eurasian Collared-Dove (I). *Streptopelia decaocto*. Cayo Coco.

Common Ground-Dove. *Columbina passerina*. Pairs were observed arid scrubby vegetation in all locations.

Blue-headed Quail-Dove (E). *Starnoenas cyanocephala*. One of the favorite species! We saw four individuals at a stakeout site in Bermejas. A BIG thanks to Orlando!

Ruddy Quail-Dove. *Geotrygon montana*. Three individuals were seen in the Zapata peninsula.

Gray-fronted Quail-Dove (E). *Geotrygon caniceps*. We enjoyed wonderful views in Bermejas and later near Soplillar.

Key West Quail-Dove. *Geotrygon chrysa*. Seen in Cayo Coco and in Bermejas. Nice studies!

White-winged Dove. *Zenaida asiatica*. A common species observed in lowland locations.

Zenaida Dove. *Zenaida aurita*. A hard-to-see species in other Caribbean islands, it was fairly common in the Zapata peninsula.

Mourning Dove. *Zenaida macroura*. Common.

Cuckoos / Cuculidae

Mangrove Cuckoo. *Coccyzus minor*. Seen incredibly well in Cayo Coco.

Great Lizard-Cuckoo. *Coccyzus merlini*. Cuckoos are amazing birds. We enjoyed various encounters with this unique species in Jardines del Rey, Sierra del Escambray and the Zapata Peninsula.

Smooth-billed Ani. *Crotophaga ani*. A fairly common species found in lowland and open habitats.

Owls / Strigidae

Bare-legged Owl (E). *Margarobryas lawrencii*. We enjoyed views of individuals in two separate nests.

Cuban Pygmy-Owl (E). *Glaucidium siju*. Another endemic owl of Cuba, it was seen in Soplillar!

Stygian Owl. *Asio stygius*. We enjoyed views of a single individual near Soroa.

Nightjars and allies / Caprimulgidae

Greater Antillean Nightjar (Cuban Nightjar). *Antrostomus cubanensis*. We can only call this as a heard species. Despite our efforts, I could not bring one individual that was singing in the forest to the open field.

Swifts / Apodidae

Antillean Palm-Swift. *Tachornis phoenicobia*. Seen frequently in lowland open habitats. Great views of a nesting colony in Santa Clara.

Hummingbirds / Trochilidae

Bee Hummingbird (E). *Mellisuga helenae*. A female and a male were observed in Bermejas, Zapata Peninsula. Later, near Bermejas, we saw two males and two other females. This is THE smallest bird in the world only slightly larger than the Vervain Hummingbird, found in Hispaniola.

Cuban Emerald. *Chlorostilbon ricordii*. An very common endemic hummingbird in Cuba. It was seen almost every day.

Trogons / Trogonidae

Cuban Trogon (E). *Priotelus temnurus*. This trogon is Cuba's national bird. Pairs were seen almost daily. The term *Priotelus* (genus) means *an accomplished or complete saw* and refers to the rugged appearance of the tail feathers.

Todies / Todidae

Cuban Tody (E). *Todus multicolor*. Todies are unique and beautiful birds. To me, they resemble a cartoon characters. The one in Cuba is the most colorful of all. It was seen in six days. Fossil evidence suggests that toadies evolved from Central America but

became extinct for unknown reasons. Five species remain in the Great Antilles. The todies are relatives of the motmots and more distantly to the kingfishers.

Kingfishers / Alcedinidae

Belted Kingfisher. *Megaceryle alcyon*. A single individual as observed in Cayo Coco.

Woodpeckers / Picidae

West Indian Woodpecker. *Melanerpes superciliaris*. Seen frequently in the lowlands. This species is a relative of Red-bellied Woodpecker (of North America) and the Red-crowned Woodpecker (of South America). It is another West Indies specialty found in all the Greater Antilles.

Cuban Green Woodpecker (E). *Xiphidiopicus percussus*. This was one of the tour participants favorites! Luckily, this astonishingly species is fairly common allowing views of pairs in 4 days!

Northern Flicker. *Colaptes auratus*. Hacienda Cortina.

Fernandina's Flicker (E). *Colaptes fernandinae*. We observed two nesting pairs in the Zapata peninsula.

Falcons and Caracaras / Falconidae

Crested Caracara. *Caracara cheriway*. Seen in the Zapata Peninsula.

American Kestrel. *Falco sparverius*. This common and widespread species was seen everyday. The pale subspecies found in Cuba is *sparveroides*.

Parrots / Psittacidae

Cuban Parakeet (E). *Aratinga euops*. About 12 individuals were observed in Bermejas. We noticed its similarities with Scarlet-fronted, White-eyed and Hispaniola's parakeets. These species may be closely related one to another.

Cuban Parrot. *Amazona leucocephala*. We enjoyed views of pairs in Topes del Collante and near Soplillar. Sometimes considered conspecific with other parrot species in the Caribbean.

Tyrant Flycatchers / Tyrannidae

Cuban Pewee (E). *Contopus caribaeus*. An endemic tyrant-flycatcher of Cuba. We saw it almost everyday and this one was the first Cuban endemic seen in our tour.

La Sagra's Flycatcher. *Myiarchus sagrae*. The genus *Myiarchus* comprises similar and hard-to-tell-apart species, and is distributed from southern USA to Argentina. In Cuba there's only one option, so its identification is pretty straightforward. We came across various pairs of La Sagra's Flycatcher. By the way, its common (and specific) name is after Ramón de La Sagra (1801-1871), a Cuban writer and naturalist. He authored *Historia física, política y natural de la isla de Cuba*, in 1837.

Gray Kingbird. *Tyrannus dominicensis*. Several individuals were observed in our tour. We noticed that these individuals might have just arrived from its non breeding grounds to Cuba.

Loggerhead Kingbird. *Tyrannus caudifasciatus*. We observed this species almost daily.

Giant Kingbird (E). *Tyrannus cubensis*. We were extremely lucky to find a single individual in Hacienda Cortina right few minutes before we had to leave this location!

Vireos / Vireonidae

Thick-billed Vireo. *Vireo crassirostris*. We observed a pair of this species in Cayo Paredón Grande. The subspecies *cubensis* is restricted to this part of Cuba.

Cuban Vireo (E). *Vireo gundlachii*. Seen very well in the Zapata Peninsula.

Red-eyed Vireo. *Vireo olivaceus*. Reported by Steve in Topes del Collante.

Black-whiskered Vireo. *Vireo altiloquus*. Heard in most locations. Seen in the Hemingway's house and in Hacienda Cortina.

Crows, Jays and Magpies / Corvidae

Cuban Crow. *Corvus nasicus*. A group was observed near the Hotel Playa Larga.

Swallows / Hirundinidae

Cuban Martin. *Progne cryptoleuca*. Observed mainly in Old Havana.

Cave Swallow. *Petrochelidon fulva*. Seen in Cayo Paredón Grande and in Trinidad.

Wrens / Troglodytidae

Zapata Wren (E). *Polioptila lembeyi*. WOW! We observed this species singing in front of us in the Zapata marsh. We even took some photos of it!

Gnatcatchers / Polioptilidae

Cuban Gnatcatcher (E). *Polioptila lembeyi*. A pair was observed near Cayo Coco.

Thrushes and Allies / Turdidae

Cuban Solitaire (E). *Myadestes elisabeth*. I think everyone agreed that seeing this bird was not as spectacular as it was hearing it. The specific name *elisabeth* was given after Queen Isabel I of Castile and Spain (1451-1504). It will remain as a mystery why the person that described this species (Lembeye) used the English equivalent (*Elisabeth*) rather than the Spanish name (*Isabel*). We enjoyed views of a single individual in the Mogotes of Viñales.

Red-legged Thrush. *Turdus plumbeus*. Another gorgeous species found in the Greater Antilles. We saw it in every location visited during this tour. The subspecies found in Cuba has a nice dark orange belly.

Mockingbirds and Thrashers / Mimidae

Gray Catbird. *Dumetella carolinensis*. Reported everyday. A boreal migrant.

Bahama Mockingbird. *Mimus gundlachii*. We could not see this species if it wasn't for Odey's perseverance and capacity to find it. After much effort we saw it and, what a way to see it! It perched in the open.

Northern Mockingbird. *Mimus polyglottos*. Common. Seen daily.

New World Warblers / Parulidae

Ovenbird. *Seiurus aurocapilla*. Observed in Cayo Coco and Bermejas.

Louisiana Waterthrush. *Parkesia motacilla*. This species was seen three times. A Boreal migrant.

Northern Waterthrush. *Parkesia noveboracensis*. Thanks to Steve, we realized that the individual seen in Soplillar was this species.

Black-and-white Warbler. *Mniotilta varia*. A pair was seen in the Colorado's family, near Topes del Collante.

Prothonotary Warbler. *Protonotaria citrea*. A single individual was observed in Hemingway's house.

Common Yellowthroat. *Geothlypis formosa*. Seen several times during the tour.

American Redstart. *Setophaga ruticilla*. A common neotropical migrant in Cuba.

Cape May Warbler. *Setophaga tigrina*. Seen in Los Caneyes.

Northern Parula. *Setophaga americana*. Seen twice in Cayo Coco.

Magnolia Warbler. *Setophaga magnolia*. Los Caneyes and Bermejas.

Yellow Warbler. *Setophaga petechia*. Cayo Coco.

Black-throated Blue Warbler. *Setophaga caerulescens*. A common Neotropical migrant in Cuba. Seen almost everyday.

Palm Warbler. *Setophaga palmarum*. The commonest Neotropical migrant in Cuba. It is mostly found in edge of forest, scrubby vegetation and gardens.

Olive-capped Warbler. *Setophaga pityophila*. Another specialty of the Greater Antilles. This species is only found in N Bahamas and Cuba. We enjoyed views of a pair near Viñales.

Yellow-rumped Warbler. *Setophaga coronata*. Seen only once in Cayo Paredón Grande.

Yellow-throated Warbler. *Setophaga dominica*. Cayo Coco.

Prairie Warbler. *Setophaga discolor*. Found near the lighthouse in Cayo Paredón Grande.

Yellow-headed Warbler (E). *Teretistris fernandinae*. Common in the Zapata Peninsula and in Viñales.

Oriente Warbler (E). *Teretistris fornsi*. Fairly common in Cayo Coco and Cayo Paredón Grande.

Tanagers and Allies / Thraupidae

Red-legged Honeycreeper. *Cyanerpes cyaneus*. First seen in Los Caneyes and later, towards the end of the tour in Las Terrazas.

Cuban Grassquit (E). *Tiaris canorus*. We owe a big thank you to our guide of Las Terrazas for keeping up to her words and taking us to the best site for this species where we got to see more than 8 individuals!

Yellow-faced Grassquit. *Tiaris olivaceus*. A common grassquit seen in all the locations.

Cuban Bullfinch. *Melopyrrha nigra*. Seen daily in Cayo Coco.

Genera INCERTAE SEDIS

Western Spindalis. *Spindalis zena*. The spindalis are endemic to the Greater Antilles. Some taxonomists consider them to be part of the cardinals rather than to the tanagers. This lovely species was observed in Cayo Coco, Cayo Guillermo, Cayo Paredón Grande as well as Viñales and Las Terrazas.

Buntings, Sparrows and Allies / Emberizidae

Zapata Sparrow (E). *Torreornis inexpectata*. We saw two subspecies, *inexpectata* from the Zapata Swamp and *varonai* from Cayo Coco.

Cardinals and Allies / Cardinalidae

Indigo Bunting. *Passerina cyanea*. A male in breeding plumage was observed in Cayo Coco.

Troupials and Allies / Icteridae

Red-shouldered Blackbird (E). *Agelaius assimilis*. We enjoyed superb views of a pair near Bermejas, in the Zapata Peninsula.

Tawny-shouldered Blackbird. *Agelaius humeralis*. Seen in various locations from Topes del Collante to the Zapata peninsula.

Eastern Meadowlark. *Sturnella magna*. Observed in the Zapata peninsula.

Cuban Blackbird (E). *Dives atrovioleaceus*. First observed in Los Caneyes in Santa Clara and later in the Zapata Peninsula and Soroa.

Greater Antillean Grackle. *Quiscalus niger*. This species is widespread and tolerates human presence, like other grackles of the genus. It was seen in everyday of the tour.

Black-cowled Oriole. *Icterus prothemelas*. We came across this species in almost all locations. According to Clements, this species is found in Central America and also in the Caribbean. But, bear in mind that other taxonomists consider the populations of the Caribbean to be separate taxa involving more than two species. The one we saw is also called Cuban Oriole, *Icterus melanopsis*.

Old World Sparrows / Passeridae

House Sparrow (I). *Passer domesticus*. Common in lowland areas.

OTHER SPECIES LIST

MAMMALS

Common Bottlenose. *Tursiops truncatus*. Seen along the causeway to Cayo Coco.

Jamaican, common or Mexican fruit bat. *Artibeus jamaicensis*. Seen under the roof of Los Caneyes in Santa Clara.

Cuban evening bat. *Nycticeius cubanus*. This endemic bat was seen in Soroa.

Leaf cutter ant. *Atta insularis*. The species we saw is apparently endemic to Cuba!

Little fire ant. *Wasmannia auropunctata*.

REPTILES

Racer. *Alsophis catherigerus*.

Whip-tailed Lizard. *Cnemidophorus sp.*

Brown Anole. *Anolis sagrei*.

Allison's (Blue-headed) Anole. *Anolis allisoni*.

Knight Anole. *Anolis equestris*. Topes del Collante.

Anole sp. Escambray mountains, Topes del Collante.

AMPHIBIANS

Cuban Tree Frog. *Osteopilus septentrionalis*.

Bull Frog. *Lithobates catesbeiana*.

OTHER SPECIES

Needle Fish. Belonidae.

Jellyfish.

Black Land Crab. *Geocarcinus sp.*

Dragonfly sp.

Arboreal termites. (Nasutitermes).