

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

CUBA

A relaxed & easy tour

April 3-13, 2018



Bare-legged Owl. *Margarobyas lawrencii*. Photo: David Ascanio

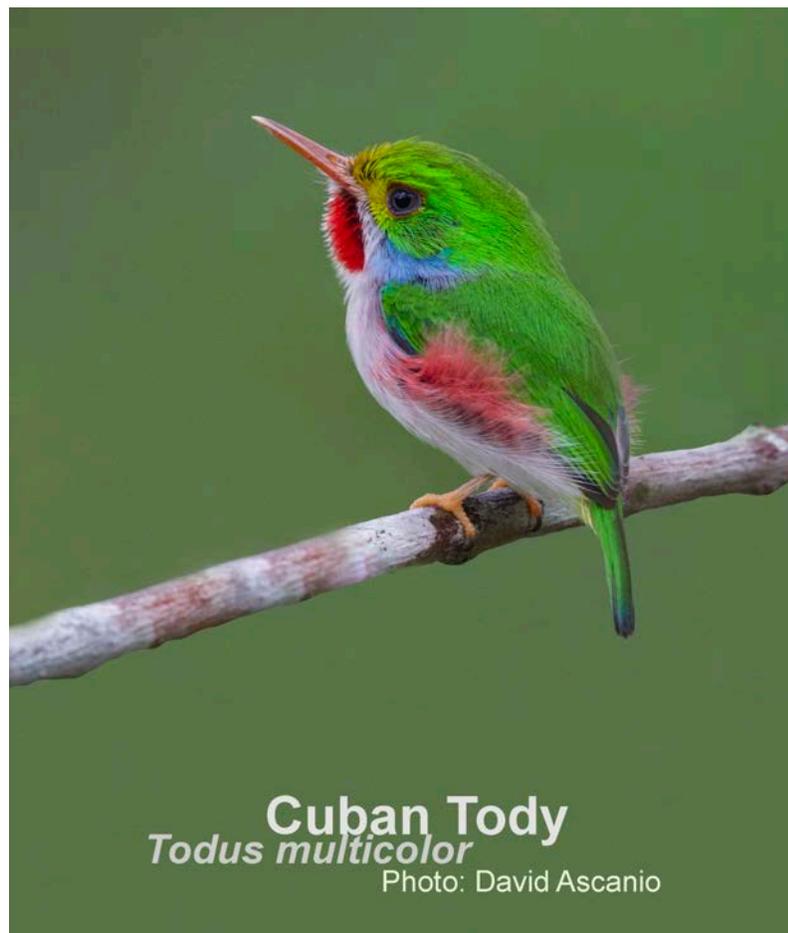
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Compiled by: David Ascanio.

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Our Cuba tour, on a relaxed & easy pace, wasn't much different from a regular tour, except that we enjoyed more rest time and saw birds in a very relaxed style. Upon arrival to Santa Clara, we nailed the common and widespread Antillean Palm Swift as well as the endemic Cuban Blackbird. This blackbird closest relatives are found in Mexico-Central America and the northern Pacific coast of South America. Besides seeing some endemic and restricted range distribution birds we noticed that most of the Boreal migrant warblers were gone to their breeding grounds, although we still enjoyed few species (some in breeding plumage!) such as Northern Parula, Bay-breasted Warbler, Black-throated Blue-Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler and Palm Warbler.



After Santa Clara we headed south, to the famous Zapata peninsula and the Bay of Pigs. The Zapata national park was declared in 1974 and is currently a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. It is the biggest and most important wetland in the Caribbean. Here, we visited various locations including dry forest, scrubby vegetation, coastal wetlands and farmland. Among the most important birds we enjoyed astounding views of the Bee Hummingbird, the world's smallest bird and the Red-shouldered Blackbird, one that has a restricted distribution and is threat due to habitat loss. This area provided views to about 16 Cuban endemic birds. What a milestone!

In the Zapata peninsula we also observed several other unique species, and two that stand among the endemic birds where one has uncertain affinity (Blue-headed Quail-Dove) and another with its scientific name (genus and specific name) given after a single person's name, the *Ferminia cerverai* (after Fermín Cervera) or as we know it, the Zapata Wren. A visit to *La Salina* allowed us to add waterbirds to our checklist including American Flamingo, several species of egrets, few sandpipers and terns.



The second location of the tour was in the west side of the island, to Soroa, Viñales and San Diego de los Baños. Here we visited unique geological formations, saw more endemic and restricted distribution birds and added the important cultural component when visited Las Terrazas community and interacted with local people.

Some of the target species observed were the Cuban Grassquit and Cuban Solitaire and among the rarities we nailed two Stygian Owls and White-crowned Pigeons.

The tour concluded with two full days in Havana where we focused in various cultural aspects of Cuba including a rehearsal of the National Ballet, an interpretive walk in the Botanical Gardens and visited Orlando Garrido, Cuba's most notorious contemporary ornithologist.



I want to thank you for joining us in this special Cuba tour. I believe that a great part of our success is because you came with the same goals in mind: to learn, to enjoy and to change people's life.

Now that you have learned much of Cuba's flora, fauna and culture 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 wonderful ship to explore the Amazon and its tributaries. Using skiffs, we distinctive Amazonian habitats such as the sedimentary river islands, Varzea and Igapo forest types. We offer an optional walk to terra firme forest. Non-birding spouses like to join this cruise because of the variety of wildlife including several

species of primates and an optional visit to a community. Photos and video of our 2017 cruise in:

Photo album

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157667300036438>

Video link

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

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

Panama is 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. Enjoy short walks plus a boat trip to the Chagres River. We visit the famous Pipeline road and the Canopy Tower, where we can see canopy species at eye level. Photos and video of our 2017 tour in:

Photo album

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157661430603057>

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 see birds from cloud forest to lowland rain forest, all in slow pace. We include a ride along the aerial tram. This tour is designed for seeing gaudy species such as tanagers and honeycreepers as well as many hummingbirds. We visit hummingbird feeder stations. Photos and video of our 2017 tour in:

Photo album

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157690123123015>

Video link

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

I look forward to having the privilege to guide you in another tour!



Dusky Dwarf Boa
Tropidophis melanurus

David Ascanio



Map of locations
Cuba Realxed & Easy.
A People-to-People Tour
April 3-13, 2018
Prepared by David Ascanio

2018 VENT Cuba

A people-to-people relaxed & easy tour

April 3-13, 2018

Leader: David Ascanio

ITINERARY

3 April. Night Miami.

4 April. Flight to Santa Clara. Night Santa Clara.

5 April. Santa Clara-Yaguaramas-Bermeja. Zapata peninsula.

6 April. Bermeja-La Salina. Zapata peninsula.

7 April. La Turba. Drive to Soroa.

8 April. Viñales.

9 April. San Diego de los Baños-Hacienda Cortina.

10 April. Las Terrazas. Havana.

11, 12 April. HAVana.

13 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 for all tours:

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

Photo album for this tour:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/sets/72157691122897190>

(Flickr is frequently changing the link codes. If you experience problems accessing the photo album, please go to the first link and click in the photo album of the tour entitled "2018 VENT Cuba relaxed & easy tour". Enjoy it!

Waterfowl / Anatidae

Blue-winged Teal. *Anas discors*. 5+ San Juan fish farm.

Flamingos / Phoenicopteridae

American Flamingo. *Phoenicopterus ruber*. 216+ ind. were seen in La Salina, Zapata peninsula.

Grebes / Podicipedidae

Pied-billed Grebe. *Podilymbus podiceps*. San Juan fish farm.

Pigeons and Doves / Columbidae

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

Scaly-naped Pigeon. *Patagioenas squamosa*. 1 near Soroa.

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

Eurasian Collared-Dove (I). *Streptopelia decaocto*. Widespread in urban areas.

Common Ground-Dove. *Columbina passerina*. Pairs were observed in scrubby vegetation in all locations. Seen almost every day.

Blue-headed Quail-Dove (E). *Starnoenas cyanocephala*. One of the favorite species. Two individuals were seen at a stakeout in Bermeja. A big thanks to Orlando for this!

Gray-fronted Quail-Dove (E). *Geotrygon caniceps*. We enjoyed wonderful views of two individuals in Bermeja.

White-winged Dove. *Zenaida asiatica*. Various locations.

Zenaida Dove. *Zenaida aurita*. Various locations.

Mourning Dove. *Zenaida macroura*. Common and widespread in open areas.

Cuckoos / Cuculidae

Great Lizard-Cuckoo. *Coccyzus merlini*. Lizard-cuckoos are amazing birds. Not only because of their extravagant size and behavior but also for their voice. We enjoyed views of it in the Zapata peninsula and heard it in Soroa.

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

Swifts / Apodidae

Antillean Palm-Swift. *Tachornis phoenicobia*. A fairly common species in Los Caneyes.

Hummingbirds / Trochilidae

Bee Hummingbird (E). *Mellisuga helenae*. We saw five individuals in two locations, Bermeja and Palpite. This is THE smallest bird in the world and only slightly larger than the Vervain Hummingbird, found in Hispaniola.

Cuban Emerald. *Chlorostilbon ricordii*. A very common endemic hummingbird found in various locations. We enjoyed daily views of it.

Rails, Gallinules and Coots / Rallidae

Purple Gallinule. *Porpyrio martinicus*. San Juan fish farm.

Common Gallinule. *Gallinula galeata*. San Juan fish farm.

American Coot. *Fulica americana*. First seen near the Zapata peninsula and later observed in the San Juan Fish Farm.

Limpkin / Aramididae

Limpkin. *Aramus guarauna*. Bay of Pigs.

Stilts and Avocets / Recurvirostridae

Black-necked Stilt. *Himantopus mexicanus*. Various locations.

Plovers and Lapwings / Charadriidae

Black-bellied Plover. *Pluvialis squatarola*. 6+ individuals Bay of Pigs.

Killdeer. *Charadrius vociferans*. Various locations.

Jacana / Jacanidae

Northern Jacana. *Jacana spinosa*. Pair. San Juan fish farm.

Sandpipers and Allies / Scolopacidae

Whimbrel. *Numenius phaeopus*. La Salina. Zapata peninsula.

Ruddy Turnstone. *Arenaria interpres*. La Salina. Zapata peninsula.

Least Sandpiper. *Calidris minutilla*. La Salina in the Zapata peninsula and the San Juan fish farm. 30+ individuals seen in the tour.

Semipalmated Sandpiper. *Calidris pusilla*. La Salina in the Zapata peninsula and the San Juan fish farm. 7+ individuals seen in the tour.

Short-billed Dowitcher. *Limnodromus griseus*. La Salina in the Zapata peninsula and the San Juan fish farm. 9 individuals seen in the tour.

Lesser Yellowlegs. *Tringa flavipes*. La Salina in the Zapata peninsula and the San Juan fish farm.

Willet. *Tringa semipalmata*. La Salina in the Zapata peninsula and the San Juan fish farm. 5 individuals seen in the tour.

Greater Yellowlegs. *Tringa melanoleuca*. La Salina in the Zapata peninsula and the San Juan fish farm. 18+ individuals seen in the tour.

Gulls, Terns and Skimmers / Laridae

Laughing Gull. *Leucophaeus atricilla*. A common species throughout the tour.

Gull-billed Tern. *Gelochelidon nilotica*. 16 individuals. San Juan fish farm.

Caspian Tern. *Hydroprogne caspia*. San Juan fish farm.

Royal Tern. *Thalasseus maximus*. A common species in wetlands throughout the tour.

Storks / Ciconiidae

Wood Stork. *Mycteria americana*. Zapata peninsula.

Frigatebirds / Fregatidae

Magnificent Frigatebird. *Fregata magnificens*. Zapata peninsula.

Cormorants / Phalacrocoracidae

Neotropic Cormorant. *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*. Various records during the tour.

Double-crested Cormorant. *Phalacrocorax auritus*. 5+ individuals in La Salina, Zapata peninsula.

Anhinga / Anhingidae

Anhinga. *Anhinga anhinga*. Road between Santa Clara to the Zapata peninsula. Also San Juan fish farm.

Pelicans / Pelecanidae

American White Pelican. *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*. Almost two dozen individuals were observed in La Salina, Zapata peninsula.

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

Hérons, Egrets and Bitterns / Ardeidae

Great Blue Heron. *Ardea herodias*. Common in the Zapata peninsula.

Great Egret. *Ardea alba*. Seen in various wetlands.

Snowy Egret. *Egretta thula*. Zapata peninsula and other locations.

Little Blue Heron. *Egretta caerulea*. Seen almost daily.

Tricolored Heron. *Egretta tricolor*. Common in La Salina, Zapata peninsula.

Reddish Egret. *Egretta rufescens*. Two individuals in white morph plumage were seen along with eight in regular plumage. La Salina, Zapata peninsula.

Cattle Egret. *Bubulcus ibis*. Seen daily.

Green Heron. *Butorides virescens*. Zapata peninsula, Las Terrazas and Soroa.

Ibises and Spoonbills / Threskiornithidae

White Ibis. *Eudocimus albus*. La Salina, Zapata peninsula.

Glossy Ibis. *Plegadis falcinellus*. A single individual in the rice fields along the road to Bermeja.

Roseate Spoonbill. *Platalea ajaja*. San Juan fish farm.

New World Vultures / Cathartidae

Turkey Vulture. *Cathartes aura*. Seen daily. A numerous species in Cuba. Seen in all days.

Osprey / Pandionidae

Osprey. *Pandion haliaetus*. Observed in wetlands near Santa Clara, Soroa and the San Jose fish farm.

Hawks, Eagles and Kites / Accipitridae

Snail Kite. *Rosthramus sociabilis*. San Jose fish farm.

Gundlach's Hawk (E). *Accipiter gundlachi*. What a privilege to have seen a male and a female. A great experience!

Cuban Black Hawk (E)(Common Black Hawk). *Buteogallus anthracinus*. Seen in La Salina, Zapata peninsula. Nowadays treated as a Cuban endemic, Cuban Black Hawk *Buteogallus gundlachii* by most taxonomists.

Red-tailed Hawk. *Buteo jamaicensis*. Soroa. Seen at various locations.

Barn-Owls / Tytonidae

Barn Owl. *Tyto alba*. Heard only. Soroa.

Owls / Strigidae

Bare-legged Owl (E). *Margarobyas lawrencii*. A pair nesting in Bermeja.

Cuban Pygmy-Owl (E). *Glaucidium siju*. This endemic owl of Cuba was seen near Santa Clara.

Stygian Owl. *Asio stygius*. We enjoyed superb views of a pair in Las Terrazas.

Trogons / Trogonidae

Cuban Trogon (E). *Priotelus temnurus*. This is Cuba's national bird. Pairs were seen in various locations. 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 birds. To me, they seem like coming from a kid's cartoon character. The one in Cuba is the most colorful of all. It was first seen in the Zapata peninsula. Fossil evidence suggests that todies 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*. Seen in wetlands in four locations.

Woodpeckers / Picidae

West Indian Woodpecker. *Melanerpes superciliaris*. Seen almost daily 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*. Seen in the Zapata peninsula and Las Terrazas. The only member of its genus and certainly one of the most spectacular woodpeckers of all.

Fernandina's Flicker (E). *Colaptes fernandinae*. We observed s female in the Zapata peninsula, near Bermeja.

Falcons and Caracaras / Falconidae

Crested Caracara. *Caracara cheriway*. Zapata peninsula.

American Kestrel. *Falco sparverius*. This common and widespread species was seen every day. The pale subspecies found in Cuba is *sparveroides*. And we observed two morphs, the pale and the rufous one.

Parrots / Psittacidae

Cuban Parakeet (E). *Aratinga euops*. A group was observed in Bermeja. I commented its similarities with Scarlet-fronted, White-eyed and Hispaniola's parakeets. These species may be their closest living sister species.

Cuban Parrot. *Amazona leucocephala*. Superb views. Bay of Pigs in the Zapata peninsula.

Tyrant Flycatchers / Tyrannidae

Cuban Pewee (E). *Contopus caribaeus*. We saw it in five consecutive days. Fond to forest edge, open areas and mangrove.

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 this flycatcher. It is usually associated with forest habitats. 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*. These are local migrants that come to Cuba to breed. Pairs were seen almost daily. A common species this time of the year.

Loggerhead Kingbird. *Tyrannus caudifasciatus*. Observed in Soroa and Las Terrazas. Similar to the previous one but plumage contrasts in head are bolder. Voice is distinctive.

Giant Kingbird (E). *Tyrannus cubensis*. Nice studies of it near Soroa. This species is threatened and apparently due to loss of habitat. Further studies are needed.

Vireos / Vireonidae

Cuban Vireo (E). *Vireo gundlachii*. Seen in the Zapata peninsula.

Black-whiskered Vireo. *Vireo altiloquus*. It was seen in various locations. A common voice this time of the year.

Crows, Jays and Magpies / Corvidae

Cuban Crow. *Corvus nasicus*. Zapata peninsula. We noticed its loud voice.

Swallows / Hirundinidae

Cuban Martin. *Progne cryptoleuca*. Observed in Old Havana and Las Terrazas.

Tree Swallow. *Tachycineta bicolor*. Soroa and surrounding locations.

Cave Swallow. *Petrochelidon fulva*. We observed nesting pairs in the Mogotes of Viñales.

Barn Swallow. *Hirundo rustica*. San Juan fish farm.

Wrens / Troglodytidae

Zapata Wren (E). *Ferminia cerverai*. We enjoyed close views of a single individual in La Turba, Zapata swamp. This is the only member of its genus and both, the genus and specific name are taken from the persona that apparently first collected it, Fermín Cervera. ENDANGERED.

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 two individuals singing from a tree contiguous to a Mogote in Viñales.

Red-legged Thrush. *Turdus plumbeus*. Another gorgeous species of the Greater Antilles. We saw it in every location visited during this tour. Both subspecies found in Cuba have a nice dark orange belly (*schistaceus* & *rubripes*).

Mockingbirds and Thrashers / Mimidae

Gray Catbird. *Dumetella carolinensis*. Seen in scrubby vegetation in various locations.

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

Old World Sparrows / Passeridae

House Sparrow. *Passer domesticus*. Common in urban areas.

New World Sparrows / Passerellidae

Zapata Sparrow. *Torreornis inexpectata*. Astonishing views of a pair in La Turba, Zapata peninsula.

Spindalises / Spindalidae

Western Spindalis. *Spindalis zena*. The spindalises 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 various forested habitats.

Cuban Warblers / Terestistridae

Yellow-headed Warbler (E). *Teretistris fernandinae*. Pairs were observed in the Zapata peninsula, Soroa and Viñales.

Oriente Warbler (E). *Teretistris fornsi*. Only one individual was observed near Santa Clara.

Troupials and Allies / Icteridae

Eastern Meadowlark. *Sturnella magna*. A pair carrying nesting material. Road to the Zapata peninsula.

Cuban Oriole. *Icterus melanopsis*. We came across this species in Palpite. The population found in Cuba was believed to be conspecific with the populations in Central America and the Caribbean. Nowadays, it is accepted as an endemic species of Cuba.

Baltimore Oriole. *Icterus galbula*. A single individual was observed in Havana botanical gardens.

Red-shouldered Blackbird (E). *Agelaius assimilis*. We enjoyed superb views of various individuals singing in Bermeja and later in la Turba. Both locations are part of the Zapata swamp.

Tawny-shouldered Blackbird. *Agelaius humeralis*. A common lowland species in open habitats. It was seen in various locations during the tour.

Shiny Cowbird. *Molothrus bonariensis*. Three individuals were observed near Soroa.

Cuban Blackbird (E). *Dives atroviolaceus*. Observed in various locations. Sometimes treated as *Ptiloxena atroviolacea*. It was originally described as a grackle, in 1892.

Greater Antillean Grackle. *Quiscalus niger*. This species is widespread and tolerates human presence, like other grackles. It was seen every day.

New World Warblers / Parulidae

Ovenbird. *Seiurus aurocapilla*. Seen in Bermeja.

Northern Waterthrush. *Parkesia noveboracensis*. Observed in Bermeja and later in Soroa.

Black-and-white Warbler. *Mniotilta varia*. Bermeja.

Common Yellowthroat. *Geothlypis formosa*. Seen twice near wetlands. In one location, a pair was carrying nesting material.

American Redstart. *Setophaga ruticilla*. A common Neotropical migrant in Cuba. Despite that it was migration time to their breeding grounds, we still saw several individuals including some in breeding plumage.

Cape May Warbler. *Setophaga tigrina*. Seen twice. We observed some individuals in breeding plumage.

Northern Parula. *Setophaga americana*. Seen once in Santa Clara. We observed some individuals in breeding plumage.

Bay-breasted Warbler. *Setophaga castanea*. Los Caneyes in Santa Clara. Two pairs were observed and at least one individual had breeding plumage.

Yellow Warbler. *Setophaga petechia*. Pair in La Salina, Zapata peninsula.

Black-throated Blue Warbler. *Setophaga caerulescens*. Los Caneyes in Santa Clara. Also in Havana botanical gardens.

Palm Warbler. *Setophaga palmarum*. This species is among the commonest Boreal migrants in Cuba and probably the latest to leave during the breeding season. It was 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, W and E of Cuba. We enjoyed views of three pairs near Viñales.

Yellow-throated Warbler. *Setophaga dominica*. Seen only in Los Caneyes. One of the first Boreal migrants to leave the island.

Tanagers and Allies / Thraupidae

Red-legged Honeycreeper. *Cyanerpes cyaneus*. Nice views of various individuals in Las Terrazas and Viñales.

Cuban Grassquit (E). *Tiaris canorus*. 5+ individuals near Las Terrazas. A highlight of the tour!

Yellow-faced Grassquit. *Tiaris olivaceus*. Seen in most locations.

Cuban Bullfinch. *Melopyrrha nigra*. Seen in the Zapata peninsula.

OTHER SPECIES LIST

MAMMALS

Antillean Fruit-eating Bat. *Brachyphylla cavernarum*. Under the bridge, Pozo Azul.

REPTILES

Dusky Dwarf Boa. *Tropidophis melanurus*. Los Caneyes.

Black-and-white Racer. *Antillophis andreae*. Zapata peninsula.

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

Tropical House Gecko. *Hemidactylus mabouia*. Introduced from Africa.

OTHER SPECIES

Cuban Toad. *Peltophryne platycephala*.

Cuban Tree Frog. *Ostepilus septentrionalis*.

Arboreal termites. (*Nasutitermes*).

Red Crab. *Geocarcinus* sp.

Orb Weaver Spider.