

## CUBA - trip report 10th-22nd September 2009

*Ian Forsyth*

Along with my partner Hilary and two other non birding friends, I took advantage of a late bargain two centre deal. The first 10 days were spent based at a hotel (all inclusive), in the resort of Playa Guardalavaca (PG) and then, via an internal flight, 4 days based in a hotel on the outskirts of Havana (B & B ). PG is situated on the north coast towards the east of the island and has good habitat within easy walking distance both to the east and west. I worked these areas daily for an hour or so after sunrise and similarly before sunset and they were usually productive. Also, on most days, I took one of the free bicycles provided by the hotel and cycled anything up 10 kms away in the surrounding area, adding more species in the process.

For the Havana leg of the trip I hired a guide, El Chino, particularly with Zapata in mind. On the afternoon of 19th we collected the rental car in Havana and drove about 75km SW to the dense, humid forest at Soroa at the eastern end of the Cordillera de Guaniguanico. On 20th an early start was made for the Zapata peninsular (overnight stay at Playa Larga) where we birded during the less hot parts of the day and again on 21st before heading back to Havana in the evening. On 22nd we visited Parque Lenin in Havana, where the large lagoon was productive but, unfortunately, the botanical gardens were closed for reparation and, despite the best efforts of El Chino, entry was refused. After a look around Old Havana, the rental car was returned and we went back to the hotel, where from IF had to leave in the afternoon and fly back to the UK.

Although September may not be the ideal time to visit this remarkable island - some of the endemic species can be very difficult to find - there are nevertheless many good birds to be seen. Also, the weather can be unpredictable at that season, most obviously with the risk of hurricanes, but for my visit it was nigh on perfect - hot and sunny all day every day. In addition North American migrants are passing through, including some difficult to identify juvenile wood warblers! Altogether I had a great time, with the added excitement of never being quite sure what species I would encounter next.

**Systematic list.** *The sequence, English names and scientific nomenclature follow those adopted by Raffaele, Wiley, and Garrido et al in 'Birds of the West Indies'.*

PG = Playa Guardalavaca.

### **Magnificent Frigatebird** *Fregata magnificens*

An immature flew slowly E close inshore at PG on 14th at 0740 hrs and an adult female flew close inshore and then over the hotel grounds at Havana on 19th.

### **Laughing Gull** *Larus atricilla*

An adult flew E at PG on 10th; an adult and two imms flew E at Havana on 19th and a 2cy was off Old Havana on 22nd.

**Royal Tern** *Sterna maxima*

A total of 15 were noted coasting at PG during occasional sea watches; mainly flying E, including three on 10th and four on 18th.

**Sandwich Tern** *Sterna sandvicensis*

An adult flew E close inshore on 13th at PG.

**Gull-billed Tern** *Sterna nilotica*

An adult flew E close inshore at PG on 18th.

**Little Blue Heron** *Egretta caerulea*

A total of four was seen in the PG area, in flight over the eastern mangroves area. One flew at Zapata (La Turbo) on 20th.

**Snowy Egret** *Egretta thula*

Seen almost daily at PG, mainly at or over the eastern mangroves area with maxima of 21+ on 15th and 14+ on 16th roosting there. Occasionally others were seen in flight here and there. Two were noted in the Hondones area of Zapata on 21st.

**Great Blue Heron** *Ardea herodias*

One was at rest at the lagoon in Parque Lenin, Havana on 22nd.

**Great Egret** *Ardea alba*

Seen on four days at PG, including five on 15th and four on 16th. It was common enough in the Zapata area and noted singly, or sometimes two, mainly en route but not always recorded.

**Least Bittern** *Ixobrychus exilis*

A juvenile was feeding out in the open at the lagoon in Parque Lenin, Havana on 22nd.

**Yellow-crowned Night-Heron** *Nyctanassa violacea*

At PG a juvenile was in the eastern mangroves on 11th and an adult was on the beach near the western mangroves early on 14th.

**Black-crowned Night-Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Single adults were present at PG in the eastern mangroves on 12th and 15th and a juvenile on 16th. A total of three adults were noted in flight at Zapata (La Turbo) on 21st.

**Limpkin** *Aramus guarauna*

On 21st it was heard several times at Zapata (La Turbo) but flight views were tantalisingly brief. On 22nd in the same area two in flight were seen in quick succession, one very close; both allowed good views.

**Green Heron** *Butorides virescens*

In the PG area one on 14th and two on 16th. On 19th one flew at the obvious second large reservoir en route to Soroa and several were noted on each of the two days in Zapata.

**Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis*

Low numbers in the PG area. At Havana 48 flew W in three flocks on 19th. Fairly common in the Zapata area but not always specifically noted down.

**Wilson's Plover** *Charadrius wilsonia*

A first winter was in the eastern mangroves at PG on 11th.

**Killdeer** *Charadrius vociferous*

Seen only at the Banes road reservoir, south east of PG: two on 16th, one on 17th and four on 18th.

**Solitary Sandpiper** *Tringa solitaria*

One, probably the same, was in the eastern mangroves at PG on 11th/12th.

**Western Sandpiper** *Calidris mauri*

At least two were at the Banes road reservoir (PG) on 17th and probably several of 25-30 distant small waders there on 18th were this species.

**Least Sandpiper** *Calidris minutilla*

Seven were at the mouth of the mangrove creek, west PG, on 10th and one was at the Banes road reservoir (PG) on 17th.

**Spotted Sandpiper** *Actitis macularia*

One or two juveniles were noted most days in the PG area and a juvenile was at Havana on 19th. A juvenile was at the lagoon in Parque Lenin, Havana on 22nd.

**Willet** *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*

Only seen near the PG reservoirs: one on 10th and two on 13th.

**Lesser Yellowlegs** *Tringa flavipes*

Three at the Banes road reservoir (PG) on 17th and two there on 18th.

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*

One was on the PG beach at dawn on 10th.

**Black-necked Stilt** *Himantopus mexicanus*

Only encountered at the PG reservoirs: four on 10th, 14+ on 13th, 11 on 16th and 15+ on 17th/18th.

**King Rail** *Rallus elegans*

One was at the lagoon in Parque Lenin, Havana on 22nd.

**Northern Jacana** *Jacana spinosa*

One was in Zapata en route to La Turbo on 20th and two at the lagoon at Parque Lenin, Havana on 22nd.

**Purple Gallinule** *Porphyrio martinica*

An adult was in a small roadside wetland SW of PG on 13th and two juveniles were at the lagoon in Parque Lenin, Havana on 22nd.

**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus*

Up to three noted on four dates in the PG area. At least 50 were in view at the lagoon in Parque Lenin, Havana on 22nd.

**Least Grebe** *Tachybaptus dominicus*

Six were at the Banes road reservoir (PG) on 17th.

**Pied-billed Grebe** *Podilymbus podiceps*

Three were at the reservoir on the north side of PG on 13th.

**Neotropic Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*

One was at the second large reservoir en route to Soroa on 19th.

**Ruddy Duck** *Oxyura jamaicensis*

At PG the Banes road reservoir held six on 13th and at least seven on 17th.

**American Kestrel** *Falco sparverius*

Up to three a day were noted in the PG area. It was regularly seen in the Zapata area and at a variety of places en route and around Havana.

**Snail Kite** *Rostrhamus sociabilis*

Five were at the second large reservoir en route to Soroa on 19th.

**Common Black-Hawk** *Buteogallus anthracinus*

Two were on poles, some 200m apart, on the edge of Playa Larga on 20th.

**Red-tailed Hawk** *Buteo jamaicensis*

Two immatures: one near Soroa on 19th and one en route to Havana on 21st.

**Crested Caracara** *Caracara cheriway*

Two were watched feeding for a few minutes along a track at Zapata (Hondones) on 21st.

**Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura*

Common almost anywhere.

**Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus*

One was near Playa Larga on 21st.

**Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)** *Columba livia*

A few were seen in the vicinity of Playa Larga and occasionally singles in flight here and there.

**White-crowned Pigeon** *Columba leucocephala*

One was seen a few kms west of PG on 14th.

**White-winged Dove** *Zenaida asiatica*

Singles were found in the eastern mangroves area at PG on 11th and 16th.

**Gray-headed Quail-Dove** *Geotrygon caniceps*

Two were on a forest track in the Hondones area of Zapata on 20th and one was on a track bordering the sawgrass in La Turbo area on 21st.

**Common Ground-Dove** *Columbina passerina*

Common!

**Zenaida Dove** *Zenaida aurita*

In the PG area singles appeared on 12th and 14th and two on 17th. One was on a track in the Hondones area of Zapata on 21st.

**Mourning Dove** *Zenaida macroura*

It was fairly common in all areas.

**Cuban Parakeet** *Aratinga euops*

At least 25-30 were flying around Playa Larga towards dusk on 20th and it was heard over dense forest in the Zapata area on 21st.

**Yellow-billed Cuckoo** *Coccyzus americanus*

Two were seen to the west of PG in the early morning of 11th.

**Great Lizard-Cuckoo** *Saurothera merlini*

One or two were seen and heard almost daily around PG. Two were at Zapata (Hondones) on both 20th and 21st.

**Smooth-billed Ani** *Crotophaga ani*

Groups of up to seven were noted almost daily around PG. At least three were noticed in Zapata (Hondones) on 20th and it was present at Parque Lenin on 22nd.

**Cuban Pygmy-Owl** *Glaucidium siju*

One was on a wire west of PG on 16th and another was clearly visible in a tree in the Soplillar/Hondones area on 20th.

**Antillean Palm Swift** *Tachornis phoenicobia*

It was seen regularly in low numbers 20th-22nd in Zapata and at Parque Lenin.

**Cuban Emerald** *Chlorostilbon ricordii*

It was difficult to find in the PG area, with just one on 12th. At least three at Soroa on 19th, five in Zapata (Hondones) on 20th, two in the La Turbo area on 21st and three in Hondones on 21st, when also a nest was found. One was in the hotel grounds at Havana on 22nd.

**Bee Hummingbird** *Mellisuga helenae*

One came to a flowering tree at Zapata (Hondones) on 20th. Amazing!

**Cuban Tody** *Todus multicolor*

The only one was on the forest edge near Soroa on 19th. Stunning!

**Cuban Trogon** *Priotelus temnurus*

It was encountered only in the Hondones area of Zapata: one on 20th and two on 21st.

**West Indian Woodpecker** *Melanerpes superciliaris*

Singles were heard then seen in flight at Soroa on 19th and La Turbo on 20th; good views were obtained of one on a trunk at La Turbo on 21st and then one in flight at Hondones on 21st.

**Cuban Green Woodpecker** *Xiphidiopicus percussus*

Excellent views were obtained of one at Zapata (Hondones) on 21st.

**Fernandina's Flicker** *Colaptes fernandinae*

A female on the ground at La Turbo gave fine views on 21st.

**La Sagra's Flycatcher** *Myiarchus sagrae*

Singles were found at Soroa on 19th and at Hondones on 20th, then two at La Turbo on 21st, four at Hondones on 21st and one at Parque Lenin, Havana on 22nd.

**Gray Kingbird** *Tyrannus dominicensis*

It was seen daily in the PG area, including 12+ on 10th. Not noted in Zapata but a flock of about eight was seen en route back to Havana on 21st.

**Loggerhead Kingbird** *Tyrannus caudifasciatus*

Up to four were seen most days in the PG area. One or two at Soroa on 19th and several were noted daily in the Zapata area.

**Crescent-eyed [Cuban] Pewee** *Contopus caribaeus*

Two were in the Soroa area on 19th, one at La Turbo on 20th and two at Hondones on 21st.

**Cuban Crow** *Corvus nasicus*

Two were seen at Playa Larga on 21st.

**Cuban Martin** *Progne cryptoleuca*

A female was circling, sometimes overhead, to the west of PG on 12th.

**Cave Swallow** *Pterochelidon fulva*

A flock of at least 10 were hunting over one particular field about 3 kms south of PG on 13th.

**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica*

It was only present at PG: one on 12th and three on 15th.

**Cuban Gnatcatcher** *Polioptila lembeyi*

One was singing constantly from dense scrub to the west of PG resort for several minutes in the early mornings of 11th and 12th. After a frustrating ten minutes it allowed very good views on 11th but refused to reveal itself next day.

**Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher** *Polioptila caerulea*

Two were in the Hondones area on 20th.

**Zapata Wren** *Ferniniaerverai*

It was heard at La Turbo on 20th and then a singing male gave superb views in the trackside trees there on 21st.

**Northern Mockingbird** *Mimus polyglottos*

It was common both in the PG area and in Zapata.

**Cuban Solitaire** *Myadestes elisabeth*

Excellent views were obtained of one of this, often elusive, species near Soroa on 19th.

**Red-legged Thrush** *Turdus plumbeus*

Up to three a day were seen in the PG area but it was noted only occasionally in the Zapata area.

**Cuban Vireo** *Vireo gundlachii*

Two singles were seen, both in the Hondones area of Zapata, on 20th and 21st.

**Black-whiskered Vireo** *Vireo altiloquus*

One allowed excellent views, including the moustache line, about 2km west of PG in the evening of 10th. A couple of other Vireos seen briefly on the trip, possibly this species, did not give diagnostic views.

**Black-and-White Warbler** *Mniotilta varia*

Three were together in woodland west of PG on 15th and one there next day. One was noted in the Hondones area of Zapata on 20th.

**Northern Waterthrush** *Seiurus noveboracensis*

One on 14th a few kms west of PG and one close to PG on 15th. Two were at Hondones on 20th and two or three at La Turbo on 21st.

**Louisiana Waterthrush** *Seiurus motacilla*

One gave superb views in the eastern mangroves at PG on 12th and one south west of PG on 15th. At least one was seen at Hondones on 20th.

**Ovenbird** *Seiurus aurocapillus*

Two were at Hondones on 20th and one at La Turbo on 21st.

**Prairie Warbler** *Dendroica discolor*

This was the commonest North American wood warbler: two or three seen daily in the PG area. Singles were noted at Hondones and La Turbo on 20th and at Hondones on 21st.

**Yellow-throated Warbler** *Dendroica dominica*

As the writer was collecting a bicycle in the hotel grounds at PG, one of these gems appeared in the shade trees above the attendant on 14th. Raising the bins led to everything else, including the bike, hitting the ground but this was a view not to be missed!

**Yellow-rumped Warbler** *Dendroica coronata*

One immature provided good views below the hotel room window in PG on 17th.

**Oriente Warbler** *Teretistris fornsi*

Singles were found on most days in the PG area.

**Common Yellowthroat** *Geothlypis trichas*

A female/immature was found at La Turbo on 21st.

**Yellow Warbler** *Dendroica petechia*

Although supposedly a 'common resident widely in West Indies', only two could be found on this trip, at western PG on 17th.

**Northern Parula** *Parula americana*

An adult was found just west of PG resort on 15th. One near Soroa on 19th, two at Hondones on 20th then at least two at La Turbo and four at Hondones on 21st.

**Yellow-headed Warbler** *Teretistris fernandinae*

One was at Soroa on 19th and three were in La Turbo on 20th.

**American Redstart** *Setophaga ruticilla*

It was only seen near PG: a female/immature on 11th and female and male on 18th. The female on 18th exhibited some interesting behaviour, for some two minutes at close quarters, in brushing its body and tail on broad-leaved vegetation about a metre from the ground, calling repeatedly as it did so. The leaves were coated in early morning moisture and it appears that the bird was taking the opportunity to 'bathe'.

**Black-throated Blue Warbler** *Dendroica caerulescens*

A male and female were with a small party of warblers at Hondones on 20th.

**Worm-Eating Warbler** *Helmitheros vermivorus*

Two were at Hondones on 20th.

**Western Stripe-headed Tanager** *Spindalis zena*

About 2 kms east of PG a male and female kindly perched in a nearby tree for several minutes on the evening of 10th.

**Baltimore Oriole** *Icterus galbula*

Two females/immatures flew into light woodland near Caletica, west of PG, on 16th where one perched up in full view.

**Greater Antillean Oriole** *Icterus dominicensis*

Two on 12th and 15th east of PG and one was seen in flight at Hondones on 21st.

**Cuban Blackbird** *Dives atrovioacea*

It was very common at PG, particularly in the resort area and fairly common around Zapata.

**Greater Antillean Grackle** *Quiscalus niger*

It was not difficult to find on a daily basis in the PG area.

**Eastern Meadowlark** *Sturnella magna*

Three were in fields west of PG towards Caletica on 14th where the local farmers, on horseback, managed cattle grazing. One was in Parque Lenin on 22nd.

**Yellow-faced Grassquit** *Tiaris olivacea*

The only one seen in the PG area was a female/immature on 17th. Two, including a fine male, were noted at Hondones on 20th and 15+ were in an elusive flock at La Turbo on 21st. Others were heard but, at least in September, not an easy species to see well.

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*

It was fairly common in the resort area of PG and in 'urban' Zapata.

**Cuban Bullfinch** *Melopyrrha nigra*

Two adults and three immatures comprised a family party at La Turbo on 21st.

*Ian Forsyth, October 2009*