

Gearing Up for Cuba

Thoughts on digital assets for international travel

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My husband and I depart soon to go birding in Cuba. Like most weight-conscious travelers, I don't want to carry heavy books. Why should I? It is the digital age, after all, so I expect digital resources, be they full-fledged birding apps, geographically specific supplemental apps, or field guides converted to ebooks.

But it's not as easy as one might expect to find and collate digital assets for international birding, whether for Cuba, Korea, or Colombia. Fundamentally it's a needle-in-a-haystack problem. Resources may be out there, but the search tools haven't caught up to the size of the haystack. So it takes a fair bit of time and bandwidth to find out what's available for your destination. Time and bandwidth are two resources that typically are limited while you're traveling, so it's worth having an efficient process to locate, amass, and organize these digital assets while you have hot-and-cold-running domestic internet.

I'll share my search strategy for Cuba, the idea being that a similar process would apply to any other country. In addition, I hope the Cuba example is particularly compelling for the ABA readership, now that we're witnessing the end of travel restrictions to our Caribbean near-neighbor.

There's an App for That

Apple's slogan, "There's an app for that," captures the enormity of the app universe. There are currently 1½ million apps in the Apple App Store and even more in Google Play. Okay, we'll take Apple at their word and assume there is an app available. So the real question is, "Can you find it?"

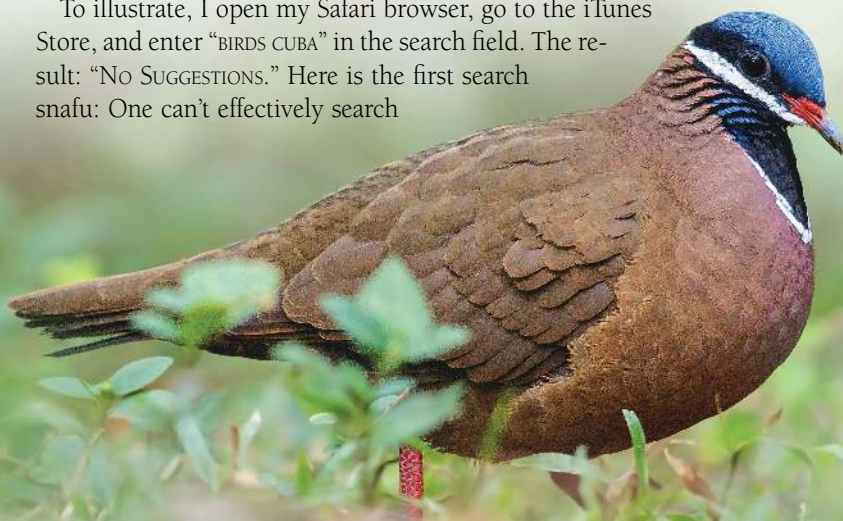
To illustrate, I open my Safari browser, go to the iTunes Store, and enter "BIRDS CUBA" in the search field. The result: "NO SUGGESTIONS." Here is the first search snafu: One can't effectively search

the iTunes Store (iOS) or Google Play (Android) from a web browser. Instead, you'll need to open the relevant app store and search from within that internet-enabled software. In other words, if you see Safari or Internet Explorer at the top of your screen, you're not properly searching iTunes. You need to see iTunes as the application at the upper left of your computer screen, or on your mobile device.

I know of an excellent field guide app for Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. That's not Cuba, but it's a start, so I'll look that one up. I enter "BIRDS PUERTO RICO" in the search field and again no suggestions. What's going on? My confidence in the app search process has plummeted. I'm looking at my iPhone, and I know it has an app called "Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands Birds in Photos and Audio." It's an excellent app, with more than 2,900 photos of 382 species, more than 360 audio recordings, and maps from the Puerto Rico Breeding Bird Atlas. Since

With the recent relaxation of restrictions on travel to Cuba, many U.S. birders are considering a visit to that bird-rich nation so close to Florida. What to bring?—binoculars, for starters, and probably a field guide. But what sort of field guide?—print or electronic? In this primer on international travel in the digital era, we look at the various e-resources you might consider loading onto your phone or laptop.

Photos: The **Blue-headed Quail-Dove** (*Sternoenas cyanocephala*) and **Cuban Tody** (*Todus multicolor*) are among the 25 birds species endemic to Cuba—and tantalizingly close to the ABA Area. Photos by © Glenn Bartley.



The app **PUERTO RICO AND VIRGIN ISLANDS BIRDS IN PHOTOS AND AUDIO** has a bit of overlap with Cuba. New country-specific international apps are released each year.

I know this app exists, I can locate its website (puertoricobirds.com), where there is a direct link to the iTunes Store. Lo and behold! Now that I've found the app in iTunes, by backdoor linking via its website, the search algorithm has the app in recent history and subsequently the search field can find it.

The point of this example is that you can't simply search the app store and assume that an empty search means an appropriate app doesn't exist. The search is flawed—it's just too big an app universe. First you may have to reverse-search by adding some human intelligence and doing a bit of your own detective work.

Finding International Apps

It's no secret that the search engines for Apple iTunes and Google Play are buggy. If you really want to search, turn to the search engine behemoth, Google. Open your web browser (such as Safari, Internet Explorer, or Google Chrome), go to google.com, and now experiment with keyword search strings. You will be dumped on, but if there is an app for your region, this is your best chance of finding it. In the meantime you'll probably discover some other gems, such as checklists or field guides. In the case of Cuba: no *bona fide* apps, only several field guide books.

Another good place to start is with an online list of apps geared for birders. For example, The Birder's Library has a blog post on "Bird Apps of the World: A List of All Field Guide Apps for Apple and Android Devices" (tinyurl.com/BL-bird-apps). It's not the superset, but it's an excellent start. Again nothing for Cuba, but it contains a list of intriguing country-specific apps, such as for Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Locating a regional app, or an app for a nearby country, may provide a thread to pull in your search. If nothing else, there may be some species overlap, such as with Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands in the case of Cuba. Also, once you have a lead to an app, the search engine adjusts, using network algorithms based on others' search and purchase patterns. For example, "CUSTOMERS ALSO



BOUGHT" displays The Warbler Guide app, which is a good idea since Cuba in winter hosts many of U.S. and Canadian warblers. I also see a specialty app, eGuide to Birds of East Africa, which isn't relevant for this trip, but I'll make note of it for bucket-list dreaming.

Locating Digital Books

Now that I'm fairly confident there isn't a field guide app to Cuba, I'll turn to digital versions of printed guides. It's best to start with Amazon.com, which has effectively replaced *Books in Print* as the über-catalog.

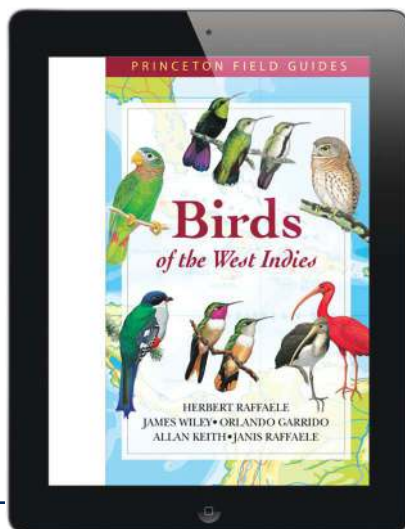
Again, don't assume that the search is perfect. Locating four of the major titles for field guides to Cuba required digging well into the third page of Amazon's output. Depending on the search string, typically one of the following four books did not show up:

- *Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba*, by Orlando H. Garrido and Arturo Kirkconnell (2000; 2011 Spanish edition)
- *Birds of the West Indies*, by Herbert A. Raffaele and James Wiley (2003)
- *Birds of the West Indies*, by Norman Arlott (2010)
- *Endemic Birds of Cuba: A Comprehensive Field Guide*, by Nils Navarro (2015)

What about digital editions? As many of us know, Amazon has a propriety digital format, called Kindle. So if a book is not listed as having a digital edition in Amazon, that only means it's not available in Amazon's format. To confirm the availability of an e-book edition, check the book's source, the publisher. For example, Raffaele's *Birds of the West Indies* is listed on the Princeton University Press website as available in many digital formats, including Kindle, iBooks, Nook, Google eBook, and Kobo. A link from the publisher's site takes me directly to the iTunes Store, where it can be downloaded to my iPad for \$17.99.

It's also important to check the publisher's site to find just-released editions and companion apps. Amazon lists the recent *Endemic Birds of Cuba* (2015) as unavailable. In fact it is available for order directly from The Friendship Association's Ediciones Nuevos Mundos ([tinyurl](http://tinyurl.com)).

To obtain books in their digital versions, visit the book publisher's site to be certain of availability. Shown here is the iBooks version of Raffaele's *Birds of the West Indies*.



com/nuevos-mundos). In addition, future digital editions will likely appear first at the book's home website. Apps created as spin-offs from print field guides are also announced early on homepages, as in the Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands app derived from the book by Mark Oberle, *Puerto Rico's Birds in Photographs: A Complete Guide and CD-ROM Including the Virgin Islands*.

There are other online book catalogers specifically for birding titles. NHBS started as the Natural History Book Service in London in 1985 with a catalog of 500 ornithology books (nhbs.com). It's currently paper only, but may provide a crucial lead on leveraging an online search.

Another option always worth a look is Google Books, where numerous titles are available in the public domain. However, many are only partial, with annoying gaps of many pages. In the arena of Cuba field guides, the best yield is only the 1993 edition of *Birds of the West Indies* by James Bond, with limited pages.

If you completely strike out on digital, but have paper versions, there is always the option of scanning or smartphone-photographing select plates, such as of the endemic species.

Finally, to delve into more details on a species, especially if you're a globe-trotting birder, consider a membership to *Handbook of Birds of the World*. This 17-volume set is now digital, called *HBW Alive* (hbw.com), with multimedia, constantly-updating content through wiki contributions, and geographic filters.

Creating a Sound Library

Smartphones, with their staggering storage capacities, have allowed birders to pack an incredibly robust audio library. Now to track down the resources.

A good start is to check the new international sound packages by BirdsEye (birdseyebirding.com). BirdsEye has produced audio collections that can be purchased and downloaded from within the app as supplemental material. Collections are avail-

able for Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, Australia, Belgium/Holland, Sri Lanka, and peninsular Malaysia. But no Cuba—yet. BirdsEye continues to add regions, though, so it's worth subscribing to their newsletter if you're interested in future releases.

Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Macaulay Library of Sounds also produces audio packages for international regions (tinyurl.com/CLO-Retail-Audio), including a CD set *Cantos de Aves del Caribe* covering Caribbean birds. Double-checking with a Google search turned up a difficult-to-purchase CD set also produced by Cornell Lab, *Bird Songs in Cuba*, cataloged in the Smithsonian Institution's Collection Search Center (tinyurl.com/search-S-I). Looking it up in WorldCat, a global library catalog, (worldcat.org) and entering my ZIP code, I see that there is a copy nearby at University of Florida Library, which I can request by interlibrary loan. All these internet catalogs are excellent search resources.

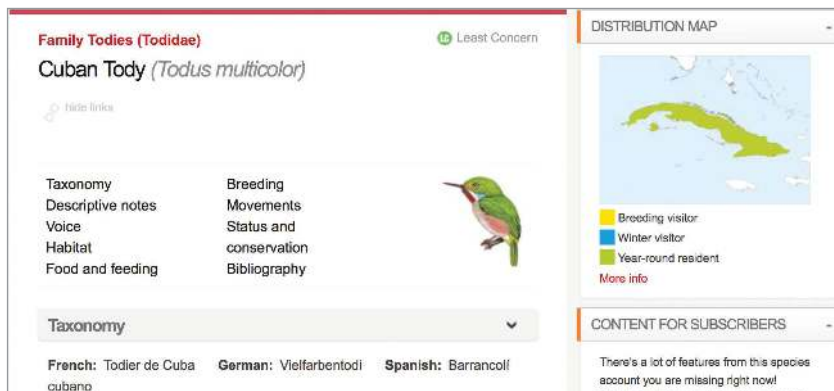
Finally, there is the customize-your-own approach. The global sound library xeno-canto.org contains almost a third of a million recordings of nearly 9,500 bird species. It also has a good search filter. Select Advanced Search, then choose Cuba in the Country pull-down for 248 recordings from 63 species recorded in Cuba. I'm interested in the endemics, so I'll download songs of Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Trogon, and so on, creating a folder in my iPhone's music collection.

Logging Your Sightings

The topic of checklist and field notebook software is too vast to cover here, but I'd like to mention one important app, eBird Mobile, and address a frequently-asked question.


The free eBird Mobile app has gone global. You can

Continued on page 78



In its hardcover, 17-volume format, the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* would be totally impracticable for international travel. What's the globe-trotting birder to do?—The whole 17-volume set is available as a digital edition by subscription called *HBW Alive*.





ConservationConnection

The author and her spouse will be traveling with Caribbean Conservation Trust (cubirds.org), which works with Cuban scientists, promotes Cuban conservation, and contributes to citizen science by its multi-year collection of data. Nils Navarro's newly-released book, *Endemic Birds of Cuba*, when purchased directly through Ediciones Nuevos Mundos, contributes 20% of the purchase price to providing Spanish edition copies to field biologists and educators. The wealth of assets at Xeno-Canto and the Macaulay Library depends on citizen science contributions. eBird recently added convenient direct upload of photos and audio (tinyurl.com/rich-media-eBird).



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Continued from page 76

log your sightings from anywhere in the world—with or without internet access. The offline checklist feature uses your device's built-in GPS for location, letting you upload the checklist later when you go online.

However, I've received many questions about eBird Mobile not working despite having internet. If you have a connection, but it's slow—such as 3G rather than 4G or LTE—you may receive an error message from eBird, telling you that the eBird server is not responding and to try again later. Here's what that means: If your connection is not fast enough to sustain, verify, and close the back-and-forth data transfer and “handshake” protocols, then the connection will be dropped and you'll receive a timeout error. So, if while traveling your connection works for text or email but has trouble with high bandwidth tasks such as web browsing, it likely won't work online with eBird Mobile. Instead, use the excellent offline checklist option and upload your sightings later.

Supplemental Resources

Finally, a handful of extras. If you'd like to read a bit deeper into Cuba's or any country's avifauna, do a quick search of SORA (sora.unm.edu) or JSTOR (jstor.org). SORA is free to the public, whereas JSTOR can be accessed through an institutional membership, such as a university or public library card. In the journal *Neotropical Ornithology* I found an article on Cuba's endangered species



Many apps now rely on “in-app purchases”: The app itself is free, and then users select detailed regional content to download for purchase, such as the new sound packages available through BirdsEye.

that piqued my interest, downloadable in PDF format.

Many of us have used ebook travel guides such as *Lonely Planet*. And the *Moon Travel Guides* post free downloadable maps on their website—including one for Cuba (tinyurl.com/Cuba-Moon).

I downloaded a detailed map to Cuba's Zapata Peninsula onto our offline and bigger-screen iPad. And a currency exchange app is always handy for travel, such as the 99¢ Coinverter or free XE Currency.

Instead of a traditional word look-up dictionary app, a new trend is language phrase keyboards, such as Amigo Spanish Keyboard (tinyurl.com/amigo-key). This app transforms your regular smartphone keyboard into a phrase board, interactively working as a dictionary, thesaurus, verb conjugator, and pronouncer without having to switch to a dedicated dictionary app.

You may not be birding in Cuba soon, or maybe you plan to do so shortly with the substantial loosening on the travel embargo. In any event, I hope that following along through these search techniques has provided some ideas and resources for acquiring digital assets for your next international birding adventure. ¡Buen viaje!