



## Nature & Culture Series

### Eastern Cuba's Mountains, Coast and Colonial Settlements

December 1 – 8/9, 2019

The **Caribbean Conservation Trust** (CCT) is offering an exclusive, **legally authorized** U.S. led and managed natural history program to Eastern Cuba! The program is coordinated under **U.S. government authorization by CCT**, which is based in Connecticut. CCT staff have a 23 year history of managing bird conservation programs in Cuba. Along with **CCT Founder and Executive Director, Gary Markowski** and **Cuban Biologist Dr. Giraldo Alayon**, our team will include a bilingual Cuban tour guide, and an additional regionally located Cuban naturalist. They will guide you through a variety of natural areas in Cuba, the Caribbean's largest and most ecologically diverse island nation.

Our program begins in Holguin, on Cuba's north east coast following a direct flight from Miami. Our arrival day in Cuba includes airport transfer, a meeting with our guide, our hotel and dinner just outside Holguin.

CCT designed this itinerary to take you to Eastern Cuba's best and most accessible bird habitats, most beautiful national parks, diverse biosphere reserves, and unique natural areas. We will interact with local scientists and naturalists who work in research and conservation. In addition to birding, we will learn about the ecology and history of regions we visit. Finally, we can expect some degree of indulgence in the richness of Cuban culture, and history that is unique to this part of Cuba.

#### Cuba's Birds

According to BirdLife International, which has designated 28 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Cuba, "Over 370 bird species have been recorded in Cuba, including 28 which are endemic to the island and 29 considered globally threatened. Due to its large land area and geographical position within the Caribbean, Cuba represents one of the most important countries for Neotropical migratory birds – both birds passing through on their way south (75 species) and those spending the winter on the island (86 species)."



Cuban Tody

Our itinerary provides opportunities to see many of Cuba's endemic species and subspecies, as listed below. This trip will also focus on the many neotropical migrant species that migrate south to Cuba in the fall and winter in Cuba (endemic and endemic subspecies in italics):

*Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Oriente Warbler, Bare-legged Owl, Blue-headed Quail Dove, Grey-fronted Quail Dove, Cuban Oriole, Bee Hummingbird, Cuban Blackbird, Cuban Grassquit, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Pewee, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Solitaire, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Vireo, Fernandina's Flicker, Giant Kingbird, Gundlach's Hawk, Cuban Nightjar, Tawny-shouldered Blackbird, Cuban Sparrow (eastern race), Cuban Crow, Cuban Emerald, and Cuban Bullfinch.*

Other species of interest include:

Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Western Spindalis, Red-legged Honeycreeper, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Loggerhead Kingbird, *Olive-capped Warbler*, Key West Quail-Dove, Ruddy Quail-Dove, Zenaida Dove, *Stygian Owl*, and numerous other migratory and resident species.

#### WHERE WE TRAVEL

We will visit UNESCO World Heritage Sites, UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (two of the six UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Cuba are located in the eastern provinces), National Parks, and various other protected areas. These will include five *BirdLife International* designated Important Bird Areas (IBAs) - **Cuchillas del Toa Biosphere Reserve, Alejandro de Humboldt National Park**, as well as **Baitiquirí, Boqueron, and Gran Piedra reserves**.

**Cuchillas del Toa Biosphere Reserve** covers portions of Cuba's easternmost provinces: Holguín and Guantánamo. This Biosphere Reserve is one of Cuba's most important protected areas in terms of biodiversity and endemism. Of the reserve's 180,000 acres, approximately 5,600 correspond to its marine habitats, while the remaining area is terrestrial.

**Alejandro de Humboldt National Park** is the center piece of this biosphere reserve. The park is considered to be of global importance as one of the most biologically diverse tropical ecosystems in the Western Hemisphere. The property contains 16 out of 28 plant formations defined on the island of Cuba, and is considered an important site for the

conservation of endemic flora, as almost 70% of the 1,302 species of the seed plants (spermatophyta) found here are endemic to the park. Endemism rates for vertebrates and invertebrates found in the park are also very high. Countless species are severely restricted in their range, which adds to the importance of the property. The park is set in Cuba's coolest and wettest environment, and the lush forests here support a large number of endemic birds (including *Bee Hummingbird*, *Cuban Green Woodpecker*, *Cuban Parrot*, *Cuban Parakeet*, *Cuban Solitaire*, Cuban Tody, *Cuban Trogon*, *Giant Kingbird*), and various resident and migratory birds.

In Bahia del Taco, where the park headquarters are located, the *Polymita* - a colorful endemic land snail (*Polymita picta*) can be easily found. They are common here most likely because of the protection afforded by park personnel. Outside of this area they have been illegally collected for trade (cheap jewelry) and are therefore threatened. The Cuban race of the Antillean Manatee (endangered) are also found in the surrounding waters of the peaceful, protected bay.



*Polymita Picta*

**Guantanamo Province** is geographically Cuba's southeastern most point, boasting an exceptionally beautiful, natural and



large subtropical bay surrounded by vibrant vegetation and a unique semi-circle of low slung mountains. To the north (within the previously described Cuchillas del Toa Biosphere Reserve) are the wettest mountain ranges in Cuba featuring unsurprisingly the largest rivers in Cuba. Conversely, to the south and west of the province lies the semi-desert **Los Cerros de los Monitongos** mountains. Renowned nationally as the driest place in Cuba, its unusual climate and terrain describe a mountainous, coastal desert in striking contrast with what is essentially tropical Cuba. This unique microclimate brings with it a unique range of animal and plant species endemic to this tiny area of Cuba. Near the important bird area at **Baitiquiri** is Cajobabo Beach, a National Monument commemorating the landing of Jose Marti and

General Maximo Gomez in 1895, to participate in the War of Independence which eventually succeeded in ending nearly 400 years of Spanish colonial rule. We will explore protected natural areas to the east and west of Guantanamo Bay, affording distant views of the U.S. Naval base. Our most advantageous location for lodging will be Guantanamo City, directly north of the bay.

Looming over Santiago de Cuba is **Gran Piedra (Giant Stone) Reserve**, and the northern peaks of the **Sierra Maestra Mountain Range**. As the pinnacle of this important UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Gran Piedra includes the namesake 65,000 ton boulder of volcanic origin resting near the summit, which is just over 4,000 feet above sea level. Along with a weather station, a Franco- Haitian coffee plantation and museum, the area around the summit features a botanical garden featuring an abundance of ferns and other flora quite unique in Cuba. Here humid evergreen forests predominate and ferns abound. With great contrast, the coastal vegetation is typical of semi-desert areas with Cactaceae and Spiny Shrubs.

### **Bacanao Biosphere Reserve**

The **Siboney Ecological Reserve** is located east of the city of Santiago de Cuba. The reserve is narrow and elongated, and is located within the **Bacanao Biosphere Reserve**. Among the most significant features of this landscape are the marine terraces that give the appearance of giant steps. In total eight levels of marine terraces occur between emergent and submerged. The existence of 33 caves and grottoes, along with other karstic features such as streams, sinkholes, small canyons and depressions with red soil support the existence of high species diversity of both marine and terrestrial life.

### **BIOLOGICAL RARITIES**

Although this will not be the focus of our trip (nor do we expect to see the 3 named species below), this region is considered perhaps the last bastion of a number of rare and limited range endemic species of fauna. Among these include the critically endangered *Cuban Kite* (*Chondrohierax wilsoni*) which was recently recorded here; the nocturnal

insectivorous mammal - *almiqui* (*Solenodon cubanus*), declared extinct in 1970, but rediscovered in 1974 & more recently in 2003, and perhaps the *Ivory-billed Woodpecker*, last recorded in this region in 1992. Among amphibians, frogs boast a 97.4 % rate of endemism, and include the *Monte Iberia eleuth* (*Eleutherodactylus iberia*) considered to be the smallest frog in the Northern Hemisphere.

[http://www.cubanaturaleza.org/component/search/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=16&Itemid=17](http://www.cubanaturaleza.org/component/search/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16&Itemid=17)

**THE CONSERVATION PROJECT** The U.S. Department of Treasury has provided a license for conducting bird conservation work in Cuba to the **Caribbean Conservation Trust, Inc. (CCT)**, a U.S. based organization committed to the conservation of endemic and migratory birds and their habitats in the greater Caribbean region. The primary objective of CCT is to enhance the ability of North American and Caribbean ornithologists, naturalists, resource managers, conservation organizations, institutions, and local citizens to conduct research and initiate programs to help conserve the birds of the Caribbean and their habitats. CCT is dedicated to bird and habitat conservation through education and relationship building and, as a result of our work and research findings, are in compliance with U.S. Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) licensure for travel to Cuba.

**The Cuba Bird Survey Program** Your participation in this program will involve a simple bird survey. Each evening, the group will record a checklist of birds seen on that particular birding day. Data is compiled by the group, and submitted by the trip leader to CCT staff. Recorded trip totals are part of CCT's ongoing data bank of information on both migratory and resident species recorded in Cuba over several years. Significant findings are noted and submitted to the journal *North American Birds*. Our Cuban colleagues keep trip totals and notable information to support their ongoing research as well.

[Monte Iberia eleuth](#)



For a glimpse of our program in action, go to <http://www.nhptv.org> for a link to the film **COUNTING ON BIRDS**, a 2013 Public Television production which describes the history of the Christmas Bird Count and features a segment on our program in Cuba as an example how birders can contribute to 'citizen science' based bird conservation efforts.

### Program Leadership

Our program is designed and managed in the United States and is professionally staffed and field tested over 23 years in Cuba. We are dedicated to providing participants with informative nature oriented opportunities, good, wholesome food and comfortable accommodations, and highly skilled local leaders.

#### Gary Markowski



**CCT Founder Executive Director, Gary Markowski**, first traveled to Cuba in the mid-1990s to meet with staff at Cuba's National Museum of Natural History to investigate ways to become involved with conservation initiatives in Cuba. A fledgling group of authorized U.S. citizens arrived the next winter. Since then, the bird survey program has involved more than 2,000 'citizen scientists', as well as dozens of U.S. and Cuban ornithologists, field biologists, and educators who have contributed to this effort. Gary's 35 years of experience in the fields of environmental and experiential education, outdoor leadership and adventure travel provide the foundation for CCT's success in Cuba.

#### Dr. Giraldo Alayon



Biologist **Giraldo Alayon** is well known in the Caribbean region as the foremost expert on spiders of the West Indies and Central America. He has published more than 100 papers on the systematics and biogeography of spiders and other insects in the region. Giraldo has been birding seriously since 1977, and has also published 15 papers related to avian biology and behavior. He is currently working on a book about the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, which he claims to have seen in eastern Cuba in 1992. Dr. Alayon has traveled to various island nations in the Lesser Antilles, and has made many trips to the United States with grants from the American Museum of Natural History; Smithsonian Institution; Museum of Comparative Zoology (Harvard University); Field Museum; Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences; Peabody Museum (Yale University); Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor); and California Academy of Sciences. From 1995 to 2001, Dr. Alayon was president of the Cuban Zoological Society. He is currently **Curator of Arachnida at the National Museum of Natural History at Havana**, where he has worked since 1988. Dr. Alayon will

be with you throughout the program in the field and will assist in providing a broad overview of Cuban natural history as well as specific information relative to the flora, fauna, geology and other natural features of the environments we visit.

### ***Cuban Specialists***

Our primary Cuban naturalist will be with us throughout the program in the field and will assist in providing a broad overview of Cuban natural history as well as specific information relative to the flora, fauna, geology and other natural features of the environments we visit. Additionally, we will work with regional naturalists from the national parks and biosphere reserves that we visit around the country.

**A Bilingual Cuban Guide** will be at our service throughout the program. Along with a professional driver, he or she will be with the group each day to tell us about Cuban history, culture, arts and lifestyle. He/she will also deal with logistics, meals, translation, and other nuts-and-bolts aspects of the travel experience.

### **Accommodations**

Accommodations feature hotels and tourist board approved homestays in Holguin, Santiago de Cuba, and Guantanamo provinces. Our Cuban accommodations are staffed by friendly, helpful hosts and represent the best Cuba has to offer in the regions we visit, and may include refurbished vintage hotels, modest 3 star facilities, and beach-front bungalows. All hotels are safe, clean, air conditioned tourist facilities.

### **Additional Details**

Following program registration, we will provide all participants with a bird check list as well as details with regard to travel to Cuba, including all of the basics you need to know about travel documents, customs, facts about Cuba, currency, health and safety, food, flights, and what to bring. U.S. Government authorization documents and bird checklist will be provided following receipt of your final balance.



El Morro, Santiago de Cuba

### **Physical Demands and Expectations**

This program offers opportunities for several days of ambitious birding, with early departure times on birding days, and occasional evening sessions. Birding days provide for leisure time after lunch and before our afternoon birding sessions. Physical exertion will be light to moderate on most days, with the longest walks approximately 3 miles. Terrain is mostly flat and dry, with some hills present in western Cuba. All participants should be in reasonably good physical condition. Be prepared for strong sun, with temperatures in the mid 70s – 80s. Mosquitoes can be bothersome in north eastern Cuba in Humboldt National Park. Although unlikely, rain may occur as well, so bring adequate rain gear. Those with medical concerns should check with their physician before taking part in the program. Your health and well-being are very important to us!

### **Trip Costs, Terms, and Conditions**

Land costs for the 8 day program is **\$ 3,495.00** per person for shared accommodations. Single supplements are an additional \$ 375.00 per person. A one day optional extension in Santiago de Cuba is available at \$ 185.00 per person in a shared room, of \$ 235.00 in a single room.

### **What is included:**

CCT Cuba Bird Survey Programs include the following: all accommodations, meals as described in the itinerary, guide services, some tips (local naturalists, restaurant and bell staff), the flight between Havana and Baracoa, Cuba, airport/hotel transfers, ground transportation, bottled water, some drinks, admission fees (itinerary only), U.S. Department of Treasury authorization documents, and program management services which include the provision of all pre- and post-program materials, a full-time Cuban bilingual guide, bilingual Cuban naturalists, and a full-time driver. Program fees include a donation to help support our conservation efforts in Cuba.

### **Not Included:**

Travel within the U.S., or between the U.S. and Cuba or Cuban Visa (\$75). Cuban health insurance (required by law and cost \$3 per day) or airport departure taxes (both are included with flight to Cuba); items of a personal nature such as

laundry, phone calls, some beverages, or bar, housekeeping, guide, driver and leader tips, passport fees, or other fees not listed in the program.

**Flights**

We fly directly between south Florida and eastern Cuba with **Jet Blue** and **American Airlines**. Our arrival in Cuba will be in Holguin, near Cuba’s Atlantic coast, and our departure from Cuba will be from Santiago, on the Caribbean coast. This allows us to travel in one direction without backtracking or driving an additional 4 hours to Holguin from Santiago.. We will provide all of the information necessary to make booking these flights simple and secure. Visas are easily obtained either in advance or on the day of travel to Cuba from the airport in Miami. Estimated costs for round trip flights between Miami and eastern Cuba range between \$ 275.00 and \$ 350.00.

**Travel Insurance Protection**

Any U.S. citizen traveling internationally these days should consider insurance protection. Reasonably priced coverage is available to provide protection against financial loss due to trip cancellation or delay, as well as lost baggage. Although uncommon, cancellations due to illness, accidents, work related schedule changes, and other un-planned or un-welcome events have happened. Unforeseen travel related events which you have little or no control over can also effect travel plans. All of these factors make trip cancellation insurance a very important consideration. For information about Travelex insurance, go to: <http://www.travelex-insurance.com/index.asp?location=07-0067> or call 1 800-228-9792. Be sure to use the agency location code 07-0067 to access coverage explicit to this program. CCT’s U.S. Department of Treasury issued OFAC license is based on our HUMANITARIAN PROJECT for the environment in Cuba.



**Payment**

Regarding payment for the land portion of the tour, a \$ **700.00** deposit is due as soon as possible to reserve space on these programs. This can be paid by check or money order payable to:

Caribbean Conservation Trust  
353 West Todd Street  
Hamden, CT 06518

Please do not write **Cuba** on the check memo.

**Cancellation and refund policy \***

All cancellations must be done in writing and are effective upon receipt in the CCT office. Should it become necessary for you to cancel, all payments will be refunded after a deduction of our cancellation fee outlined below:

- More than 90 days prior to the tour..... \$ 200.00 per person (land only)
- Fewer than 90 days prior to the tour..... NO REFUND

In the unlikely event that we must cancel the tour due to under enrollment, a full refund less a \$ 75.00 processing fee for your license application will be forwarded to you, should cancellation occur after your license has been processed. **\*Please be aware that the refund policies apply only to the land portion of the trip, and that airlines may have different policies that exist beyond our ability to control. Additional registration fees may apply. As with all international travel programs, we highly encourage trip cancellation and travel insurance policies.**

Caribbean Conservation Trust and its agents and constituents reserve the right to make changes to the itineraries. Land and air arrangements may be subject to price increases beyond our control.

# CUBA NATURE & CULTURE ITINERARY

## Eastern Cuba's Mountains, Coast and Colonial Settlements

December 1 – 8/9, 2019

### Day 1 December 1 (Sunday)

Miami – Holguin – Guardalvaca

Fly south Florida – Holguin. Our day is unstructured to accommodate our currently undetermined flight times. We arrive anytime between late morning and early evening. Dinner and accommodation north east of Holguin in the seaside community of Guardalvaca. There is forest and coastal habitat nearby, which serves as a major migratory landfall and winter habitat.

### Day 2 Guardalvaca – La Mensura National Park

We will start the day with a morning bird walk on nearby forest trails. Charismatic Cuban endemics such as Cuban Trogon, Tody, Green Woodpecker, Pygmy Owl and Cuban Vireo are common here, along with Great Lizard Cuckoo and a variety of warblers and other winter visitors to Cuba. Following a brief stop at a small self-sustaining farm we will move on to the Sierra Cristal range ( - 2 hours east). En route we have an opportunity to visit Bariay, the area associated with the first landfall of Columbus in Cuba in October of 1492. Lunch is at a comfortable look out point 2,000 feet above sea level, with tremendous views of Salto de Guayabo, one of the highest waterfalls in Cuba. Afternoon birding will occur on nearby trails in **La Mensura National Park**, where Cuban Solitaire is a primary target. We will have dinner and accommodation in a villa surrounded by mountain pine forest habitat in an inspiring natural setting. This is likely our most rustic accommodation.



### Day 3 La Mensura National Park - Humboldt National Park

This morning we will bird the expansive hotel grounds prior to breakfast, and later visit trails with mixed vegetation in a protected area managed by CITMA, Cuba's environmental protection entity. After leaving the national park, we will head north for a brief stop along the coast near the Bahia de Nipe. With luck we will see American Flamingoes and other wading birds in isolated pockets along the mangrove dotted coastline. Of historical interest is a former sugar mill and community of Preston, developed by the United Fruit Sugar Company in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By August of 1960, all foreign properties were nationalized in



Cuban Giant Anole

Cuba. This community continued to process sugar until the early 1990s, when the Cuban economy nose-dived following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Currently, a small fishing industry supports this decaying but interesting community. In early afternoon we will continue east towards **Alejandro de Humboldt National Park**, eastern Cuba's premier natural habitat. We will travel on along the Atlantic coast with excellent scenery and patches of semi-deciduous and pine forests (3 + hours) to **Bahia del Taco** and the park headquarters.



<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/839>. Our first stop is the park visitor center for birding and interaction with park naturalists. The modest visitor center overlooks a peaceful bay that is home to the endangered *Antillean manatee*. Endemic (and also endangered) *Polymitas* – Cuba's colorful terrestrial snails can be easily observed on site. From here we begin our exploration of **Cuchillas del Toa Biosphere Reserve**. Dinner and accommodation at beachfront bungalows (2 nights), 20 minutes east of Humboldt National Park.

#### Day 4 Humboldt National Park - Balcon de Iberia

Breakfast followed by drive east for birding around **Monte Iberia**. **Alejandro de Humboldt National Park** harbors some



of the most significant natural habitats for the conservation of terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity in Cuba. This area is of global importance as one of the most biologically diverse tropical ecosystems in an island setting anywhere on Earth. The property contains 16 out of 28 plant formations defined on the island of Cuba. There is a consensus that many species remain to be discovered in the property. Endemism rates for vertebrates and invertebrates found in the park are also very high. Countless species are severely restricted in their range, which adds to the importance of the property. *Bee Hummingbird*, the world's smallest bird, and the critically endangered *Monte Iberia euleuth*, the smallest frog in the Western Hemisphere, can be found here. This endemic frog was discovered in 1996, and can be found in only two isolated micro-habitats within the park. Late afternoon return to our beachfront bungalows.

#### Day 5 Humboldt National Park - Baracoa - Guantanamo Bay

After breakfast we will have an orientation to Baracoa, which was among Cuba's first settlements in the early 16<sup>th</sup>

century. From Baracoa we head south west over the 'Cuban Alps' toward **Guantanamo Bay** along the stunningly scenic Via Mulata. This



mountain range includes both temperate and arid zone habitat. In essence, this drive takes us from Cuba's wettest region to it's driest region.



Lunch en route. Afternoon birding near **San Antonio del Sur** on Guantanamo's semi-desert south coast. Dinner and accommodation in **Guantanamo City** (1 night).

#### Day 6 Guantanamo – los Monitongos - Bacanao Biosphere Reserve – Gran Piedra

Breakfast followed by birding and hiking in the **Cerro de Monitongos Mountains**, south west of Guantanamo [city.http://www.guantanamocity.org/en/geography/monitongos.html](http://www.guantanamocity.org/en/geography/monitongos.html) . Reputed to be the driest place in Cuba, los monitongos escarpment features a landscape of unusual stone formations, as well as unique flora (up to 70% endemic) and a rich fauna. Lunch followed by departure west along the Caribbean coast near **Bacanao Biosphere Reserve** (1.5 + hours). Dinner and accommodation atop **Gran Piedra** overlooking the Bacanao coastal plain. (1 nights).

#### Day 7 Gran Piedra Reserve to Santiago de Cuba

Early birding around our mountain top bungalows on Gran Piedra. After breakfast we will hike the summit while birding along the mountain trails, with magnificent views of the coast and surrounding mountains. Lunch at 4500 feet above sea level at an historic French coffee plantation. The small but attractive botanical gardens here host over 200 varieties of ferns, and more than 350 types of orchids, eucalyptuses, maestrense pines, cypresses and a variety of fruit trees. Along with many species of charismatic forest birds (tody, trogon, various warbler species) our focus will be on the endemic

*Gundlach's Hawk.* After lunch we'll drop back down to sea level and explore **Siboney Ecological Reserve** along the dry, rocky coastline where we will visit a botanical cactus garden and caves. The reserve is narrow and elongated. Most significant are the marine terraces that give the appearance of giant steps the local landscape. The landscape includes 'dogtooth' formations and other karstic features such as streams, sinkholes, small canyons and depressions with red soil. Time permitting, we'll visit a museum dedicated to the Spanish-American War near Siboney, where U.S. forces deployed by land and later captured Santiago de Cuba in 1895. Later en route to Santiago we will pass by San Juan Hill. Dinner, accommodation in Santiago de Cuba (1 - 2 nights).



Camilo Cienfuegos

**Day 8 Santiago Extension Option ( or return to Miami)**

Breakfast followed by a tour of the city's historic sites, which include **Moncada Barracks**, the site of young



Fidel Castro's initial (and failed) attack on a Cuban military establishment in 1953, leading to his capture and imprisonment. We will also visit the **Plaza of the Revolution**, which features stunning sculpture of Antonio Maceo, followed by lunch and an afternoon tour of **Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca** fortress overlooking Santiago's rugged, unspoiled coast. Return to Santiago for exploration of the city's historic central square. Farewell dinner and

accommodation in town.

El Morro Fortress and Sierra Maestra Mountains

**Day 9 Santiago - Miami**

**December 9, 2019 (Monday)**

Breakfast and departure for the airport (15 minutes) for our return to Miami ( 1+ hour flight). The current flight schedules are not available at time of writing, with service scheduled to begin in the summer of 2019.

This itinerary / costs may be subject to change. Costs are based on at least 12 passengers

