

THE CUBAN BIRDER

May 2022
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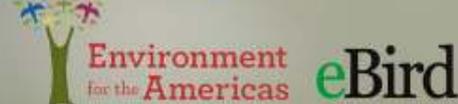
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Birds Caribbean, Optics for the Tropics,
Environment for the Americas, eBird, the
Cuban Birders Club and
Birding Havana

*invite you to join the
birdwatching competition*

GRAN AÑO CUBA
BIG YEAR 2022

An atmosphere of party,
camaraderie and
collaboration because, in
short, it will not matter too
much who wins in the
competition, the real winners
will be the birds and their
natural environments in the
present and the future.



Dear readers:

With great pride we are celebrating the first year of this magazine dedicated to lovers of bird watching, both Cubans and people from other countries of the world. The first edition was published on March 28, 2021 in the midst of a social isolation period due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been congratulations and compliments received since then. The editorial team has grown, the design has been renewed and numerous topics covered.

The objective of this modest publication was, and remains the same: to deliver interesting, educational and above all stimulating content so that our community of birdwatchers continues to grow throughout Cuba. This magazine also aims to be a tool to generate awareness and to fight against the predation of wild birds and their habitats, against the illicit trade of wild birds and to fight the apathy in the face of these terrible scourges. Increasing the use of the citizen science platform eBird is also among its priorities.

We're celebrating, yeah! This publication, along with numerous actions of many people and institutions inside and outside of Cuba, is contributing to our country and its people to be better citizens, with a greater environmental awareness, more

educated and even more sensitized to the importance of the protection and conservation of birds and their natural environments.

A year ago we were 2907 ebirders registered on eBird, today we are 3243; we had 54,500 published checklists, and today we have 61,600; records of four new species were added to the country to reach 366; and from 237 hotspots we went to 260. We have birdwatching clubs in Baracoa, Holguin, Granma and Havana. And one of the most outstanding pieces of news, without a doubt, is that according to eBird statistics, since last November, month after month our country has been among the 20 countries in the world that have grown the most in checklists compared to 2020. Last month (April) we grew by 338% compared to April of the previous year.

These are modest results but they illustrate that we are on the right track and that the collective effort is paying off. The celebration of the Big Year Cuba 2022 is being a great motivation in that sense.

Our sincere thanks to all the readers, collaborators and followers on social networks for their support and encouragement during this first year of The Cuban Birder.

Congratulations to each one of the members of this beautiful community of Cuban birdwatchers. And we're going for more! ■



Cover photo:
Vladimir Mirabal

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A Mysterious RAIL



Dissected specimens in the Museum of Comparative Zoology of Harvard University, United States. Photo: Nils Navarro

By: Yaroddy Rodríguez

The Zapata Rail *Cyanolimnas cerverai* was discovered by Fermín Cervera in 1926, a Spanish naturalist and collector, and was officially described a year later by the American herpetologist and ornithologist Thomas Barbour and his compatriot, the ornithologist, James Lee Peters.

Fermín Cervera had accompanied Barbour on several previous visits to Cuba and when Barbour heard rumors about strange birds in the Zapata Swamp area,

he hired Cervera's services to go into the swamp to explore it. Cervera finally succeeded and a few months later discovered this rail and two other species new to science. It is worth noting that although Gundlach spent long periods in the Zapata Swamp, he never came across this species; even Thomas Barbour himself never got to see it in life.

Today we are going to share some interesting facts about this mysterious species considered one of the least known in the Caribbean, including anecdotes of the only two people still alive today who managed to see it.

The only 14 specimens collected

Only 14 specimens have been collected, 13 of which (skins) are in American collections and one is at display in University of Havana, Cuba. In fact, the last documented record of Zapata Rail was the last specimen to be taken which was a female by V. C. Heilner in May 1934 and is in the National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC, specimen number 501649.

The only two photos ever taken

Only two photos have been taken and the bird cannot be



Photograph taken by Pedro Regalado in 1971



Photographs taken by George B. Reynard

identified well, but the observation is validated due to the honesty of the observers. The first was by Pedro Regalado, a Cuban ornithologist, who took a photo in 1971 and the other photo was by George B. Reynard, an American ornithologist, in the 1980s.

A possible nest

James Bond mentions in 1984, that Antonio Bolaños Hernández, a grass cutter and resident of the area, had found a nest of the Zapata Rail on September 7, 1982 in the vicinity of Santo Tomás batey, deep in the Zapata Swamp. The nest was on a platform above the water inside the sawgrass and contained 3 white eggs. While Bolaños was examining the nest, an adult of the Zapata Rail was nearby, nervous and vocalizing. This information was given to Bond by George B. Reynard, but in fact it was never confirmed and some ornithologists doubt it because there was never a photo or other proof that validated it and it could be another species of rail, even though Antonio Bolaños knew them better than everyone because he practically lived next to them in the swamp.

Voice recording

We don't know for sure if James Bond managed to record the song in January 1931 when he was in the Zapata Swamp,



Mounted specimen of Zapata Rail exhibited in the Museum of Natural History, Felipe Poey, of the University of Havana

THE ANECDOTE

Hiram González, a prominent Cuban scientist and educator, is one of the two people, still alive, who have been able to observe this bird: "In 1981 an expedition was organized to Santo Tomas, Zapata Swamp. One of the objectives was to look for the Zapata Rail. Orlando Garrido, the guide Antonio Bolaños and I participated. Garrido heard the rail singing and we saw her enter some bushes called "macollas," we surrounded her and waited for about 15 minutes until I saw her leave between Antonio Bolaños and me less than a meter and a half away. I warned Garrido, but unfortunately he couldn't see her. I described it to him and the teacher confirmed that it was Zapata Rail. We could not get a photo because we did not have a camera at that time, but its characteristics were unmistakable. I consider myself lucky for that sighting."



PHOTO: NILS NAVARRO

Detail. Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, USA

but he did describe it for the first time in his 1936 book, *Birds of the West Indies*.

Today there are many more observers with cameras and lenses in hand. Despite the bureaucratic limitations to enter the Protected Area where the bird has been seen, there are also many places where you can search. The Zapata Swamp is immense and it is possible that our Zapata Rail is more common than we imagine. Even James Bond mentioned that by the 1930s it was easy to see them in the swamp.

Perhaps some will dare to look for and photograph this species and thus they would be the first in the world to achieve a sharp and clear photo of the mysterious Zapata Rail. ■

THE ANECDOTE

Pedro Regalado tells us about when he met the Zapata Rail: "I saw the rail by pure chance; I was coming back from a study walk of the *Torreornis inexpectata*, when I sat down to rest among some logs knocked down by a hurricane. Shortly after being there I saw a bird come out of the grass that I immediately recognized as the Zapata Rail. I slowly aimed with my camera and took the photo that you must have already seen and that is not good because of the darkness that there was. It was after 6 o'clock in the afternoon and my camera was a Soviet Zenit. At that time there was not the technology that there is today and despite the short distance the photo was very dark, but I think that despite this the figure of the bird can be appreciated well and there is no doubt that it is a rail. I could see it well because it was about 8 or 10 meters from me and I'm sure it didn't notice my presence because I didn't move and I almost didn't breathe when I took the photo. It walked unhurriedly and disappeared among the sawgrass. For many years I have thought that perhaps someone could have the same luck and achieve a better photograph, but this has not happened like that and 50 years have passed since then and it has practically not been seen convincingly again, so we have to think that this species may be extinct, unfortunately.

Zapata Rail /

Cyanolimnas cerverai

The species was discovered by the Spanish zoologist Fermín Cervera in March 1927 in the Zapata Swamp, near Santo Tomás, in the south of the province of Matanzas. Due

to ongoing habitat loss in its limited range, its small population size is assessed as critically endangered (CR) on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

THE TOKEN

Identification: 11.5" (29 cm). Overall olive-brown pattern, without spots on the body. Bill long and green, red at the base. Legs and iris red. Upperparts olive-brown, ventral parts gray. Throat white, light superciliary line. Flanks with inconspicuous gray bars. Weak flight. *Juvenile:* Paler, without red on the beak; olivaceous legs.

Very little is known about the Zapata Rail's natural history and distribution. Few people have heard or observed it.

Voice: Unknown. Recordings in the first edition of the CD *Cantos de las Aves de Cuba* (Bird Calls of Cuba) (Reynard and Garrido, 1988) were recently identified as those of the Spotted Rail *Pardirallus maculatus*.

Similar species: The Spotted Rail is darker, with spots on the upperparts, neck and chest; barred white on ventral part; and lemon-green bill, with red at the base of the lower mandible only.

Status, distribution and habitats: Endemic genus; threatened, rare, and local. Known only in Ciénaga de Zapata, around Laguna del Tesoro, Santo Tomás, Peralta, and Hato de Jicarita. Its original distribution apparently extended to other regions of Cuba. Some fossil remains from Pinar del Río, Havana and Isla de la Juventud are known. Occurs in flooded fresh water savannas that have an abundance of dense and entangled sawgrass (*Cladium jamaicense*) and isolated trees and shrubs. The introduction of the African sharptooth catfish is a threat to the rail.

Feeding: Unknown, probably invertebrate larvae, aquatic snails, and small vertebrates.

Nesting: Unknown, probably November through January. There is a single record that is doubtful. Eggs: Unknown.

Drawings and texts taken from the book Endemic Birds of Cuba. A Comprehensive Field Guide. (Nils Navarro, 2015). Ediciones Nuevos Mundos.



Tips

for identifying shorebirds

By: Vladimir Mirabal

We already know that identifying birds is difficult. No matter the species, no matter the time of year, this is always a challenge. Sometimes the wrong lighting conditions can be tricky even for an expert birdwatcher. Every season new birds arrive that present a new challenge to us, and they keep us studying to learn more about them.

If we talk about shorebirds, the issue becomes quite complicated. It seems to me that what I was able to learn about them during a winter goes back with them in the migration to the north. They are quite a challenge for observers of all experience levels!

In this article I want to share some of the most useful shorebird identification tips I've learned along the way. I will also show a comparison between two of the most common that we can observe in Cuba during the winter that are as common as they are confusing when we want to identify them.

Let's get started!

Tip No. 1

We need to know what to expect in our area

In Cuba, during the winter, we can observe a good number of shorebirds, however, not all those that breed in North America stay here after the migration period. In our country we will find mainly the species from central and eastern United States and Canada. Thus we can already discard the ones from the west coast, which are a few, the ones that will be very difficult to see or we will never have the opportunity. Keep in mind that this method is not enough to determine species abundance categories, but it will only give us an idea of the likely species that we could find in that particular locality.

A practical way to get acquainted with the species that we can expect at our place of observation is by using the website ebird.org. Let's play at exploring a locality; we write Cuba, after that we click where it says 260 Hotspots, we look for the site that interests us and we click on it and all the species registered for that locality will appear. Within that list we will be able to see which shorebirds are most common for that specific place.

These are some of the most common shorebirds that we can find throughout Cuba during the winter, although some of them can be seen all year round. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of all our potential visitors, just some of the most common ones!

Tip No. 2

Let's not look at the plumage in the first place, instead, pay more attention to the shape of the bird

The plumage (the feathers of a bird and the color/pattern of those feathers) is often what catches our attention. In many cases, just by observing the plumage we can easily differentiate one bird from another. It is difficult to confuse the bright orange and black of a male American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla* for example, but when it comes to shorebirds, their plumage may seem indistinguishable from a distance. There are differences, but these



1. Semipalmated Plover / *Charadrius semipalmatus*.
2. Black-bellied Plover / *Pluvialis squatarola*.
3. Killdeer / *Charadrius vociferus*.
4. Short-billed Dowitcher / *Limnodromus griseus*.
5. Sanderling / *Calidris alba*.
6. Willet / *Tringa semipalmata*.
7. Semipalmated Sandpiper / *Calidris pusilla*.
8. Least Sandpiper / *Calidris minutilla*.



PHOTOS: VLADIMIR MIRABAL

are not as obvious as in woodland birds, for example. Especially if we take into account that when we observe most of these birds in Cuba they have their basic plumage or they are juveniles, which makes them even more complicated.

As a new birdwatcher, I often find it difficult to distinguish field markings other than color or plumage. They seem like an “easy” thing but I actually end up feeling overwhelmed when trying to compare what I see with the images in my field guide. It’s frustrating, that’s the truth. I have to make a constant effort to focus on other features, such as shape.

Why is form so important? There are many species of shorebirds and the shape of their bodies can drastically reduce our list of options. In most cases, the bill will be our best clue. Is it long, short, curved up, curved down? This is a varied group made up of different families of birds which have their own characteristics. Each of the answers will point to a different family of shorebirds. The legs, the size of the head or the elongated or compact shape of a bird can help us narrow down our options even more.



PHOTO: VLADIMIR MIRABAL

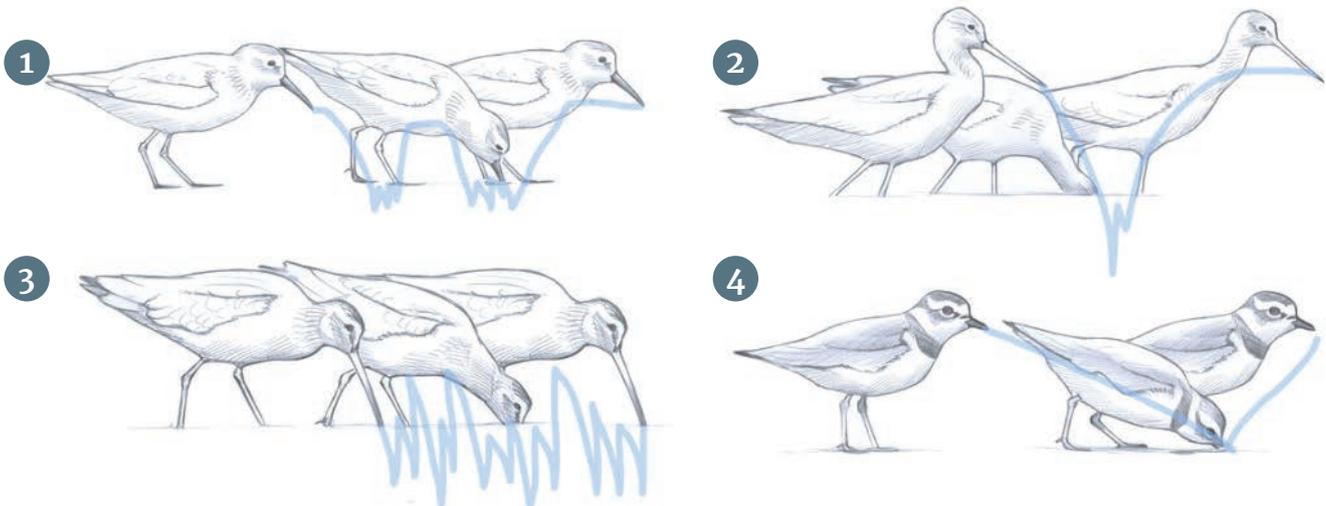
These short, thick and orange-based bills indicate that we are in front of Semipalmated Plovers *Charadrius semipalmatus*. Although when they are juveniles that orange may not be noticeable. These are distinguished from others of their family such as the Killdeer or the Black-bellied Plover by their smaller size and the single dark band on the chest.

Tip No. 3

Let's pay attention to foraging behavior

Looking only at the shape will not always lead us to a correct ID. So, we're going to consider as much information about the bird as we can, and that often includes behavior. Shorebirds spend most of their time foraging in the mud or coastal shores, and lucky for us their movements can help us determine which species or group of species are in front of us.

The so-called peeps (the smallest of the shorebirds) such as the Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* and the Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*, forage with their heads down, always walking, pecking and probing (number 1 in the image below). The Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* will walk around and pick something up, then keep walking around and picking up as they see new food (number 2 in the image below). Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodro musgriseus* will constantly probe in the mud with their long beaks, which is often described as the movement of a sewing machine (number 3 in the image below). The Semipalmated Plover



This illustration by David Sibley describes how certain groups of shorebirds will move while foraging.

Charadrius semipalmatus and the Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus* will run and collect the food, then run and collect again (number 4 in the image below).

Some birds also have unique quirks in their movements that will give you a clue to their identity. Spotted Sandpipers *Actitis macularius*, for instance, walk with a constant movement of their tail. Solitary Sandpipers *Tringa solitaria* will tilt their bodies forward as if heading a soccer ball.

Tip No. 4

Use the size only as a comparison

Determining the size of shorebirds, or any birds in general, can be really difficult from a distance. Without something to compare it to, the size is extremely misleading. For example, the Least Sandpiper and the Lesser Yellowlegs may have quite similar plumage patterns and both have yellow legs, but there is a big difference in their sizes.

Let's practice with a couple of shorebirds who are similar and deceptive!

Shorebirds don't usually stand still for comparison photos, but I was able to find this photo I took a few months ago at Playa del Chivo to help us examine these two little guys. Look carefully at the image, as I point out some key field marks about the shape, size and behavior.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* (r) vs Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla* (left)

The best indication to distinguish these two will be their legs. Least Sandpipers have greenish-yellow legs, while Semipalmated Sandpipers have darker gray or black legs. However, the legs are not always useful if the lighting is poor or if they are darkened by high water or mud.

Our next clue will be the bill. While both birds have short, thin-tipped bills, let's observe how the Least's beak tilts slightly while the beak of the Semipalmated stays straighter. The difference is subtle, but it's there.



PHOTO: VLADIMIR MIRABAL

Here you can see the marked difference in size between Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* (left) and Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* (right)



PHOTO: VLADIMIR MIRABAL

A Semipalmated Sandpiper (left) rests near a Least Sandpiper (right). Notice the black legs and the straight black bill on the Semipalmated, and the yellow-green legs and the very slightly downed-curved black bill on the Least Sandpiper. These two shorebirds are small, similar in behavior and often appear indistinguishable from a distance.

The size is difficult when it comes to the smallest peeps next to each other, but if we look carefully, we can see that the Least is definitely smaller than the Semipalmated.

Least Sandpipers are the smallest shorebirds, that's a fact. So if you think you have a

Least in front of you but it is bigger than another nearby shorebird, that is a sign to reconsider your identification!

Now it only remains to go out to look for shorebirds and to challenge ourselves identifying them. Only practice and careful observation will make us better identifiers. ■

Waterbirds in the Wetlands of Cuba

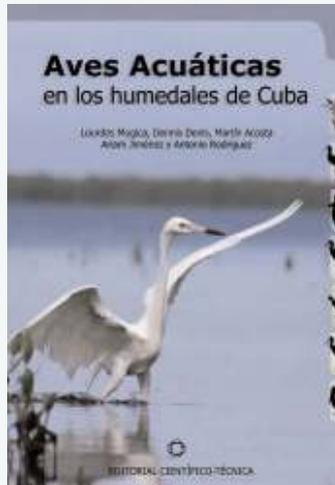
In 2006, a team of Cuban specialists led by doctors Lourdes Mujica, Dennis Denis and Martín Acosta, professors at the Faculty of Biology of the University of Havana, made available to readers a magnificent book that constitutes an obligatory reference for all those interested in deepening their knowledge about the Cuban avifauna and its natural environments, in particular waterbirds. The foreword was written by Xavier Ruiz, a renowned Professor of Zoology at the University of Barcelona and Honorary Member of the Cuban Society of Zoology.

It is a book loaded with valuable information, infographics, statistics and inspiring images. In this Number 6 of the magazine *The Cuban Birder*, from May 2022, we put a fragment of its content at your disposal. The book can be downloaded for free from: <http://repositorio.geotech.cu/xmlui/handle/1234/1399>

...

Birds constitute the most specialized group within the vertebrates, due to the fact that most of their organisms have undergone modifications that have allowed them to conquer the aerial environment. Currently, more than 9000 species are recognized that show a wide and rich variety of shapes, sizes and colors; with a distribution throughout the planet, they occupy from habitats that can be inhospitable, such as arid zones, swamps and even the poles; to those that result from unparalleled biological richness such as forests and rainforests.

From the early stages in the evolution of birds, numerous groups adapted to the use of the resources provided by ecosystems dominated by water and this has given rise to what are now known as waterbirds. According to the definition given by the Ramsar Convention, waterbirds are those that depend, totally or partially, during their entire life or at some stage, on wetlands. This group contains some of the largest species and a number of very interesting ecological phenomena appear in it, among which migrations and life in colonies stand out. On the other hand, aquatic species constitute a highly dynamic group within birds, since the internal variability of wetlands is also reflected



in them, since their habits are in a constant state of change and adaptation to current human activities.

The Cuban archipelago is made up of two main islands and 4,195 islands, cays and small cays (110,926 km²) and due to its physical shape contains the most extensive wetlands in the Caribbean. The coasts, abrasive or cumulative, extend for 5,746 km where mangroves, sand dunes and the karstic plains of dogtooth are among the best represented habitats. The aquatic area of the island is about 310,676 ha and 40.5% (127,137 ha) correspond to natural sites. Rivers and lakes are

less represented in the country, although estuarine complexes have an area of approximately 9,500 km², and are important economic zones. The shortage of lakes is compensated by the more than 2 226 dams and micro-dams that, together with the associated canal systems, have water surfaces exceeding 180,000 ha. Mangroves are among the most productive and best represented wetlands and are dominated by four tree species: red mangrove, black mangrove, white mangrove and button mangrove comprising 26% of the country's forested surface. In addition to the natural wetlands, rice cultivation fields and shrimp aquaculture ponds must be added. The most important rice mills in Cuba are located along the southern coast, on land that formerly constituted natural wetlands. The wetlands in Cuba contain a very diverse fauna, including 186 species of birds, 57 species of freshwater fish and countless invertebrates and marine fish. The most important wetland systems in Cuba are Zapata Swamp, Lanier Swamp, the northern cays (Sabana-Cama-güey archipelago) and Birama Swamp.

Since about 165 million years ago, a group of reptiles evolved to give rise to birds, and since its inception, many species of this broad animal phylum colonized wetland ecosystems. A high percentage of the 9,000 or so species that currently inhabit our planet are associated with water, grouped into five large groups: seabirds, waders, swimmer-divers and aerial raptors. ■

Mujica, L., D. Denis, M. Acosta, A. Jiménez and A. Rodríguez (2006). Ed. Científico-Técnica, Havana, Cuba. 200 pp.

What types of **herons** can we find in Cuba?

By: Vladimir Mirabal

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With reference information
from ebird.org

Herons are grouped within the family Ardeidae, Order Pelecaniformes. Although their identification is relatively simple, it is advisable to be attentive to certain details to avoid confusion. This article details some keys to help correctly identify the twelve species of herons present in Cuba.

The presence of herons in Cuban wetlands is common. Although their breeding colonies are quite localized, the non-nesting population is usually very dispersed and, after

breeding, adults and juveniles become regular outside the nesting localities.

Herons are generally linked to wet areas, both inland and coastal. Their size ranges from small to large, their feet are not webbed and they have long legs, neck and beak. A characteristic of their own, which separates them from related species, is that herons fly with their necks retracted and their wings obviously arched during gliding.

American Bittern / *Botaurus lentiginosus*

A plump brown heron found in swamps and marshes. Shy, but occasionally found in the open. Note the striated neck, the wings without spots and the behavior: it does not normally perch on branches. Its diet includes fish, frogs, insects and small mammals. It is most active near sunrise and sunset flying low over the extensive swamps. It is not common to find it in Cuba and that is why there are very few reports of its presence. It is considered a winter resident or transient.



PHOTO: JASON DAIN / EBIRD.ORG



Least Bittern / *Ixobrychus exilis*

This diminutive heron is fairly common in its preferred wetland habitat, but secretive and easily overlooked. Tiny size and attractive pattern of orange, black, and white is distinctive among herons within its range. Males are blacker above; females are browner. It can be found in marshes with a mix of open water and vegetation, often with cattails, phragmites, or lily pads. Usually seen perched motionlessly, straddling reeds at the edge of water. Occasionally makes short flights just above the reeds. Listen for the soft cooing song, given during the day and at night. It feeds on small fish. In Cuba it is a partial migrant whose local populations breed here.



Great Egret (American) / *Ardea alba*

A large white heron, with a yellow beak like a dagger and with long black legs. It forages in shallow wetlands stalking its prey very slowly. It is the largest and most widely distributed large egret. In Cuba it is considered a partial migrant and also a transient. Cuban populations breed here.



Snowy Egret / *Egretta thula*

A white heron of medium size with a long, thin, black bill and yellow lore (area between the eye and the beak). Adults have black legs and yellow feet. Immature ones have yellow-green legs and feet. Forages in wetlands. Often with a more active feeding style than other herons. Smaller than the Great White Egret; also note the black bill of the Snowy. Slightly larger than the Cattle Egret and more likely to have its feet in the water rather than walking on grassland. It breeds in Cuba where it is considered a transient and partial migrant.

Great Blue Heron / *Ardea herodias*

Huge gray heron, no other similar species in range. Note large yellow-orange bill, short black plumes on head, and black and chestnut pattern on shoulder.

Due to its importance, we reproduce here a recent comment made by Nils Navarro on this controversial species:

“What we knew until today as nesting birds of the so-called “blue morph” is nothing more than the subspecies resident in the southern United States (whose type locality is Florida): *Ardea herodias wardi* which incredibly had not been officially registered for Cuba, despite the fact that some authors commented on some possible unconfirmed and uncertain sighting. Actually that is the most common form in Cuba of the so-called “blue morph” and not uncommon to find in the archipelago as Resident all year round and probably Partial Migratory as individuals could move from Florida to Cuba as it happens with other members of the group.

The second within the so-called “blue morph” are the populations considered the most migratory of all: *Ardea herodias herodias*, which migrate from the north of North America, but do not breed in Cuba and is common

as a Transient and as a Winter Resident here.

And the third is the so-called “white morph” considered as *Ardea herodias occidentalis*. Although some authors consider it a different species, its results are too weak to corroborate this hypothesis and I personally consider that not even a subspecies category should be given, but only a color morph as happens with the Reddish Egret for example, but anyway that would be another story, another story...

What is known as Würdemann’s Heron is estimated to be nothing more than the hybrid between *A. h. occidentalis* and *A. h. wardi*. In my opinion it should be considered that what is called *occidentalis* (white morph) is only a color form of the *wardi* race and in that case *occidentalis* would be valid by the principle of priority of the Code, since it was described before *wardi*, anyway, complex issue, right? The scenario today is that *wardi* is recognized as one subspecies and *occidentalis* as another...

How to differentiate them? well, easy!

Ardea herodias herodias: “the migratory one of blue morph” is much smaller than the other blue, the gray color is a darker, the gray of the neck has a cold tone and covers almost the en-

tire face and ears, leaving the white of the throat delineated, and the brown streak in the center of the ventral part of the neck is more extensive, and darker. I set myself the task of searching the historical records of banded birds recaptured in Cuba and found 28 records of birds all banded in the north: Michigan, Ohio, Maryland, Wisconsin, New Jersey, Maine in the USA and Quebec and Ontario, Canada, these records most likely belong to the nominal race.

Ardea herodias wardi: “The breeding resident of blue morph”, as this is the most common in the photos shared in Cuba, and we could call it “the white-face” because it differs from the nominal migratory subspecies to be the larger, considerably higher than the nominal, overall color grey a lot more clear and the color of the neck warm gray with areas under and behind the eyes and ears in white, neck and ventral brown streaks very small, and the overall color brown, very pale.

Ardea herodias occidentalis: This is the already well-known “White Morph”, just like that, white. If this race is valid, when hybridized with *wardi*, it produces intermediate birds with the upper part of the head white, but with a variable pattern of color coverage.





Tricolored Heron / *Egretta tricolor*

Medium-sized heron with a gray-blue back and a white belly. The beak is longer than in other herons. Adults have yellowish feathers on the lower back, a purple neck and a paler throat. Immature ones show bright rufous neck and shoulders. Often active when foraging; moves quickly in shallow water chasing fish. It breeds in Cuba where it is considered a transient and partial migrant.

Reddish Egret / *Egretta rufescens*

A very entertaining heron to watch as it runs, jumps and circles in shallow water with its wings raised as it forages for fish. There is a dark morph and a white one. Individuals in white form are similar to other herons but note the behavior and grayish legs and feet. Always observe the pink base of the beak and the violet-blue loreal area (between the eye and the beak), which can become surprisingly bright in the breeding season. Found near the coast, especially in marshes and estuaries. Larger than the Little Blue Heron. Note the rusty shades on the head and neck of the dark form, which are not present in the adult Little Blue. Individuals of the white form are separated from the immature Little Blue by the longer beak with a pinkish base. It breeds in Cuba where it is considered a transient and partial or migrant. It is the only one of our herons with category (NT -Near Threatened) due to its fragmented distribution and small populations.



PHOTO: VLADIMIR MIRABAL



PHOTO: FÉLIX RAÚL FIGUEROA

PHOTO: HENRRY SANCHIES



Little Blue Heron / *Egretta caerulea*

Medium-sized dusky heron. The long bill is pale blue at the base and darker at the tip. Adults are mostly grayish-blue, with a purple head and neck that contrasts with the body. The immature ones are white in their first year; they frequently show blue-gray spots in their first spring with yellow-green legs. Forages in wetlands. It moves slowly through the shallows with its neck outstretched. Body more elongated than the Snowy Egret. It breeds in Cuba where it is considered a transient and partial migrant.



PHOTO: YUNIOR PELIER

Cattle Egret / *Bubulcus ibis*

A small, compact white heron with a thick yellow bill. It is often observed in dry areas. With red or yellow legs during the breeding season, black during the non-breeding season. Birds in reproductive plumage have redder bills and creamy patches on the body. It is often feeds by following livestock or tractors in agricultural areas. It breeds in Cuba where it is considered a partial migrant.

PHOTO: JEAN CARLOS VEGA



Green Heron / *Butorides virescens*

Also known in Cuba as Aguitacaimán, Cagaleche or Matuango. Small dusky heron with a bluish-green back, a reddish collar and a dark cap. Usually in a crouched position, partially hidden in vegetation, patiently waiting for a prey. In flight, notice the wide wings, the bent neck and the legs extended beyond the tail. Often vocal when disturbed it gives a high-pitched call "skiu!". It breeds in Cuba where it is considered a partial migrant.

Black-crowned Night-Heron / *Nycticorax nycticorax*

A stocky heron with a usually bent neck. Adults mostly pale grayish with black cap and back. Red eyes. It is often observed crouching under hanging branches during the day. It feeds at night on fish, frogs and other prey. The brownish and striated immature ones can be confusing, but note the large teardrop-shaped white spots on the wings to separate it from the Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. It breeds in Cuba where it is considered a transient and partial migrant.



PHOTO: FÉLIX RAÚL FIGUEROA

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron/ *Nyctanassa violacea*

Usually inconspicuous and rests in trees during the day. It feeds at night, especially on crabs. Adults have a black and white pattern on the protruding head and gray body. The brown immatures are similar to the Black-crowned Night-Heron immatures, but this one has longer legs and neck and thicker bill. In flight, the legs project beyond the tail. Compared to the Black-crowned Night-Heron, the juvenile of the Yellow-crowned has smaller white dots on the wings. In Cuba there are two subspecies: *Nyctanassa violacea violacea* and *Nyctanassa violacea bancrofti*; the first is a transient and winter resident and *N. v. bancrofti* is a partial migrant.



PHOTO: KARLOS ROSS



An expert photographer's advice on bird photography ethics

By: Marie Read

Many birders now carry cameras on field trips in addition to — or sometimes instead of — binoculars and spotting scopes. As bird photography increases in popularity, it's more important than ever for photographers to consider our collective impact on the welfare of birds and to minimize disruption while pursuing our craft.

Capturing a close-up view of a wild bird going about its life certainly is a thrill, but achieving that with a wary, skittish subject involves more than using a long telephoto lens. Photographic lenses don't provide the extreme magnification of spotting scopes, and so photographers need to get physically closer

to obtain a satisfactory subject size, either by approaching the bird or waiting for it to approach you. How do you do that safely and ethically?

The low-down on stalking

First, pick your location: Stalking birds is less disruptive where they are used to seeing people. But even with "tame" birds, closing the distance takes caution. Consider the birds' point of view: They view us as a threat, particularly when raising young. To appear less threatening, minimize your profile by getting down low, even crawling if necessary. Move slowly and quietly, taking an indirect path rather than straight toward the

bird. Use existing cover (rocks in open areas or trees in the forest, for instance) to conceal your approach. Don't stare at the bird — that's predator behavior!

Watch for signs that your presence is creating anxiety. If the bird stops what it is doing, stands upright and stares at you, starts moving away, and/or gives alarm calls, stop. Remain still and let the bird relax before proceeding. Better yet, be satisfied with the subject size you have already. Either crop later or compose creatively by including the habitat. Once you're done, back away just as cautiously. Never flush a bird to get a flight shot — doing so wastes the bird's vital energy.

Be a bump on a log

Far less intrusive than stalking is letting birds come to you. Act like part of the scenery, and birds may ignore you, going about their natural behavior, often coming surprisingly close. Find somewhere comfortable to sit or stand near where birds tend to gather, such as a source of food or nest material. Allow yourself plenty of time and keep still and quiet. Muted-color clothing or camouflage will help you blend in with the habitat. Support camera gear on a tripod at eye level to avoid needing to raise the camera up to your face, which may spook the bird.

Use a photo blind

If you tend to fidget, you will disturb birds less by using a photography blind to conceal your human outline, especially for sensitive species or those not accustomed to seeing people. Choosing and using blinds will likely be the topic of a future column, but one important tip is to enter the blind before the bird arrives and remain inside until after it has departed to avoid frightening it away.

Nest photography

Birds are at their most vulnerable when raising young, so photographers should be doubly cautious at these times. At roped-off tern and skimmer colonies on beaches or at wading bird rookeries, stay behind barriers or at posted minimum distances. Woodpeckers and cavity-nesting songbirds may be safely photographed from a distance, but open-cup nests hidden in shrubbery are best left

alone. Never remove vegetation to get a better view: Doing so exposes vulnerable eggs and young to predation and the elements. Refrain from repeatedly visiting nests because you'll leave a scent trail, leading predators to a free lunch. Pay attention to distraction displays — evidence that you are too close to a nest and must move away.

Attracting birds for photography

Enticing birds within camera range is commonly done using food. As before, birds' health and safety are paramount. Few people would argue against feeding backyard birds for photography (so long as feeders are kept clean) or spreading cracked corn to attract turkeys or quail. Don't feed bread to waterfowl though; studies show it damages their health.

Luring predatory birds for photography with live or dead bait is controversial. Should it be acceptable to stock ponds with live fish for kingfishers or Osprey? Provide dead fish to attract eagles or pelicans, or store-bought meat to entice hawks? There may be no clear-cut answers, but we should not condone practices that create dependency or through which birds learn to associate humans with food. This strongly applies to baiting wintering owls with live or fake mice, a practice now much frowned upon. Among many potential risks, baited owls may boldly approach people along roads, thereby getting perilously close to traffic or other hazards.

Also controversial is playing birds' songs or calls to bring them close, a technique that ea-

sily can be over-used by birders and photographers alike. Remember that the bird perceives the playback as an intruder. Its stress hormone levels rise, something that is physiologically costly, and by investigating, it expends precious energy needlessly. Have a heart and use playback sparingly — and not at all in the case of endangered species or near nests and obviously not where it is prohibited.

Using flash

Is electronic flash harmful to birds' health? Opinions vary, but it is thought that fill-flash (reduced-power flash used to augment natural light) is not likely to harm birds' visual systems. Flash used when photographing nocturnal birds at night is likely to temporarily affect vision but not cause permanent damage. Safest is to err on the side of caution: Use natural light whenever possible, using flash only sparingly.

Finally, some things to reflect upon. Consider the challenges, both natural and human-made, that birds face throughout their lives in order to survive. Don't add to those challenges. No photo is worth causing harm to birds. Empathize with the bird: Know its life history and behavior, read its body language for signs of stress. By treating your subject with respect, you will be a responsible, ethical bird photographer who can rightly take pride in your work. ■

This article was first published in the July/August 2020 issue of BirdWatching magazine.

<https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/photography/how-to-photograph-birds/an-expert-photographers-advice-on-bird-photography-ethics/>

Code of Birding Ethics

Practice and promote respectful, enjoyable, and thoughtful birding as defined in this code.

1. Respect and promote birds and their environment.

(a) Support the conservation of birds and their habitats.

Engage in and promote bird-friendly practices whenever possible, such as keeping cats and other domestic animals indoors or controlled, acting to prevent window strikes, maintaining safe feeding stations, landscaping with native plants, drinking shade-grown coffee, and advocating for conservation policies. Be

mindful of any negative environmental impacts of your activities, including contributing to climate change. Reduce or offset such impacts as much as you are able.

(b) Avoid stressing birds or exposing them to danger. Be particularly cautious around active nests and nesting colonies, roosts, display sites, and feeding sites. Limit the use of recordings and other audio methods of attracting birds, particularly in heavily birded areas, for species that are rare in the area, and for species that are threatened or endangered. Always exercise caution and restraint when photographing, recording, or otherwise approaching birds.

(c) Always minimize habitat disturbance. Consider the benefits of staying on trails, preserving snags, and similar practices.

2. Respect and promote the birding community and its individual members.

(a) Be an exemplary ethical role model by following this Code and leading by example. Always



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bird and report with honesty and integrity.

(b) Respect the interests, rights, and skill levels of fellow birders, as well as people participating in other outdoor activities. Freely share your knowledge and experience and be especially helpful to begin-

ning birders.

(c) Share bird observations freely, provided such reporting would not violate other sections of this Code, as birders, ornithologists, and conservationists derive considerable benefit from publicly available bird sightings.

(d) Approach instances of perceived unethical birding behavior with sensitivity and respect; try to resolve the matter in a positive manner, keeping in mind that perspectives vary. Use the situation as an opportunity to teach by example and to introduce more people to this Code.

(e) In group birding situations, promote knowledge by everyone in the group of the practices in this Code and ensure that the group does not unduly interfere with others using the same area.

3. Respect and promote the law and the rights of others.

(a) Never enter private property without the landowner's permission. Respect the interests of and interact positively with people living in the area where you are birding.

(b) Familiarize yourself with and follow all laws, rules, and regulations governing activities at your birding location. In particular, be aware of regulations related to birds, such as disturbance of protected nesting areas or sensitive habitats, and the use of audio or food lures. ■

• *Birding should be fun and help build a better future for birds, for birders, and for all people* •

• *Birds and birding opportunities are shared resources that should be open and accessible to all* •

• *Birders should always give back more than they take* •

Wildlife tourism: birdwatching

The enthusiasm for birdwatching, let's say for aesthetic purposes, arises at the end of the XVIII century...



Group of birdwatchers at Playa del Chivo, Havana. Photo: Yuri

By: Giraldo Alayón

“Responsible travel that preserves the natural environment and sustains the well-being of the local population. It ranges from small groups of people with a special eco-interest in nature that may include a serious study of a specific topic, to large groups of ordinary people who, in a vacation spot, want to incorporate an excursion, even a day, to a Nature Reserve (or similar place) as part of their entertainment or rest.”

This is how eco-tourism is defined in the book published in 2004, *Eco-Tourism in Cuba*, by Norman Medina and Jorge Santamarina, where both experts address all aspects of this activity.

In the same book according to the authors, “The definition adopted in Cuba, appears in the Joint Resolution MINTUR-CITMA-MINAG on eco-tourism and says: All the forms of tourism in which the motivation of the trip (or excursion) or the selection of the destination, is determi-

ned by the need for the approach and enjoyment of nature, or the components thereof.”

This work itself defines and comments on one of the most important activities of eco-tourism: birdwatching.

According to Medina and Santamarina (op.cit. p. 44), “... Birdwatching. The main motivation is the observation of species and subspecies endemic to Cuba, the migratory species and those difficult to locate in other countries. It is practiced mainly in natural spaces, forests, wetlands

and reservoirs. It requires prior scientific support - location of the areas, determination of the times, etc.- and during the visits, a qualified field guide.”

Several questions may arise from those who do not know about the activity such as how and when did it start? Since when has it been practiced in Cuba and how important is it?

A little history

The enthusiasm for birdwatching, let's say for aesthetic purposes, arose at the end of the eighteenth century in Great Britain by the efforts of several English naturalists, especially George Montagu and Thomas Bewick among others. This custom is then expanded by studying the natural history of birds during the Victorian era (19th century).

At the end of this century the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in England and the Audubon Society in the United States advocated the protection of birds and proposed that they be observed in life and in their natural habitat instead of being hunted. However, it is not until the 20th century that this practice became widespread, mainly due to the birth of a new science, ethology (the comparative study of animal behavior), thanks to the contributions of Julian Huxley, Oskar Heinroth, Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen, the main initiators, who based their theoretical premises on the study of the behavior of several groups of birds in the wild state.

The term “birdwatching” appeared, for the first time in the book of the British ornithologist and writer, Edmund Selous, titled *Bird Watching* published in 1901. He strongly defended the need to protect birds since some species were on the verge of extinction due to the harmful practice of capturing them for display in cages or killing them to be embalmed or consumed as food.

In the past, the identification of birds was only possible



Black-and-white Warbler
Mniotilta varia

PHOTO: VLADIMIR MIRABAL

by capturing and killing them, but the development of better binoculars and the preparation of illustrated field guides made it possible to identify birds from a distance without the need to shoot them down.

The first illustrated field guide to birds dates from 1889 and was published in the United States by Florence Bailey (*Birds Through a Looking-Glass*). In the last five years of the 19th century, another compendium appears: the *Bird Guide* by Chester A. Reed. Until the early 1930s both served as tools to identify mainly the coastal birds of the northeast of North America.

In 1934 an event occurred that turned things upside down - the publication of *A Field Guide of the Birds* by the American Roger Tory Peterson, a talented illustrator and bird scholar, which revolutionized identification and led to the development of birdwatching in North America. His ideas and new illustrations made it much easier to identify the different species and he also included species from the western part of the region. The success of this field guide has been such that it has run to 47 editions to date.

In 1938 the first field guide to the birds of Great Britain and continental Europe was published, written by Peterson, and two Englishmen, Guy Mounfort and Philip Arthur Dominic Hollom which contributed to the

development of bird watching in the old continent. Nine years later the first edition of the guide to the birds of the West Indies (*Birds of the West Indies*), written by the American ornithologist James Bond appeared, which included the species of Cuba.

After the Second World War and in the mid 60s (1965), the first ecotourism company, called Ornitholidays, was established in Britain, whose objective was birdwatching, sector that increased over the next 20 years with the appearance of similar companies in the United States, Canada and other European countries.

All this was motivated by the greater mobility of people and the affordability and availability of good optical equipment (binoculars, scopes, cameras with long-range lenses, etc.), plus the increase in regional field guides for different parts of the world, mainly from the areas with the most interesting and diverse bird species.

Countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Finland, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands and Britain developed greatly, and have the largest percentage of observers; recently, groups from Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Hungary, Australia, South Africa, India and China have begun to practice this form of ecotourism.

At present, and as an example of how widespread this hobby is, in North America alone there are about 70 million people who are birdwatchers and 127 companies around the world offer tours for that purpose.

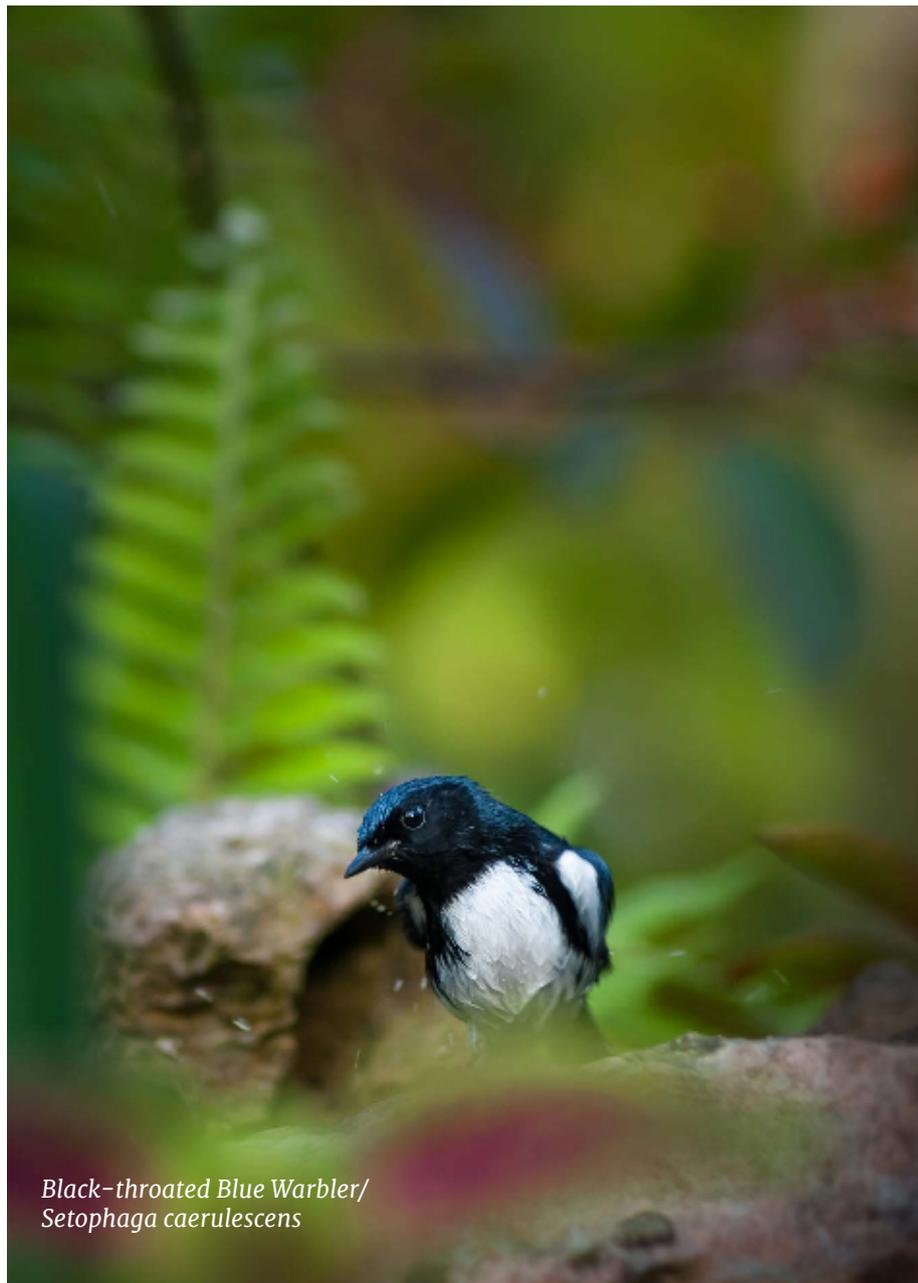
Birdwatchers in Cuba

The famous German naturalist Juan Gundlach is the one who has contributed the greatest number of observations of Cuban birds. During a good part of the nineteenth century he collected, in his two ornithological books, the largest amount of natural history data on the birds of Cuba. However, as was usual at the time, he also hunted a good number of species that were to swell the ornithological collections of the country and other parts of the world.

At the beginning of the 1940's, the late ornithologist Abelardo Moreno warned of the precarious situation of some of the endemic species of our birds and recommended that it was preferable to observe and study them in a free state instead of being hunted or caged.

Also, in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, the late ornithologist Florentino García Montaña advocated replacing the rifle with the binocular. But we cannot say that birdwatching has been practiced in our country as part of the leisure activities of our citizens (something similar happens throughout Latin America); sport hunting and keeping specimens in cages have prevailed.

In 1979, one of the editors of the journal *International Wildlife*, George H. Harrison, published the article "Our man goes birding in Cuba," or "Our man has gone to watch the birds in Cuba", on a visit to Cuba to areas of the Zapata Swamp, where he



*Black-throated Blue Warbler/
Setophaga caerulescens*

PHOTO: MARCOS VERDECIA

was accompanied by the naturalist Orlando H. Garrido. The author ponders and recommends the archipelago as a possible place for birdwatchers to visit and it is very likely that this article played a very important role in what came next.

At the beginning of the 80s, as a result of the development of bird watching in the world, the first regular visits of groups of Canadians and Americans to Cuba began which were guided by the Cuban ornithologists Orlando H. Garrido and Hiram

González, but it is from the 90s that a flow of people from mainly Canada, the United States and Great Britain was established, to which other Cuban ornithologists were added, such as Arturo Kirkconnell.

A decisive moment for birdwatching in the country was the publication in 2000 of the first field guide of the Birds of Cuba, entirely made by Cuban authors (O.H. Garrido and Arturo Kirkconnell with illustrations by the late Roman F. Compañy). It is important to note that all

the field guides of birds of Latin America before this one have been written by North American or European authors.

Currently, observers from almost all countries who regularly practice bird watching visit Cuba, and the groups number in the dozens with the participation of several travel agencies.

People who are not involved in this pastime might wonder, what is the interest in seeing birds in our country? Given that question, I would like to reproduce a paragraph from the guide *The Birds of Cuba* by O.H. Garrido and Arturo Kirkconnell, Spanish edition of 2010, p. 10, par. 3 and 4: - "In the Caribbean, Cuba is without a doubt the best island for bird watching. First, because it presents the largest number of species; second, because it really has exceptional areas for observation. Among them the Zapata Swamp, which satisfies the most demanding observers to the maximum."

In addition, in 2012 Dr. Hiram González published in the magazine *Excelencias* an article entitled "Cuba: paradise for birdwatching in the Caribbean", where he highlights and analyzes the most important sites for this activity in the Cuban archipelago.

The importance of "bird watching".

In order to understand this branch of ecotourism, it is necessary to understand the different activities into which it is divided and its characteristics.

Types of birdwatchers:

1) Those who practice observation as a kind of competition by trying to see in one day or another period of time as many species and subspecies as possible, in a given country or area. Also included in this variant are those who pursue rare or endangered species.

2) Those who are engaged in making counts of the number of species, subspecies or individuals in certain places.

3) Those who observe migration: how many? which ones? and how do they migrate?

4) Those who are interested in behavior and habitat type.

The preferred places for birdwatchers, depending on the time of year, are coastal areas, forest patches and wetlands.

As the number of people interested in this activity has increased worldwide in recent decades, the impact it can cause in the areas they visit is already worrying, so there is a code of ethics that must be complied with, trying to influence as little as possible the habitats that the birds use:

Code of ethics

1) Avoid causing stress to birds by limiting the use of cameras and recorders with bird songs

2) Don't get too close to colonies or breeding sites

3) Avoid the crowding of large groups of people at the observation sites

4) Visit only the public use areas of the protected areas.

On the World Wide Web, there are several sites dedicated to this ecotourism practice: Birdchat and eBird from the United States; Eurobirdnet from Great Britain, Birding-Aus from Australia, Orientalbirding from India and SABirdnet from South Africa, among others, on which information concerning this activity is exchanged. And there are more than a dozen magazines specializing in bird watching in Europe, North America and Asia.

There are several organizations that have to do with birdwatching, notably: The British Trust for Ornithology and The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds from Great Britain; the Audubon Society, the American

Birdwatching Association and Cornell University in the United States; and globally BirdLife International promotes this practice worldwide.

Fans of this kind of tourism are found in a wide range of occupations, and some have been prominent in other areas; for example, the Nobel prize winner in Physics in 1969, Murray Gell-Mann; the famous evolutionist, now deceased, Ernst Mayr; the former secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, who also died, Dillon Ripley; the former United States president Jimmy Carter; and among the most famous, as observers, by their impressive records and skills, we have the late Ted Parker and Ken Kaufman, an author of one of the guides to birds of North America.

It is important to note that there are several factors that limit birdwatching in many parts of the world: first, the possibility of accessing binoculars or other optical aids; second, the availability of field guides for identification, and third, the lack of bird specialists who can serve as trainers. Of course, economic and development problems have a lot to do with these factors.

Undoubtedly, birdwatching as an ecotourism practice is of great importance; firstly, because its practitioners are, without exception, conservationists, people who love nature, who gather information of extraordinary value to better understand this zoological group and thus be able to adopt appropriate measures for its protection; secondly, because from the social and cultural point of view - and I think this is the most important thing - they provide an example for those who still consider the rifle or the cage as a viable alternative for birds. ■

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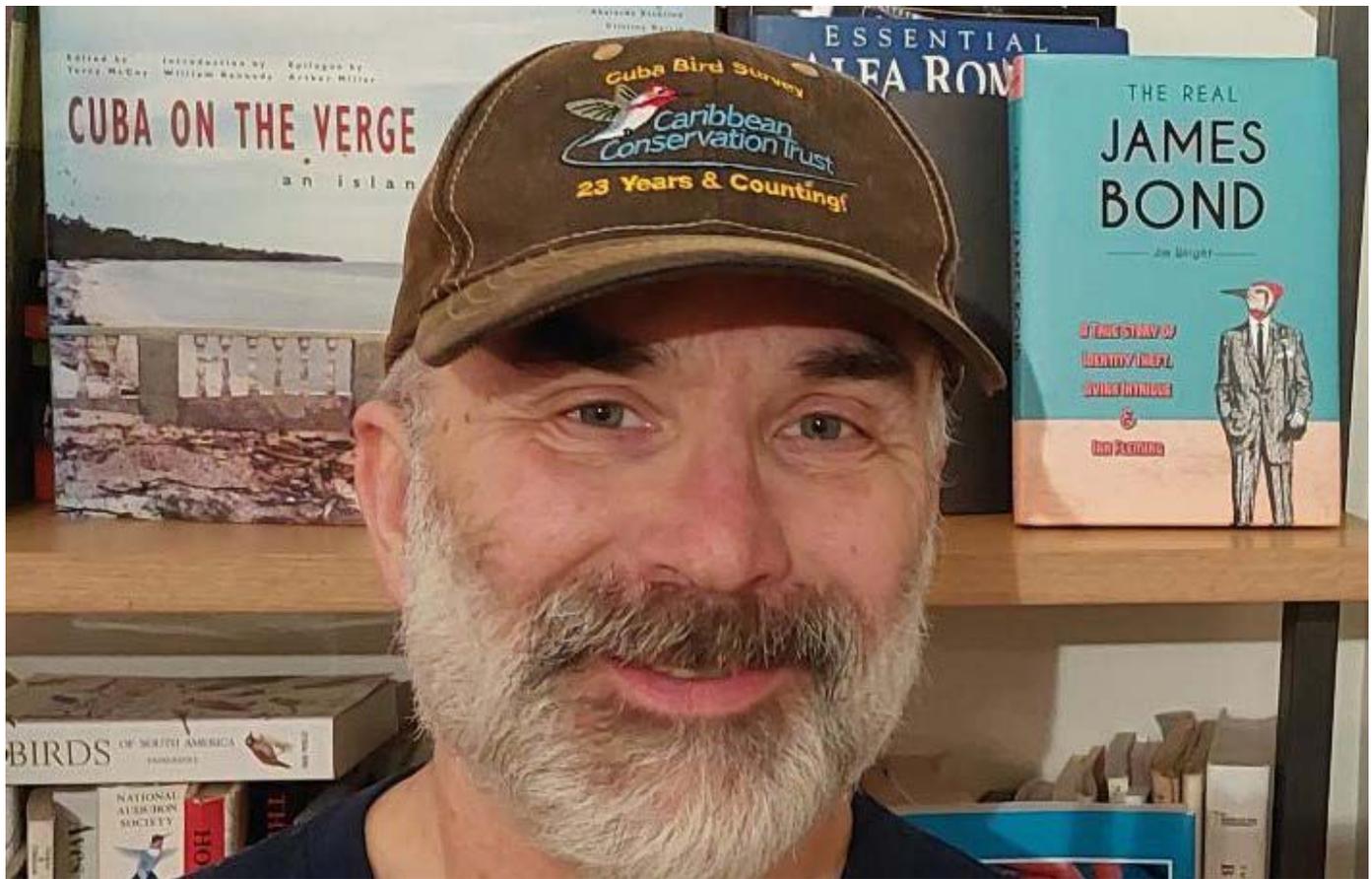


PHOTO: COURTESY OF GARY MARKOWSKI

GARY MARKOWSKI

Cuba is unique in many ways

By: Vladimir Mirabal

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about the role played by the Caribbean Conservation Trust (CCT), which you founded and lead, in the conservation of migratory birds and their habitats, as well as in birdwatching activity in Cuba.

VM: I propose to you that we start by explaining who Gary Markowski is, what CCT is, when it was founded and what it is about....

GM: Thanks Vladimir – it is a great pleasure to finally meet

you. Birding came later to me after I started a career in the field of experiential education – this term describes non-traditional, and in my situation, outdoor and wilderness-based methods of teaching and learning. My first job was with a private liberal arts university that owned an undeveloped 500-hectare (1,500 acre) property in my home state of Connecticut. I lived on the property, about 100 km (60 miles) from the university, as the Director in Residence and taught

courses on campus as well. We developed educational experiences adapted from a company called *Outward Bound*, an international organization known for multi-day programs that take small groups in sometimes extreme wilderness settings around the world. Programs include trekking and other adventure-based expeditions between 1 week and 3 months long (a college semester equivalent). These programs can be quite comprehensive, focusing on living in

the wilderness and traveling as a group by backpacking on trails, canoeing on lakes and rivers, or along the coast in kayaks.

Technical training for rock climbing, mountaineering, exploring caves, and basic survival skills are also a part of these courses. I was responsible for all these topics for programs that varied in duration and intensity. We worked with university students, younger public and private school students, and adults. We also focused on special populations such as youth-at-risk, and eventually businesses saw value in developing team cohesion through stressful physical challenges that required cooperative and creative problem-solving. This type of educational process has become quite popular in places like the U.S. At the time, it was perhaps only regionally popular. In Cuba, I don't imagine that these educational concepts have been widely developed. On the other hand, with mandatory military service, perhaps there are some common metaphors that can be transferred.

How does this relate to bird watching? On a 30-day training I was conducting in Newfoundland, Canada, one of our students gave a lecture on birding that was quite new to me at the time. Several years later I found myself in Cuba on a birding-focused exploratory trip.

VM: Why Cuba? What importance did you see attached to this Caribbean island in relation to birds and how has your work experience been during these years?

GM: This is really a random yet prophetic story I suppose. Because my university job involved conducting educational programs outdoors and was in the northeastern U.S., it was seasonal. By late November until April, I was virtually a free man. One evening, while casually discussing past travels with a colleague, I decided to make a

list of places I wanted to see but never visited. Cuba was perhaps the 10th destination on my list of 20 places. My colleague, John McNeely, surprised me when he said he had traveled to Cuba several times to look for a bird! He had made three very intense expeditions beginning in the late 1980s in search of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

McNeely's expeditions were self-funded, and averaged seven weeks, all in remote parts of Oriente, in Humboldt National Park. He assembled a team of Cuban scientists, including Alfonso Silva Lee and Giraldo Alayon, who would become close friends of mine. After much time and effort, McNeely claimed to have seen the bird. Although he was an accomplished film maker as well as a naturalist, he was not fortunate enough to have captured the bird on camera. He was able to take video of the expedition, as well as an active nest cavity, which was unmistakably that of an Ivory-billed. Eventually, Giraldo Alayon, who participated in several additional expeditions in search of this bird, has claimed what is perhaps the most credible last sighting of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Cuba. For my friend McNeely, he would make one more effort to document the bird, now that he was able to identify a local habitat. When he returned with his team the following year to Cuba, the site where the nest cavity was located had been destroyed by the ongoing encroachment of the Moa nickel mining operation. My friend's noble expedition of several years had ended badly, and he lost interest in ever returning to Cuba.

After hearing this story, the idea of my going to Cuba changed dramatically. My thoughts did not center on looking for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, but rather on helping my friend return to this lost destination. As a native U.S. citizen, born months

before the triumph of the Revolution, the idea of going to Cuba during the Special Period was challenging and fascinating. My plan was to investigate the possibility of bringing small groups to explore natural Cuba. Since my friend had spent much time among Cuba's birds, this idea took priority. We wanted to include educational, scientific, and conservation values to the experience. We made a few unannounced phone calls that night to John's closest friends in Cuba, and within two weeks I arrived alone in Havana.

Early Days

It was very clear from the beginning that as a result of decades of economic and diplomatic isolation from the U.S., a critical but positive consequence was the preservation of habitat, particularly in coastal and forested areas of the country. Compared to other Caribbean destinations, or a place like Cancun and the Yucatan Peninsula in eastern Mexico, Cuba was and still is relatively unspoiled. Credit is also due to the purposeful preservation of natural areas by the Cuban Government after the Revolution.

My first trip to Cuba was in December of 1995. As you know this was a time of great transition and challenge for your country. In my mind, it was really the first time in Cuba's long history that the country was truly independent, with no significant influence or support from foreign governments. The re-establishment of international tourism provided a hopeful but fledgling opportunity to help the country evolve financially, so there was a great deal of interest when I arrived as a U.S. citizen with motivation to bring even small groups of niche tourists to the island.

Ecotourism and birdwatching were new concepts in Cuba, and there was no play book on how to develop these kinds of trips.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF GARY MARKOWSKI

Gary playing street ball in Cuba.

When I arrived, I was given a whirlwind tour in a Lada sedan with a MINTUR (Ministry of Tourism) official who was responsible for developing cultural and ecologically themed tours. In five days, we travelled from Havana to the far western tip of the island (Guanahacabibes Peninsula), and to Zapata, Trinidad, and Cayo Coco, which had no functioning hotels yet.

Again, the idea was not to search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, but rather, to introduce Americans to Cuba's bountiful natural wonders, particularly the very underappreciated birds of Cuba. What did become clear to me during my first visit was that Cuba was unique in many ways. Bird life in Cuba has a high rate of endemism, but when considering overall biodiversity, Cuba is truly a special place. Eventually our interest in Cuba would expand to herpetology as well as marine biology. Personally, my

interests in nature and culture are broad, and Cuba continues to offer new discoveries 26 years after my initial visit.

We connected with the National Museum of Natural History because we were interested in education and conservation. This was the start of a long relationship that persists to this day. Orlando Garrido was at the time Curator of Ornithology, and one of our first field leaders. At the time, he either did not own a pair of binoculars, or chose not to use them. Contemporary optics were not easily available in Cuba, in fact, when we did see binoculars in use, they were usually large, heavy, and antiquated Russian military optics. After our first small but courageous group of birders arrived, we left behind several pairs of binoculars as our first of many donations. Unfortunately, donations of optics to Cubans were prohibi-

ted by the US Government. All material donations by foreigners were also restricted by the Cuban Government.

Another imposing challenge was the extreme difficulty of obtaining a scientific visa from the Cuban Government for anything resembling field research. It became clear early on in this endeavor that we would need to navigate these obstacles carefully if we were to have any presence in Cuba at all.

Back in 2019, I was walking the streets to investigate a new accommodation, and started watching the guys play street ball with a plastic bottle cap. I have been a baseball guy my entire life, and still occasionally play. They invited me to take some swings! A person in our group randomly came by and took the pictures. This moment represents many I have had in Cuba, when at an unexpected time, I am very personally connected to



PHOTO: CCT WEB SITE

CCT environmental education activities in Cuba.

the people, the culture, the land, and concept of Cuba.

We travelled with legal authorization from the US department of Treasury to Cuba, which was extremely difficult to obtain. From the late 1990s to 2015, we needed to apply every year and wait several months before learning our fate. Fortunately, we did receive authorization each year we applied. During the 8 years of the Bush Administration, and first term of the Obama Administration, we were, I believe, the only U.S. entity to receive authorization to conduct bird surveys in Cuba each of those years. With more than 200 groups to date prior to the pandemic, we have brought more U.S. birders to Cuba than any other organization in the world.

After 2015, the Obama Administration was able to negotiate much more progressive rules in Cuba, while granting greater

freedom for U.S. Citizens and organizations to interact with Cuban individuals and entities.

VM: Gary, surely you have many interesting experiences that have occurred on trips to observe birds in Cuba.

GM: A favorite birding moment in Cuba occurred on the final day of a 12-day trip with very ambitious and talented birders. They were on a trail in Zapata making a final attempt to see Grey-fronted Quail Dove. I returned a few minutes early to the bus to finish some paperwork. While I was sitting in the front seat of the bus, a Cuban Pygmy Owl was calling nearby. As with many of our groups, the driver had become interested in birds over the several days he was with us. He was asking about this one but could not locate it. With several papers on my lap, I was reluctant to stop what I was doing to locate the bird. I just kept on writing, whistling while

I worked. I was simply and casually replying to the owl's repeated, sharp whistle, one short blast at a time. To my surprise, not only did the owl keep responding, but it did come out of the forest, flying *directly into the bus*. It flew through the open door, past me and landed on the driver's seat! I had a very basic flip phone in my pocket and was able to take a couple of photos before the owl realized it was in an entirely different environment, and that I was not an owl! The poor bird tried to get out through the windshield but struggled mightily due to the sharp angle to the dashboard. I covered it with a shirt and carefully carried it off of the vehicle and placed it on the ground. Needless to say, the driver and I were as surprised as we were entertained by this event. The group returned to the bus minutes later, and at least were able to see the photos.

Caribbean Conservation Trust

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In late 2003, I was with one of our groups in Viñales when we recorded the first confirmed sighting of a Bald Eagle in Cuba. The confirmation was assured with an early digi-scope photo of the bird, which remained perched for quite a while. This was fortunate because Digi-scoping was a new process, and there were no devices developed to attach a phone or camera lens to the eyepiece of the scope. This was a true group effort in that several hands were wrapped around the eyepiece to hold the camera in place and block any unwanted light. We had a second group come to Vinales the next day, which was co-led by Orlando Garrido and Michael Good, our senior ornithologist. Unfortunately for them, the bird had moved on by the time they arrived. I

do not believe that a Bald eagle has been photographed in Cuba since then, although Michael Good did report seeing one the next season.

VM: Finally, I would be grateful if you would send a message to all those who are starting out in this country or are already immersed in this exciting world of bird watching.

GM: I am very pleased to see that the work you are doing promoting birding throughout the country. I want to congratulate and thank you for your passion and dedication in inspiring the growing number of Cubans with a strong appreciation for birds. The Cubans who are now involved with this activity at any level of experience can contribute to this collective effort of learning about and appreciating birds and nature as a valued resource.

When I first started working in Cuba it was clear that a consequence of the 'frozen' relationship between our two nations was a virtual black hole with regard to scientific exchange. Many years later, particularly after Obama's 2015 diplomatic moves, the effects of now years of 'citizen scientists' efforts to partake in bird and habitat surveys, and promote both formal and informal scientific and educational exchanges, that information gap was diminished at least for a few years.

Groups like yours, who are passionate about birds, are educated in correctly identifying and reporting sightings via eBird for example, are making a tremendous difference. This is a major reason why it is important for groups like **Caribbean Conservation Trust** to continue to support Cubans who have a much more difficult time obtaining proper resources, but do

not lack in motivation and evolving skills.

Our mission has always been to employ and support Cuban naturalists, scientists, and tourism infrastructure providers. We are excited that because of contact with our groups, curiosity and interest in birds and nature grew in the hearts of ordinary citizens. Additionally, we have developed programs to educate Cuban youth and adults about the value of bird conservation. The biggest challenge, beyond habitat destruction and climate change, is the caged bird trade, which has become a significant problem in Cuba. Due to ambiguous laws and a lack of awareness and enforcement, this illegal practice has had a noticeable effect on several species of birds during our 26 years of working in Cuba.

Thanks to persistent efforts on the part of dedicated Cuban ornithologists and other naturalists, these efforts to stop this harmful practice have gained influence. The government has strengthened laws, and several educational programs have been started to educate people on the importance of bird conservation as a means of preserving wildlife and benefitting communities, particularly in regions where there are national parks and protected areas. The international model of ecotourism as a provider of jobs and economic opportunities still has a long way to go in Cuba, but I have seen significant evolution in this regard in the last several years.

The future of Cuba's birds depends on the commitment by the Cuban people to preserve their unique and precious natural heritage. ■

Baracoa already has its Club!



Birdwatchers Club in Yara-Majayara, Baracoa, Guantánamo. Photo Roberto Jovel

By: Roberto Jovel

On Saturday, April 2, 2022, a group of nature conservation and protection of birds in the wild enthusiasts responded to the invitation to form the Baracoa Birdwatchers Club.

Open to all people who share an ecological sensitivity and respect and care for birds in their natural environment, the Club invited the people of Baracoa to visit several habitats of the Yara-Majayara Protected Area,

where it was marvellous to see the great variety of bird species that enrich our region.

The good weather and natural camaraderie of the Baracoans contributed to an enjoyable walk that crossed the beaches of the Ensenada de Miel, the estuary and the mangroves in the picturesque community of Boca de Miel, the evergreen forests of the coastal karst of Yara-Majayara and the mixed vegetation of the local farms.

The purpose of the Club

Joining several similar initiatives throughout the country, the Birdwatchers Club of Baracoa has been created to promote the appreciation, knowledge and care of birds in nature in our region. In this way, the Baracoa Club becomes part of a network of clubs throughout Cuba whose aim is to teach and promote a healthy, robust ornithological culture among the population.

Spectacular sightings

During the morning we managed to count a total of 183 birds of 34 different species. Shorebirds and woodland birds, from the smallest to the most colorful... and among them species that reside in Cuba all year round including some endemic (exclusive) species of the country as well as migratory that stay for the winter or summer.

For example, the Spotted Sandpipers (*Actitis macularia*) were beginning to show their summerplumage; surely they were already preparing to leave to breed in North America?

Other species that we saw already displaying their breeding plumage were the Cape May Warbler (*Setophaga tigrina*) and the Northern Parula (*Setophaga americana*), increasingly ready to leave for the north of the continent.

A very beautiful female of the Bee Hummingbird (*Mellisuga helenae*), an endemic species and the smallest bird in the world, posed for us serenely. We all kept silent, delighting in the contemplation of this jewel of the Cuban avifauna!

The group of participants

Among the people who participated there was a good variety of levels of knowledge of birds. You don't need to be an expert to participate, on the contrary. It was very pleasant to exchange impressions, ask lots of questions, share knowledge and experiences, in short, learn together. It is well-known that the world of birdwatching is characterized by companionship and good humour and Baracoa is no exception!

We had the great pleasure of receiving two visitors from Matanzas, producers of multimedia content that highlight the natural areas of Cuba.

Several people who love birds in nature who would have liked to be present could not make



Cape May Warbler / *Setophaga tigrina*.

PHOTO: ROBERTO JOVEL



Northern Parula / *Setophaga americana*.

PHOTO: ROBERTO JOVEL

it for different reasons such as work, studies, family, etc., but they will join the Club during its next meeting on May 14 on the occasion of Global Big Day, a day every year on which birdwatchers from all over the world document the presence of birds in their region, to form a collective and planetary ornithological portrait.

Acknowledgments

Our thanks go to Geovany Rodríguez and Norvis Hernández Hernández for the usual support in Alejandro de Humboldt National Park, Baracoa Sector. .

To the Yara-Majayara Protected Area, for having welcomed us with its natural wonders.

To Birding Havana and the Havana Birdwatchers Club for their constant support, as well as to the members of the CLUB DE OBSERVADORES DE AVES CUBANAS – CUBA BIRDING CLUB Facebook group, who sent us their best wishes for the occasion.

To Optics for the Tropics and The Friendship Association for their donations in support of the group of binoculars, bandannas/facemasks and ornithological books. ■

Spotted Sandpipers / Actitis macularius.



PHOTO: ROBERTO JOVEL

Bee Hummingbird / Mellisuga helenae.



PHOTO: ROBERTO JOVEL

ii We are already more than **13 000** members!!

From this edition on of the magazine we will dedicate a section to highlight the members, the photographs and the most outstanding publications of the quarter. We will take into account for the selection the statistics provided by Facebook in terms of likes, comments and times that the publications have been shared. We will also be able to see the status of the Club, its growth, periods of greatest activity and other details that may be of interest to its members.
¡CONGRATULATIONS TO EVERYONE!!

The most active members

Colaboradores destacados ⓘ

⚠ El intervalo de fechas no se aplica a los colaboradores destacados. Los datos que se muestran corresponden siempre a los últimos 28 días. Última actualización el 30 abril 2022.

1	 Felix Raul Figueroa Se unió hace 2 años	43	535	653
2	 Freddy Ricardo Se unió hace 2 años	17	430	596
3	 Jean Carlos Vega Se unió hace 2 años	20	166	372
4	 Marcos Verdecla Diaz Se unió hace 2 años	12	162	153
5	 Maribel Morell Se unió hace 11 semanas	0	167	174
6	 Ricel Polán Hernández Se unió hace 11 semanas	22	0	68
7	 Rolando Trujillo Se unió hace 2 años	3	94	64
8	 Sorahabell Orduño Se unió hace 8 semanas	3	84	130
9	 Kenia Martinez Se unió hace 9 semanas	0	97	170
10	 Bárbara Mayra Gómez Rodríguez Se unió hace 12 semanas	0	95	127

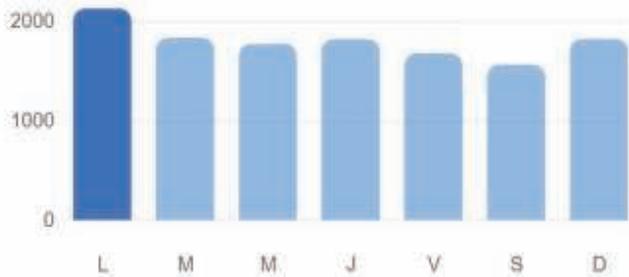
Age and sex / Top countries / Top Cities



Periods of greatest activity

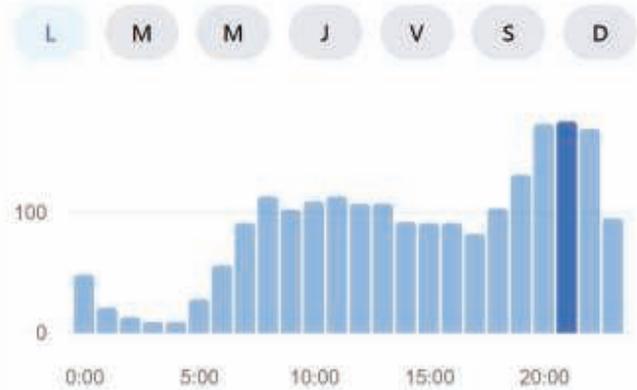
Días con más actividad ⓘ

Número promedio de veces que los miembros del grupo publican, comentan o reaccionan en un día determinado del intervalo de fechas especificado.



Horas con más actividad ⓘ

Número promedio de veces que los miembros del grupo publican, comentan o reaccionan a una hora del día determinada del intervalo de fechas especificado.



THE MOST RELEVANT POST

Yaro Rodríguez published on April 25 some photos of the follow-up he made for several weeks to a Gundlach's Hawk nest (*Accipiter gundlachi*) and this one got 506 likes, 162 comments and it was shared 28 times.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/55016252935/posts/10159720997627936>



PHOTOS WITH MORE LIKES



Marcos Verdecia:
Blue-headed Quail-Dove
1600 likes



Jorge Uría:
Cuban Grassquit
1500 likes



Marcos Verdecia:
Cuban Pygmy-Owl
931 likes



Yadiel Veunes:
Eastern Meadowlark
822 likes



Yadiel Veunes:
Northern Mockingbird
647 likes



Jorge Uría:
Cuban Parrot
434 likes

GLOBAL BIG DAY

MAY 14 2022

ebird.org/globalbigday

CUBA

Complete Checklists: 341
Species Observed: 161

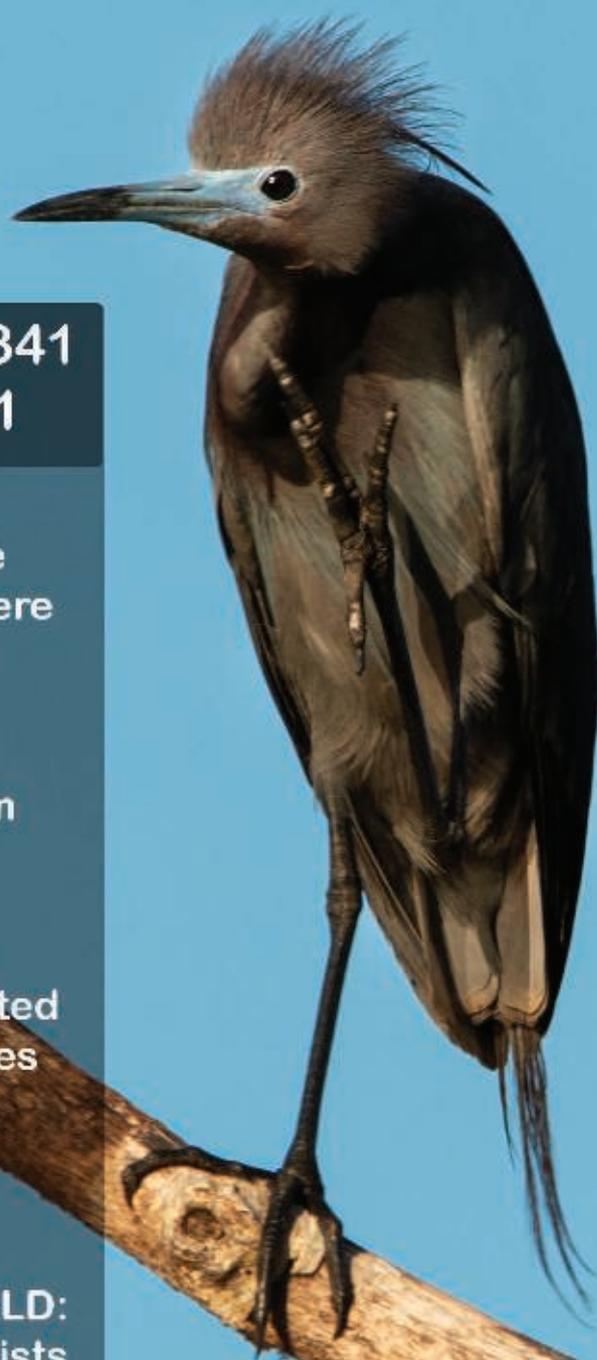
In the West Indies we got the
No.2, in the Western Hemisphere
the No.19 and in the world the
No.31 (Checklists Total)

We uploaded Checklists from
15 provinces

Pinar del Río (139), Granma
(103) and Havana (83) reported
the highest amount of species



IN THE WORLD:
135 400 checklists
7714 species



The *Global* Big Day in Cuba

Several groups of bird watchers met this past May 14 to observe birds during the Global Big Day. In our pages we show you several of them in different provinces of the island.



Havana



Villa Clara



Baracoa, Guantánamo



Granma



Holguín



Cienfuegos



On March 23, in Salinas de Brito, Zapata Swamp, Matanzas province, an American birder, **Craig Robson**, recorded this Brant (Black) *Branta bernicla nigricans*. This is the first record of this bird for Cuba and the second for the Caribbean region.





- ▲ On April 23, in Marea del Portillo, Granma province, the birder **Ricel Polán Hernández** photographed this specimen of Caribbean Martin (*Progne dominicensis*), a species that is considered Very Rare in Cuba. This is the second documented record of the species for Cuba.



- ▲ Birders **Roberto Jovel**, **El Indio de Humboldt** and **Noel Coutin**, from Baracoa, spotted on April 22, 6 specimens of White-tailed Tropicbird (Atlantic) *Phaethon lepturus scatesbyi* flying over a small inlet in the Bate-Bate locality of Guantánamo. This species is rare to see in Cuba and has very few reports on ebird.org.



Hiram José González Alonso

With a Doctorate in Biological Sciences and an outstanding Cuban scientist and educator, was born in Caraballo, Jaruco, Mayabeque province, on April 14, 1951. A disciple of the legendary Orlando Garrido and Florentino García, in the decade of the 70s Hiram was introduced with passion to the world of birds and remained in it until today. He is the author of several books of vital importance for the knowledge and protection of the Cuban fauna, among which the *State of Conservation of Threatened Fauna: Red Books of Cuba* stands out, which won the National Prize of the Academy of Sciences of Cuba in 2020, and the Special Prize for Environmental Relevance, in 2021. He has been the recipient of countless awards and recognitions in Cuba and abroad. He is one of the few people who has been able to observe the Zapata Rail in its natural habitat.

founders of Ornithology

Antonio Núñez Jiménez

(April 20, 1923 - September 13, 1998) was a Cuban scientist, geographer, archaeologist and speleologist. In 1995, the Cuban Speleological Society and the Cuban Society of Geography awarded him the status of “fourth discoverer of Cuba”, placing him at the level of men such as Christopher Columbus, Alejandro de Humboldt and Fernando Ortiz, for his contribution in the field of underground Cuba. Considered the father of Cuban Speleology. First president of the Cuban Academy of Sciences and founding president of the Speleological Federation of Latin America and the Caribbean and of various national and international scientific societies. Internationally known for his scientific work in the field of geographical sciences, especially in Speleology, one of his greatest passions, and in geo-historical issues of the most dissimilar regions of the planet. Creator of the Nature and Man foundation.

