



CUBA BIRDING and NATURAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Cuba's Western Mountains, Bay of Pigs and Zapata Swamp National Park
with an extension option in Colonial Havana



December 1 – 8/9, 2023
February 13 – 20/21, 2024



8 Day adventure with extension options

The **Caribbean Conservation Trust (CCT)**, is offering exclusive U.S. managed birding and natural history excursions in Cuba. The programs are coordinated under **U.S. Government authorization** through Connecticut-based CCT, which is proud of its **27 year history managing bird conservation natural history programs in Cuba**. In addition to **CCT Founder and Executive Director Gary Markowski**, our team will include esteemed Cuban biologist **Dr. Giraldo Alayon** and local naturalists who are experts in their respective geographic regions of Cuba. They will guide you through some of the best natural habitats in Cuba, the Caribbean's largest and most ecologically diverse island nation.

The Nature of Cuba

While there will be daily opportunities for birding on this trip, our focus expands to include a range of Cuban fauna and flora, and the ecology and history of regions we visit. At different intervals throughout the program we will hear from Cuban experts about the natural relationship of Cuban species *of birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, as well as arachnids (spiders) and insects* and other invertebrates such as *mollusks and butterflies*. We will enjoy opportunities to **swim and snorkel** as well, and encounter some of Cuba's interesting marine life in a safe, natural habitat.

We will also indulge in informal discussions that expose the main problems of conservation in the Cuban Archipelago. Throughout the program our Cuban guide will answer your questions and offer explanations that reflect Cuban history, politics, as well as topics related to daily living in Cuba. These discussions may include information about the Cuban education and health care systems, housing, transportation, education, employment, and other topics that will help enhance a better understanding of how ordinary Cubans go about their daily lives.

WHERE WE TRAVEL

Our program begins and ends in **Havana**, an unrivaled colonial city of the Americas. Our time in Havana will include an introduction to Cuba's amazing biodiversity. Our full time Cuban naturalist is a senior curator at Cuba's **National Museum of Natural History** and an expert on Cuba's unique biodiversity and natural history. Throughout our fascinating itinerary, our naturalist will discuss topics such as Cuba's evolutionary history in the region, show us examples of Cuba's strikingly high degree of endemism in terms of flora and fauna, and provide an introduction to Cuba's diverse ecosystems and the abundant life within them.

An **optional one day / night extension in Havana** is offered at the conclusion of the trip. This very popular option includes a guided orientation to **Havana**, and a guided historical walking tour of **Habana Vieja** (Old



Havana), the city's historic colonial center, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987. Havana abounds with historic sites, diverse architecture, museums, art galleries that underscore a cultural heritage and recently resurgent energy and verve that is uniquely Cuban. Following our 1/2 day guided tour and lunch, you will have time to explore on your own or head back to our hotel or quiet spot to reflect on your Cuban experience.

Once outside of Havana, we will explore two very distinct geographic regions of the country chosen for their diverse ecological systems and natural beauty. In these distinct locations, you will visit pristine national parks, remote biosphere reserves, and unique natural areas. We will interact with local scientists and naturalists who work in research and conservation and explore terrain exclusively selected for you by local insiders.

Cuba's Western Mountains include two of the country's most diverse and dramatic ranges: the **Sierra de la Rosario, & Sierra de los Organos.**

We will explore an area common to both ranges in search of western range endemic species of birds and other fauna. The Western Mountains includes habitat unique to much of the world that is often captured in photos and paintings of rural Cuba. Here we will encounter submontane seasonal rain forest, pine forest, and tropical karstic forest. A highlight of the trip, we will visit the magical, unusually beautiful karstic landscape of mogotes-- the towering, lushly vegetated, flat-top limestone monoliths that dominate the Organos Mountains. This is the only region in which we will likely see the *Cuban Solitaire*, *Cuban Grassquit*, *Giant Kingbird*, & *Olive-capped Warbler*. Other potential endemic species for western Cuba include *Cuban Oriole*, *Cuban Blackbird*, *Cuban Green Woodpecker*, *Cuban Pewee*, *Cuban Pygmy-Owl*, *Cuban Tody*, *Cuban Trogon*, *Cuban Vireo*, & *Yellow-headed Warbler*.



Other potential endemic species for western Cuba include *Cuban Oriole*, *Cuban Blackbird*, *Cuban Green Woodpecker*, *Cuban Pewee*, *Cuban Pygmy-Owl*, *Cuban Tody*, *Cuban Trogon*, *Cuban Vireo*, & *Yellow-headed Warbler*.

We will also explore the diverse wetland region of the **Zapata Peninsula**, Cuba's richest and most important birding destination located in the historic **Bay of Pigs**. This peninsula is a Ramsar Convention (international conservation treaty) designated site, and is among the most important wetlands in the West Indies.



Here, the best local guides will lead us through protected areas in **Ciénaga de Zapata National Park** and other natural sites off the beaten track. The Zapata Peninsula covers more than 2800 square miles and features easily accessible, everglades-like ecology and habitat. Framed by the pristine Caribbean coastal environment of the Bay of Pigs, the peninsula features vast open swamp land, low coastal forests, sparkling white sand beaches, healthy and accessible coral reefs, and refreshing natural limestone pools called cenotes. *Bee Hummingbird*, *Cuban Black Hawk*, *Zapata Wren*, *Zapata Sparrow*, *Fernandina's Flicker*, *Bare-legged Owl*, *Tawny-shouldered* and *Red-shouldered Blackbird* are among the many birds we will hope to find (3 nights). We will also visit a breeding center for critically endangered endemic Cuban Crocodile (*Crocodylus rhombifer*). Go to this link for a look at a short but informative PBS News Hour piece on Cuba's biodiversity and wildlife found in Zapata Swamp National Park –

Fernandina's Flicker, *Bare-legged Owl*, *Tawny-shouldered* and *Red-shouldered Blackbird* are among the many birds we will hope to find (3 nights). We will also visit a breeding center for critically endangered endemic Cuban Crocodile (*Crocodylus rhombifer*). Go to this link for a look at a short but informative PBS News Hour piece on Cuba's biodiversity and wildlife found in Zapata Swamp National Park –

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-cuba-is-home-to-a-bouny-of-rare-species>

THE CONSERVATION PROJECT

The U.S. Department of Treasury has provided a license for conducting bird and habitat 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, is in compliance with U.S. Treasury licensure for travel to Cuba. CCT's license also authorizes the examination of a wide range of environmental topics related to Cuban conservation and natural history.

Cuban Knight Anole



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 26 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).”

Our itinerary provides opportunities to see many of Cuba's endemic species and subspecies (below in italics), at a leisurely pace. Some birding mornings may be optional, depending on logistics. Beginner and intermediate birders, as well as non-birders are welcome! We will have basic binoculars in excellent condition for anyone who needs to borrow a pair for the trip. Our goal is to provide you with the best possible introduction to Cuba's incredible natural world over the course of the itinerary.

Bee Hummingbird (world's smallest bird), Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Gray-fronted Quail-Dove, Cuban Black Hawk, Cuban Blackbird, Cuban Bullfinch, Cuban Grassquit, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Pewee, Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Cuban Solitaire, Cuban Tody, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Vireo, Fernandina's Flicker, Giant Kingbird, Gundlach's Hawk, Red-shouldered Blackbird, Tawny-shouldered Blackbird, Yellow-headed Warbler, Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow, Cuban Crow, Cuban Emerald, Western Spindalis, Olive-capped Warbler, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Wood Stork, Zenaida Dove, American Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, and a variety of wading birds, and numerous other migratory and resident species.



Bee Hummingbird

For a glimpse of our program in action, go to: <http://video.pbs.org/program/counting-birds/> for a link to the film **COUNTING ON BIRDS**, a 2013 Public Broadcasting System (www.pbs.org) 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

Over the past 27 years, we have cultivated deep friendships and professional relationships with some of Cuba's finest conservation-oriented individuals and institutions. Our Cuban staff is highly-educated, experienced, competent, personable, and devoted to making your experience in Cuba — extraordinary.

Our Cuban Naturalists

Our local Cuban naturalists and birding guides will be with us at different times throughout the program and will assist in finding and identifying wildlife, including birds, reptiles, insects, invertebrates as well as providing a broad overview of Cuban natural history. They may share specific information relative to the flora, fauna, geology and other natural features of the environments we visit.

Fernandina's Flicker



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 38 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.

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 stays in privately owned 'B & Bs in Havana and 3 additional 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 4 star hotels and private villas, modest 3 star facilities, and simple beach-front bungalows. All accommodations are safe, clean, air conditioned tourist facilities. It should be noted that standards in Cuba differ from those in the U.S. and other developed countries.

Additional Details

Following program registration, we will provide details regarding 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.

Physical Demands and Expectations

This program offers opportunities for several days of casual birding, with some optional early departure times on birding days, and evening sessions. Birding days may provide leisure time after lunch and before our afternoon excursions. Physical exertion will be light to moderate on most



days, with the longest walks approximately 2.5 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 during winter, and into the 90s in spring and summer months. Mosquitoes can be bothersome in the Zapata Region in summer. In summer, rain may occur as well, so bring adequate rain gear. Dry season occurs October to late April. 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!

Registration, Trip Costs, Terms, and Conditions

Land costs for the 8 day program are \$ **3,595.00** per person for shared accommodations. Single supplements are an additional \$ **395.00** per person. The very popular one day/night **Havana extension** is \$ **225.00** per person sharing, with an additional \$ **65.00** single supplement and includes all meals, guide services, ground transportation, a guided exploration of Old Havana, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most unique destinations in the Caribbean. Trip costs are based on 12 (maximum) fully paying participants. A lower number of participants may result in a small group supplement.

What is included:

CCT's Cuba Natural History Programs include the following: all accommodations, all meals in Cuba beginning with dinner on day 1, ending with breakfast on the last day of the program, guide services, most tips (guides, drivers, naturalists and restaurant and bell staff), 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, regionally located bilingual Cuban naturalists, and a fulltime driver. Program fees include a donation to help support our conservation efforts in Cuba.

Not Included:

Travel to Havana, Cuba (estimated at \$ 300 - \$ 450 from Florida); Cuban Visa (\$85) personal expenses such as laundry, phone calls, additional beverages, bar and housekeeping tips, etc., U.S. passport fees, meals in Miami, or other fees not listed in the program. Cost estimates are as of August, 2022 and are subject to change.

Flights

Several flights are available directly from the U.S. to Cuba on commercial airlines. We will provide all of the information necessary to make booking these flights simple & secure. Most daily flights are between south Florida and Havana, but other U.S. cities do have direct departures to Cuba on a daily basis.

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 a matter of record with Travelex.



Payment

Regarding payment for the land portion of the tour, a \$ 500.00 deposit is due as soon as possible to reserve space on these programs. This can be paid by wire transfer, 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.

Balance Payment and cancellation and refund policy *

Full payment is due 90 days prior to departure. You will receive a detailed receipt/invoice following receipt of your deposit and reservation form. 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 120 days prior to the tour..... \$ 150.00 per person (land only)
- Fewer than 120 days prior to the tour... FULL DEPOSIT
- Fewer than 90 days prior to the tour..... NO REFUND (unless we can fill your place)

In the unlikely event that we must cancel the tour, a full refund less a \$ 75.00 processing fee for your reservation 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.



CARIBBEAN CONSERVATION TRUST
NATURAL HISTORY OF CUBA, WESTERN ITINERARY
Havana, Cuba's Western Mountains and Zapata Peninsula

Day 1 ~

U.S. to Havana, transfer to Vinales National Park

Our plan is to arrive in Havana late in the morning from south Florida and travel to Vinales Valley (2.5 hours) in the heart of Cuba's renowned tobacco growing region. This enchanting valley is surrounded by lushly vegetated 'mogotes', or blunt, ragged limestone monoliths that dominate the region. We will visit one of the many accessible caves and hiking trails within the national park. Endemic birds such as *Cuban Tody*, *Cuban Green Woodpecker*, *Yellow-headed Warbler*, *Cuban Trogon*, *Cuban Pygmy-Owl* and Great Lizard Cuckoo will be among the birds we pursue in this region over the next couple of days. Optional evening visit to the mouth of a local cave to witness the exit of thousands of endemic and regionally endemic bats. Dinner at an excellent private restaurant. Accommodation in Vinales (2 nights).

Day 2 ~

Vinales National Park

Morning birding and easy walking among the mogotes along lush, karstic trails. We will visit **Santo Tomas** (30 minutes) to explore an impressive local cave system which spans several levels, staying on safe paths with a local naturalist. The endemic Cuban Solitaire with its flute-like song may be seen here. We will also visit a small tobacco plantation and enjoy lunch at an organic farm / restaurant with tremendous views of the valley. Our afternoon concludes with a visit to the private home and art studio of Nils Navarro - Cuba's best wildlife artist and author of the Field Guide to Endemic Birds of Cuba.

Day 3 ~

Vinales - Las Terrazas - Soroa

Early birding option, breakfast and departure east (90 minutes) to **Las Terrazas** nestled in native pine forest and submontane seasonal rain forest habitat. 'The Terraces' was established in the 1960s as an environmental recovery project that has succeeded as a model eco-friendly sustainable community. We will explore trails in the surrounding hills, and visit with local naturalists here. Lunch is at **Cafetal Buena Vista**, a restored 19th century coffee plantation, offering sweeping views of the mountains, plains and coast. Afterwards we will depart for **Soroa** (45 minutes) and the **Sierra de la Rosario Biosphere Reserve**. Upon arrival we will visit the **orchidarium at Soroa**. Managed by the University of Pina del Rio, the gardens cover over 7 acres perched on a steep hillside surrounded by mountains and lush forest. More than 700 species of orchid, in addition to numerous other native plants and exotic species from around the globe can be found here with the help of a resident botanist. Dinner and accommodation at **Villa Soroa** (1 night).



Day 4 ~

Soroa to Zapata Peninsula

Breakfast, with optional birding in the nearby forest, with a hike (2.5 miles total) to the top of El Mirador, with excellent views of the surrounding mountains and Caribbean coast. Lunch followed by departure to **Zapata Swamp National Park** and **Bay of Pigs** (4 hours). This region contains the largest wetland complex in the West Indies, and is Cuba's most prolific birding region, hosting. The peninsula has more than 900 species of flora, and more than 100 species of birds recorded. Dinner and accommodation at **private homestays on or very near the beach in Playa Larga** (3 nights).

Day 5 ~

Zapata Peninsula

Morning birding in the forests around **Bermejas Wildlife Refuge**, where we will set sights on birds such as the *endemic Blue-headed and Grey-fronted Quail Doves*, *Cuban Parakeet*, *Fernandina's Flicker*, *Cuban Bare-legged Owl*, and the world's smallest bird, the *Bee Hummingbird*. Many other bird species are likely here. Late morning visit to the **Giron Museum**, commemorating the Bay of Pigs invasion. Lunch and snorkeling options at **Caleta Buena**, a gorgeous, protected natural inlet abundant with sea life. Certified divers have diving options here. Return to our hotel for an afternoon break. Afternoon visit to a nearby crocodile breeding center. Dinner, lodging in **Playa Larga**.





Day 6 ~

Zapata

Morning visit to Las Salinas reserve for birding in forest, mangrove, and open salt flat habitat. Endemic *Cuban Blackhawk*, a resident sub species of Yellow Warbler, and a variety of wading birds such as American Flamingo, Wood Stork, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill, and several heron species may be present. Lunch will be at a small restaurant in the forest featuring a cenote – a natural fresh water / saltwater pool for snorkeling or diving. This area is along the coast so there are opportunities to explore the nearby reef as well. We will also visit with local residents who have cultivated a backyard habitat to attract various bird species, including the *Bee Hummingbird*. Dinner, lodging in Playa Larga.

Day 7 ~

Zapata – Havana

After breakfast we will pack up and head towards Havana. En route we will visit a Cuban parrot restoration project. After lunch we return to Havana and visit **el Morro fortress** overlooking the coastal entrance to the city. Initially built in 1589 in response to raids on Havana harbor, el Morro protected the mouth of the harbor with a chain being strung out across the water to the fort at La Punta. This sprawling complex offers splendid views of Old Havana and the Florida Straights. There are impressive walls, moats, draw bridges and courtyards, a four story former military barracks as well as a variety of interesting museum exhibits dating from the 16th century. Dinner at a private restaurant, accommodation in **Havana**.

***Day 8**

Return to the U.S.

Breakfast followed by transfer from our hotel to Jose Marti Airport for the return flight to the U.S.

OR ...

HAVANA EXTENSION OPTION (see page below for more details)

City tour, including a guided walking tour of historic Old Havana. The day features both structured and unstructured time. All meals are included.

Day 9 –

Return to the U.S.

Breakfast followed by transfer from our hotel to Jose Marti Airport for the return flight to the U.S.



HAVANA EXTENSION OPTION

An optional one day / night extension in Havana will include accommodation, breakfast, lunch, and a guided tour of Havana, including historic **Old Havana**, one of the best preserved colonial cities in the Americas.

The walking tour will include a guided interpretive exploration of some of colonial Havana's most significant historical sites. This **UNESCO World Heritage site** is loaded with a variety of museums, a thriving arts scene, and a full range of architectural examples of both renovated and neglected structures, many opulent or otherwise unique, representing 5 centuries of human habitation.

The extension also includes lunch dinner in two of Old Havana's best private restaurants. Late afternoon is open for exploration of this fascinating and historic small city. Accommodation in the same Havana accommodation as the previous night.

