



CUBA: Birding & Culture

Embark on an unforgettable birding tour of Cuba, a must-visit destination in the heart of the Caribbean. With nearly 400 bird species, including 29 endemics like the dazzling Cuban Tody, and the world's smallest bird – the Bee Hummingbird – this incredible island offers a spectacle of vibrant colors and culture. You'll learn about important nature conservation efforts, see how Cuban cigars are made, and tour the sites of Old Havana, with its Afro-Caribbean music and 1950's cars. Our expert local guide will help you spot unique birds found nowhere else and share with you the history of this amazing country.

Dates: 5-16 March, 2026 (12-days)

Group Size: 10 travelers

Locations: [MAP](#) (interactive)

Price: from \$3,980pp

Potential Bird Species: 150

TRIP HIGHLIGHTS

- ✿ Visit Zapata Swamp Biosphere Reserve, the Caribbean's largest wetland
- ✿ Learn about the unique Blue-headed Quail-Dove, an enigma of science
- ✿ Snorkel Cayo Coco's crystal-clear waters, walk the forested trails of Viñales National Park, and explore UNESCO designated Trinidad City
- ✿ Search for the world's smallest bird, the regionally endemic Tody bird family, and all 29 endemic bird species
- ✿ Meet local author & artist Nils Navarro, and learn about the Zapata Swamp and Cuba's protected area network
- ✿ Tour Old Havana with its colonial architecture, classic cars, and live music

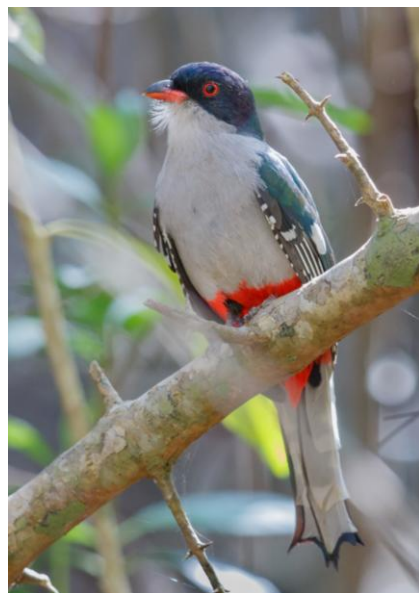


This tour will involve early mornings, hot/dry weather, moderate-to-high intensity birding, with some rough terrain.

DAY 1: Thursday, March 5

MIAMI – HAVANA – VIÑALES

The adventure starts in Miami, where our group will gather at the airport for our flight to Havana, Cuba. After clearing passport control and customs, we'll be warmly welcomed by our Cuban guide, Tania Piñeiro. Following brief introductions, we'll board our comfortable, private bus and begin our scenic journey westward to the Viñales Valley, a UNESCO Cultural Site and National Park. The drive takes 4-5 hours, winding through the heart of Cuba's stunning countryside, dotted with tobacco farms and dramatic limestone formations called *mogotes*. A great lunch will be waiting for us at Buena Vista Hacienda, a historic former French coffee plantation offering sweeping views and authentic Cuban flavors. After lunch, we continue on to Las Terrazas UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, where our Cuban birding adventure officially begins. Here, surrounded by lush forests and waterfalls, we'll have our first encounters with Cuba's incredible birdlife, including possible sightings of endemic species like **Cuban Trogon***, known locally as the *Tocororo* due to its melodic call. Other likely birds include **Cuban Emerald***, **Cuban Tody***, **Cuban Green Woodpecker***, **Cuban Pewee**^, **Olive-capped Warbler**^, and **Cuban Bullfinch***(NT), among many others welcoming you to their island home. As the sun sets, we'll resume our journey to Viñales, passing once-again through the beautiful mogote-dotted landscape. Upon arrival, we'll check into our charming Casa Particular, enjoy a hearty dinner in town, and conclude the day with a review of the bird checklist, reflecting on the sightings from our first day in Cuba.



Cuban Trogon © Peter Hart

Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Viñales town (Lunch and Dinner only today)

What is a Casa Particular?

Hotels in Cuba are almost all state-owned and operated, often overpriced, and not matching the quality of service nor facilities tourists generally expect. Casa Particular translates to 'private house' (or guesthouse) and refers to the Cuban system of allowing local families to rent out rooms, or their entire house, to visitors. This system, like a grassroots, off-line version of AirBnB, ensures that 100% of the money goes to the homeowners. Cuban casas are often unique and packed full of Latino character, offering an authentic glimpse into Cuban culture. That being said, regardless of where you stay, power cuts and breaks in WiFi and hot water are sometimes unavoidable. Staying in family-run lodging like this further demonstrates clearly that bird-based ecotourism can benefit small communities.

DAY 2: Friday March 6

VIÑALES

We'll start the day with breakfast and birding nearby in Viñales National Park. Some of the species we'll encounter this morning are the endemic **Cuban Solitaire***(NT) with its beautifully complex call, **Zenaida Dove**, **Cuban Grassquit***, **Western Spindalis**, **Cuban Blackbird*** known locally as *Toti*, and **Yellow-headed Warbler***, as well as some migrant species like **Ovenbird**, **Gray Catbird**, and **Tennessee** and **Cape May Warblers**. During the afternoon, if the water level is good, we'll visit El Albino Reservoir for some waterbirds. Later, we'll visit the Benito Tobacco Farm where you'll learn the process of making Cuba's famous cigars, and for those interested, have a taste! Hopefully, today we'll also get an opportunity to meet Nils Navarro. Nils has dedicated his life to the study and conservation of the biodiversity of his native Cuba and is author of the book 'Endemic Birds of Cuba: A Comprehensive Field Guide'. Dinner will be taken in town, after which we'll return to our Casa Particular.

Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Viñales town

DAY 3: Saturday, March 7

VIÑALES – ZAPATA

After an early breakfast we'll make our way to the Zapata Swamp (5 hours). There will be stops along the way for lunch and to pick up a few more species, like the elusive and secretive **Yellow-breasted Crake**, **Least Bittern**, **King Rail**(NT) and more. By late afternoon we'll reach a lovely little beach town called Playa Largo, located on the Bay of Pigs. Zapata Swamp UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and Ramsar site is the third largest wetland in the Americas, and the region offers the best birding in Cuba. Zapata and the vicinity have recorded over 200 bird species, 20 of them Cuban endemics, and so we'll be spending the next few days here focusing our time on many of these birds. We'll check-in to our Casa Particular for the next 3 nights, head into town for dinner, and review our bird checklist.

Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Playa Larga



Bee Hummingbird © Gregory Slobirdr

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: Weighing less than 2 grams (less than a dime) and measuring no more than 2 ¼" long, the **Bee Hummingbird** is the smallest bird in the world and often mistaken for a bee. Their nests are barely 1" across and the eggs they contain are the size of coffee beans. Endemic to Cuba, this species is considered Near Threatened by the IUCN due to habitat loss. The species is dependent on mature forest habitat which is cleared for firewood and construction.

DAY 4, 5, and 6: Sunday – Tuesday, March 8-10

ZAPATA

Over the next three days we will focus our time on the best birding locations in and around the Zapata Swamp Biosphere Reserve, considered to be one of the best birding locations in Cuba. We'll focus time exploring mixed forest habitat where we will have excellent chances to see **Bee Hummingbird***(NT). Other species we may encounter in these areas include **Ruddy** and **Grey-fronted Quail-Dove**, **Bare-legged Owl***, **Cuban Pygmy Owl***, **Cuban Parrot (Amazon)***(NT), **Loggerhead Kingbird**, **Cuban Crow**^, **Cuban Blackbird***, **Cuban Bullfinch***(NT). The threatened **Cuban Parakeet***(VU), highly range restricted **Fernandina's Flicker***(EN), and **Blue-headed Quail-Dove***(EN) are also likely. Zapata Swamp is the best place to see the **Zapata Wren***(EN), and **Zapata Sparrow***(NT), among Cuba's most limited range endemic bird species, and so we'll dedicate time to these species. It's also an excellent location to see **White-crowned Pigeon**, **Smooth-billed Ani**, **Great Lizard Cuckoo**^, and **Cuban Tody***.

CONSERVATION ACTIVITY

While in this region we will receive a presentation from our guide, Tania Piñeiro, about the National System of Protected Areas in Cuba and the Zapata Swamp National Park. Tania is the GIS and mapping specialist for the Zapata Swamp Biosphere Reserve and therefore has an intimate understanding of the reserve and what makes it so regionally important.

Among a variety of low dense forests, mangroves, marshes, and open wetlands, we are likely to encounter the endemic **Cuban Black Hawk***(NT) as well as numerous shorebird, seabird, and waterbird species, including **Blue-winged Teal**, **Black-necked Stilt**, **Black-bellied Plover**(VU), **Semipalmated Plover**, **Willet**, **Dunlin**(NT), **Stilt**(NT), **Least**(NT), **Western**, and **Semipalmated**(NT) **Sandpipers**, **American Flamingo**, **Wood Stork**, **Roseate Spoonbill**, **Little Blue Heron**, **Reddish**(NT) and **Snowy Egrets**, and **Clapper Rail**.

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: **Blue-headed Quail-Doves** can be found in the Zapata area and were once assumed to be most closely related to the doves and pigeons of Central and South America. Yet biologists began noticing it had several unusual features that are more similar to the doves and pigeons of Australasia. However, it turns out that this species is even more evolutionarily distinct than the Dodo. The Dodo was also a type of dove, and it had at least one known close relative, the now extinct *Rodrigues solitaire*. In comparison, the Blue-headed Quail-Dove has no known close relatives. Other doves in the Caribbean flew there from North, Central, or South America, where their closest relatives are living today, but the origin of the Blue-headed Quail-Dove is unknown. Sadly, the species is Endangered, with only about 1,000 individuals. While in Zapata we'll learn how conservationists are trying to protect this enigmatic and fascinating species.



Blue-headed Quail-Dove © Peter Hart



Cuban Crocodile © Paul Hudson

Because the Zapata Swamp covers such a large area, we will visit different localities and communities within and around the area

looking for different species – these locations may include Las Salinas de Brito, Salinas de Bides, Santo Tomas, San Blas, Los Hondones, Sopillar, and Casa Ana Birding Gardens. Specific locations will be determined based on bird movements and where species are being seen. Other activities during this time will include visiting the Bay of Pigs Museum where you'll learn about the failed attempt by the US to overthrow Fidel Castro. We'll also visit local organic community farms where we'll enjoy their delicious produce during lunch.

Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Playa Larga

DAY 7: Wednesday, March 11

TRINIDAD

This morning, we head east towards Cienfuegos and Trinidad City, both UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Cienfuegos (1 hour) is one of Cuba's most impressive cities with its location on a stunning bay, founded by French émigré and known as the "Pearl of the South". The city has a Parisian feel with its parks, tree-lined boulevards, and colonnades. We'll visit the Cienfuegos Botanical Gardens with its extensive native flora and local birds that may include **Scaly-naped Pigeon**, **Great Lizard-Cuckoo**^, **Cuban Emerald**^, and **Stygian Owl**. After enjoying Cienfuegos, we'll drive to Trinidad (1 hour), stopping en route for birds like **Black(VU)**, and **White-collared Swifts**, and **Gundlach's Hawk(EN)**, among others. Trinidad is a perfectly preserved sixteenth-century Spanish settlement and we'll have time to explore the cobblestone streets and enjoy the pastel-colored colonial mansions, plazas, and churches built from huge sugar fortunes.

Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Trinidad

CONSERVATION ACTIVITY

We will also pay a visit to the Zapata Crocodile Farm and learn how they are working to conserve the Critically Endangered **Cuban Crocodile** through a combination of conservation efforts including managing genetic diversity and releasing captive-bred individuals.

DAY 8: Thursday, March 12 CAYO COCO

After breakfast today we will depart for the long drive (5 hours) to Cayo Coco (Coco Key) on the north coast of the island, with stops for birding along the way in search of **Giant Kingbird***(EN) and **Cuban Palm-Crow***. Cayo Coco and nearby offshore cays on the northern Caribbean coast, provide great habitat for a diversity of shorebirds like **American Avocet**, **Black-bellied Plover**(VU), and **Stilt Sandpiper**(NT); waterbirds like **West Indian Whistling-Duck**(NT), **Blue-winged Teal**, and **Ruddy Duck**; migrants like **Yellow-throated Warbler**, **Prairie Warbler**, and **Painted bunting**, as well

as other restricted-range and endemic subspecies. Since 1988 Cayo Coco has been connected to the mainland by a 27km causeway providing great access to these stunning keys. These islands offer pristine white-sand beaches, mangrove flats, low coastal scrub, and crystal-clear waters, however, the area is being rapidly developed for “sun and sand” tourism, and the habitat of many important species is becoming increasingly threatened.

Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Cayo Coco



Trinidad Street © Iker Merodio



Yellow-throated Warbler and Painted Bunting © Brian Garrett, Prairie Warbler © Andy Reago, Black-throated Blue Warbler © Lorie Shaul



Zapata Sparrow © Ekaterina Chernetsova

DAY 9: Friday, March 13 CAYO COCO

This morning we'll be up early in search of **White-crowned Pigeon**(NT), **Mangrove Cuckoo**, **Antillean Palm Swift**, **Cuban Black Hawk***(NT), **West Indian Woodpecker**^, **Cuban Pewee**^, **Cuban Gnat-catcher***, **Bahama Mockingbird**, **Oriente Warbler***, **Greater Antillean Grackle**, and **Palm Warbler**. We'll visit a number of birding locations including Cueva del Jabali, Cayo Paredón Grande, and Cayo Guillermo looking for **Thick-billed Vireo** and a subspecies of **Zapata Sparrow***(NT), both target birds for the archipelago, as well as **White-cheeked Pintail**, **Key West Quail-Dove**, **Zenaida Dove**, **La Sagra's Flycatcher**^, **Red-legged Honeycreeper**,

Cuban Vireo*, and migratory warblers including **Cape May** and **Black-throated Blue**.

Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Cayo Coco

DAY 10: Saturday, March 14

HAVANA

Today the group will travel back to Havana (6 hours) however, there are a few options available. We can either have a free morning to go snorkeling and enjoy the beautiful beaches of Cayo Coco, or if there are birds that we're missing or have not had good looks at yet, we can revisit some nearby hotspots. Alternatively, we may depart for Havana after breakfast and enjoy some additional activities in the historic city. This evening in Havana you'll have a great dinner and enjoy some fantastic live local Cuban music and dancing (optional).

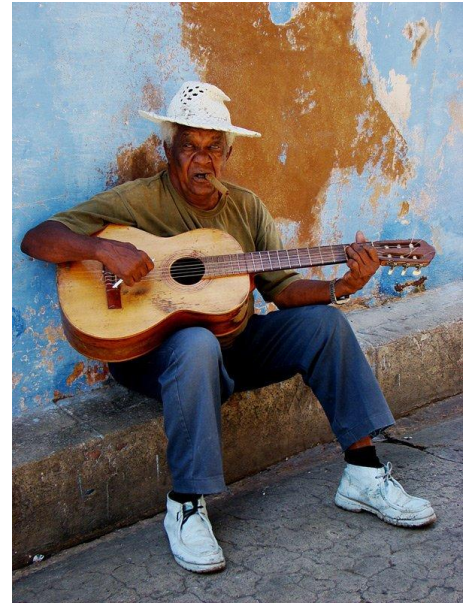
Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Havana

DAY 11: Sunday, March 15

HAVANA

A full day in Havana with numerous activities including a walking city tour of the city and a ride in a classic car. Other possible activities include visiting an art gallery, museum, street markets, or the Havana Botanical Gardens, a lovely place to bird and enjoy native tropical plants. We may also pay a visit to Finca Vigia, Ernest Hemingway's former residence (see box text). This evening we'll have a farewell dinner at a great local restaurant with live Cuban music and dancing (optional).

Accommodation: local Casa Particular, Havana



Cuban Musician © Chris Bradshaw



Finca Vigia © Jiri Bukacek

CULTURE SPOTLIGHT: Finca Vigia or Look-out Farm is the former residence of legendary author Ernest Hemingway. Nestled in the quiet town of San Francisco de Paula, just 10 miles east of the capital, this charming estate offers a fascinating glimpse into the life of one of the 20th century's most iconic writers. Hemingway called this hilltop retreat home for two decades after purchasing it in 1940. It's here that he penned masterpieces like *The Old Man and the Sea* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Today, the house has been transformed into a museum, complete with his original furniture, library, artwork, animal

trophies, and eclectic souvenirs from his global adventures. The property is also surrounded by lush grounds, perfect for birding. Even if you're not a Hemingway enthusiast, the visit is a must.

DAY 12: Monday, March 16

DEPARTURE

This morning, we will have a farewell breakfast and then transfer to Havana's International airport for our return flight to Miami and onward journeys.

LAND PRICE

\$4,650 per person, group size 6-7
\$4,350 per person, group size 8-9
\$4,150 per person, group size 10

RESERVE

To reserve your place on this trip, please contact:

Toby Ross alighttours@gmail.com or (206) 552-3834

A \$500 per person deposit is needed to secure your spot

THE FINE PRINT

VISA: Travel to Cuba by U.S. Citizens for tourism continues to be prohibited by the U.S. State Department. However, the Federal Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has issued general licenses covering 12 categories of travel to Cuba including “People-To-People” and “Support for the Cuban People” programs which will be utilized for this tour. You will be provided clear instructions on how to obtain the correct visa. The Federal Government will be closely monitored as the administration evolves in case its policies on travel to Cuba changes.

FLIGHTS: It’s now possible to purchase your own flights directly from the USA to Cuba. As such, we are not including the price of any flights, including those from Florida–Havana in the tour price. To ease complications upon arrival in Havana we are starting our tour in the airport in Miami, FL where we’ll proceed as a group through the process of passing through immigration and customs after arrival in Havana and on return to the US. It may be necessary to overnight in Florida prior to the tour if the timing of your flights won’t allow you to arrive in time for the morning flight to Havana (you’ll need to check-in for the flight three hours prior, thus by mid-morning). Note that an additional \$25 for Cuba’s departure tax will be applied to the flight purchase, as well as medical insurance as required by the Cuban Government. At the airport you will also have to pay a \$85 visa fee (as of 2024). See your airline’s policies for details.

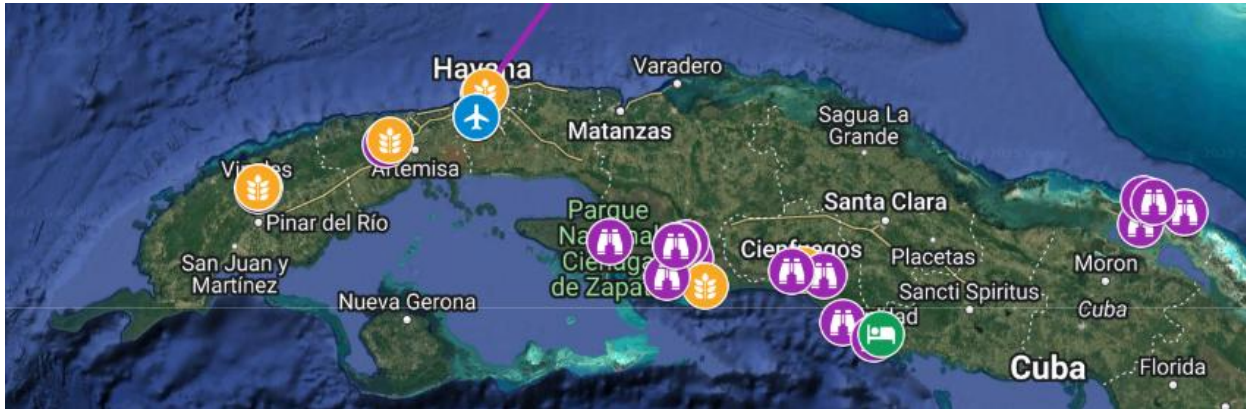
WHAT’S INCLUDED: Price includes full-time wildlife guide, accommodation in standard rooms, all meals and non-alcoholic drinks, park entrance fees and activities outlined in this itinerary, private transportation (with A/C), arrival and departure airport transfers in Havana (not Miami), donations to local conservation organizations, carbon offset for all in-country ground transportation, and a Cuba Bird & Wildlife Checklist. The price does not include international flights, departure tax, travel visa fees, travel insurance, alcoholic drinks, gratuities, and camera permits (if required). Price is based on double occupancy. Single rooms may be available for an additional cost of \$200pp. We will make every effort to match people who request to share with others seeking a roommate.

Specific locations and activities detailed in this itinerary are subject to change based on field conditions, wildlife movements, and local logistics. If changes are required, a like-for-like alternative will be arranged.

PAYMENTS: A \$500 deposit is required to reserve your place on this tour. Please contact Toby Ross at alighttours@gmail.com or +1-206-552-3834 to reserve and arrange payment. The deadline for **final payment is November 1, 2025**. If the trip has not met the minimum number of travelers (6) by the deadline, you will be refunded 100% of your deposit and the trip will be canceled. If you cancel your participation in the trip before the final payment deadline, there is a \$150 cancellation fee that will be deducted from your deposit and the balance returned. If you cancel after the November 1, 2025 deadline, you will forfeit 100% of your deposit and any trip-related costs that have already been expended by Alight Tours and travel partners. Due to the expenses required to secure accommodation and vehicle hire in Cuba, if you cancel your participation 30 days before the start of the trip you will forfeit 100% of your deposit + 50% of the total cost of the trip. It is therefore advised that you purchase insurance that will cover the cost of trip cancellation. Alight Tours will not be held responsible for any lost expenses or fees paid by the traveler should the trip not depart; these include, but are not limited to flights, additional hotel bookings, travel visas, and insurance.






MAP

The map below shows the locations of birding sites and approximate lodging during this program. An interactive map can be found [HERE](#)



CONSERVATION CONNECTIONS

Your trip to Cuba will support conservation, community engagement, and sustainable development in numerous ways:

-  Employ expertly trained and knowledgeable Cuban wildlife guides and drivers
-  Meet conservationists working on protected area mapping and conserving Blue-headed Quail-Doves
-  Support local economies by creating a demand for wildlife guides, tourist activities, high quality lodging, restaurants, and staff - demonstrating that birds can literally “mean business”
-  Alight Tours will offset the CO₂ from your in-country ground transportation across a portfolio of forest, biodiversity, clean energy, and blue/teal carbon projects.
-  Alight Tours will donate 3% of all profits from this trip to a Cuban NGO that works to conserve birds, wildlife, and the habitats on which they depend

KEY

* Endemic – a species only found in Cuba and nowhere else

^ Regional Endemic – restricted to Cuba and one neighboring country – the Bahamas in most cases

NT – Near Threatened – IUCN classification: a species that is nearly threatened with extinction

VU – Vulnerable – IUCN classification: a species that faces a high risk of extinction in the wild

EN – Endangered – IUCN classification: a species that faces a very high risk of extinction

CR – Critically Endangered – IUCN classification: a species that faces an extremely high risk of extinction

CARBON OFFSET

Climate change threatens all life on the planet, as well as the very destinations that ecotourism relies upon. Tourism is responsible for roughly [9% of the world's carbon emissions](#), making it a significant contributor to climate change. A single return flight from Seattle to Havana, Cuba produces about 1.2 metric tons of carbon emissions per passenger. That's 1/4 of the [amount of carbon](#) the average person worldwide produces each year – just from one round trip flight.

Alight Tours is committed to reducing the negative impact its tourism activities have on the environment. We are partnering with [Sustainable Travel International](#) to offset the in-country ground transportation carbon emissions each passenger has on every Alight Tours trip.