

PUERTO RICO TRIP REPORT

Jan 22 – Feb 1, 2012

Joe Morlan and I decided to do a winter trip to Puerto Rico, an island with 17 endemic bird species. We arrived in San Juan about 9PM and opted to stay at the Best Western airport hotel and pick up our Budget rental car the next morning. We drove to [Casa Cubuy](#), an ecolodge in El Junque rainforest. We stopped and birded a bit along Hwy 191, seeing Zenaida and White-winged Doves, Gray Kingbirds and a Puerto Rican Woodpecker, the first of the endemics. After dropping off our luggage, we drove downhill and Joe spotted a Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo at the bridge. A Blue Grosbeak and Nutmeg and Bronze Mannikins perched in the grasslands there. Back at Casa Cubuy, Puerto Rican Orioles were building a nest in the Sierra Palm off our balcony. Scaly-naped Pigeons flew across the valley and landed on wires visible from the good restaurant ½ mile down the hill.

On Jan 24 we drove 45 minutes to the visitor center at El Junque Rainforest Preserve to meet our guide, Hilda Morales (<http://www.birdingpr.com/>). Our first bird was the Red-legged Thrush, robin-like but with black and white streaks on the throat and red legs, bill and eye ring. Walking a short nature trail, we saw an adult and immature Ruddy Quail-Dove. The day was showery but, thankfully, there are many stone shelters along the trails. In the Sierra Palm area we saw three more endemics. Puerto Rican Emerald is an iridescent green hummer with a spiky, forked black tail. Puerto Rican Bullfinches with their bright orange caps were feeding young. Puerto Rican Spindalis superficially resembles a Black-headed Grosbeak but it is actually a tanager.

After lunch, Hilda took us along Hwy 988 through an experimental forest. We had been hearing Puerto Rican Todys but they had stayed deep in the undergrowth. We stopped and walked along the road and found two Black-whiskered Vireos engaged in a bizarre display which was likely territorial. A pair of Puerto Rican Flycatchers attempted to mate directly overhead. We turned back towards Hilda's car and found a Tody perched on her side view mirror. It's a tiny bird with an emerald green back, crimson throat and lower mandible and a white breast. It digs a burrow for its nest.

Later in the afternoon Hilda showed us a neighborhood at the foot of the mountains with both Loggerhead and Gray Kingbirds, an Antillean Mango with its long, decurved bill and the introduced Orange-fronted Parakeets. That evening, back at Casa Cubuy, we heard Puerto Rican Screech-owl but never actually saw one on the trip.

Jan 25 we moved to the [Ceiba Country Inn](#) and spent some time birding at the Fajardo waterfront. Magnificent Frigatebirds and Royal Terns were common but the best sighting was a close fly by of an adult Brown Booby. Boobies nest offshore near Fajardo. Joe also spotted a couple of distant immatures.

On the 26th, we left early and went to Humacao Nature Preserve where we encountered Tricolored and Green Herons, Common Gallinule and Caribbean Coot on the ponds. We

found a flock which contained Northern Parula, American Redstart, Black-and-white and Prairie warblers. Nearby there was a pair of Puerto Rican Flycatchers and a Puerto Rican Woodpecker. We were happy to see 3 White-cheeked Pintails in the mangroves. Then we drove 3 ½ hours along the southern coast to our rented house in Boqueron.

The Calle Cementario neighborhood hosted Greater Antillean Grackles, Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds, Shiny Cowbirds and Cave Swallows. We had dinner at Galloway's on the harbor and watched the Yellow-crowned Night Herons flying by to their roosts at sunset.

Jan 27th our excellent guide Alcides Morales met us at the house and we drove into the hills to Maricao National Forest. Our main target was Elfin-woods Warbler, an endemic species which was discovered in 1972 and superficially resembles a Black-and-white Warbler. We heard a few songs and chip notes then Joe pished one out for brief looks in good light. We had good views of Puerto Rican Vireos and a Green Mango as well as a pair of Antillean Euphonias. We heard Puerto Rican Pewee and saw a Black-faced Grassquit. Loggerhead Kingbirds were building a nest on a pole near the abandoned Casa Piedras (stone house). A couple of birders took us behind the administration building to see a perched endemic subspecies of Sharp-shinned Hawk.

Mid-afternoon Alcides directed us to Laguna Catagena NWR, where we saw at least 14 Masked Ducks. Adelaide's Warblers (another endemic) sang in the lowland forest and Smooth Billed Anis perched in the marsh. Among the ducks were 16 West Indian Whistling-ducks, many Blue-winged Teal, Ring-necked Ducks and Northern Shovelers. Using the scope, we were able to find a Least Grebe, Least Bittern and some Glossy Ibis. It was an interesting habitat.

The morning of the 28th Joe and I visited Cabo Rojo NWR, especially to look for Caribbean Elaenia, a small flycatcher. Luckily we did see one perched right above the trail. Three Mangrove Cuckoos were life birds for both of us. We saw our first Caribbean Martins and the introduced Venezuelan Troupial as well as Red-tailed Hawks, Turkey Vultures and Yellow-faced Grassquits. Gray Kingbirds are abundant and there is a saying in Puerto Rico that every hawk has its kingbird. We had a picnic lunch at a lovely cove near the salt ponds in Cabo Rojo and then walked to the lighthouse for the great views from the cliffs.

We walked around the neighborhood the morning of the 29th and found a small flock containing Cape May, Palm and Adelaide's warblers. Introduced White-winged Parakeets chattered in the trees while Northern Mockingbirds imitated local species. After lunch we walked out behind the interpretive center at the Cabo Rojo Refuge to the salt flats. Lesser Yellowlegs were more common than Greater. Stilt Sandpipers were the most abundant shorebird and we also saw Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers, Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones and Willets. The rarest bird for Puerto Rico was a Red-breasted Merganser, which had been present for a few days and was a first for many of the local birders.

Jan 30 we left for our drive to San Juan. Alcides had recommended we stop in Quebradillas at Parque Merendero. From the cliffs overlooking the ocean we saw at least 20 White-tailed Tropicbirds, which nest there. It was rainy but there were stone shelters with picnic tables so we were able to wait out the showers for excellent views of these lovely birds.

Our last two nights we stayed at the Courtyard by Marriott Hotel on the beach in Isla Verde. We visited Parque Central; supposedly a good spot for birds but the boardwalk was closed. We did see a pair of Pearly-eyed Thrashers, multiple Red-legged Thrushes, White-winged and Zenaida Doves. Introduced Mongooses dashed under the raised paths and reminded us how dangerous it is to try to control one pest (in this case rats in sugar cane) with another. Later in the day we drove east along Hwy 187 and stopped along the forested boardwalk of Bosque Pinones. We saw a Northern Waterthrush, Black-faced Grassquit and Puerto Rican Woodpecker and heard Black-whiskered Vireos. At sunset, a Magnificent Frigatebird flying over a parasailer reminded us we were on a tropical island.

Puerto Rico was interesting. We did see many endemics and I encountered 37 life birds. Unlike other islands, such as Trinidad, the distance to the mainland is great. The diversity of species is therefore low. We actually saw or heard only 104 species and very few individuals of each in most cases.

Robbie Fischer
March 15, 2012