

Cuba

VLADIMIR DINETS, dinets@gmail.com

I visited Cuba for 18 days (Feb 23-Mar 11, 2016). I got a license for that from the US Treasury Dept. (ask me for details if you are a US citizen planning a trip to Cuba; note that you have to apply 4 months in advance). I used my Russian passport while on the island; it saved me \$25 for a visa and made local authorities a bit less suspicious in some situations. My original plan was to guide a mammal-watching tour, but I ended up having only one paying participant (Sergei Kolenov, an intrepid Russian ornithologist from Tatarstan) who was a bit more interested in birds than in mammals. So I spent a lot of time gathering information on birding sites, and not so much preparing for the mammals part, expecting mammals to be as easy to find as on other islands of the Greater Antilles.

This didn't work out well. We totally nailed the birds: saw 177 species, including all Cuban endemics (even the near-mythical Zapata rail), all West Indian endemics, almost all breeding species and lots of wintering ones, plus a possible undescribed species of warbler (still trying to figure out what to do with that observation). I'm pretty sure it was a birding record. We also did pretty well with herps and invertebrates. But mammals proved frustratingly tricky. Seeing hutias took countless hours of spotlighting; accessing bat caves was difficult or impossible due to a multitude of restrictions and other problems, and when we did manage to access them, they usually contained just one ubiquitous species, the Jamaican fruit bat. We found a bunch of night and day roosts in houses, but all of them had either Jamaican fruit bats or Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bats. All bats we caught at cave entrances were also Jamaican fruit bats. Despite much effort, we didn't get into any "hot caves" and so missed all Mormoopid bats. We also saw very few nectar-feeding bats; I strongly suspect that some or most of them leave Cuba (or at least its western and central parts) for the dry season. They occasionally show up in the Florida Keys, indicating possible migration overshooting. We still got over 20 species, but could get 25+ if I did a better job arranging access to bat caves. I'm not very happy with the result, and would like to do a more mammals-centered rerun in a few years.

Cuba is an easy country to move around. The roads are often in abysmal state and many road signs are missing, but traffic is light, and once you get used to local pronunciation, asking for directions works reasonably well even with basic Spanish (just skip the letter *s* unless the word starts with it, and use *tu* instead of *Usted* in all but the most official situations: it's an egalitarian society!). We pushed our little car to the limits on some bush tracks (sometimes having to repeatedly bulldoze the road with the front bumper to get out of deep ditches), and still covered 5,000 km without a scratch (I am really proud of that). We used Borch 1:1 000 000 *Cuba* map, which proved to be relatively accurate in most cases. Food was simple but edible, and hotels seemed nice (we did only limited sampling of either since we agreed to eat once every two days and stay in hotels once every five nights to save time and money). Bring your own supply of soap, toilet paper, and towels. We never had any problems from drinking tap water, and never saw any indication of crime being present, but locals often reminded us that a parked car should never be left unlocked. We drove by the scenes of three serious traffic accidents in 18 days; that's a lot for a country where many roads are virtually empty.

Except for La Havana area, the country is sparsely populated, but most habitats are heavily modified and much of the wildlife is in decline. Flora and fauna have been poorly studied, and new taxa are being discovered all the time despite the small number of researchers visiting the island. Any mammal-watching trip to Cuba should be thought of as a scientific expedition, with potentially significant results.

For the locals, life is very difficult, the average income outside La Havana is around US\$10 per month, while a liter of 83 gasoline costs \$0.8, a dinner in a restaurant \$1-5 (unpredictable and with the food essentially the same), a loaf of bread \$0.2. Having grown up in the Soviet Union, I found Cuba to be an unforgiving reminder (even a bit of a caricature) of the mind-boggling stupidity, ineffectiveness, and senseless restrictiveness of life under a single-party rule. *Nothing* ever works like it's supposed to (during our visit most offices were regularly closed "for fumigation" due to a totally irrational anti-Zika campaign). Despite the hardships, people are mostly very nice and even charming, especially away from the areas infested with cruise ships. There are a few notable exceptions, such as the paranoid guards at

various useless dilapidated installations in the middle of nowhere (the Russian term for these idiots is *vokhra*, an abbreviation for “armed guard” which has become an insult). In my experience, life under Communist rule by itself doesn’t make people bad; it’s the brutal period of transition to capitalism that turns them into orc-type creatures like the ones dominating today’s Russia.

I will describe the sites we explored (and a few we missed) in counterclockwise order starting from La Havana, just like we happened to visit them. The five sites marked with an asterisk form the traditional birding circuit, so there are numerous detailed descriptions in birding trip reports available online. Sites off that circuit (including the entire E part of the country, where the biodiversity is the highest) get virtually no visits from birders. I omitted **feral cats** and **dogs** that are common throughout the island.

1. Soroa* is a small eco-resort in limestone hills (Sierra del Rosario) about an hour west of La Havana, not counting the time you spend trying to find the entrance to one of the country’s few *autopistas* (roads supposed to be freeways). It’s said to be an excellent place to see **prehensile-tailed hutia** (locally called *jutía carabali*), and the guard at the orchid garden claimed to have seen dozens near the garden entrance (22.7946N, 83.0096W) the night before our visit, but we spent all night searching and found only one, on one of the “nature trails” leading up from the main road (starting at 22.7966N, 83.0106W). There were small bats flying along forest trails (particularly the upper part of Mirador Trail, which starts at 22.7945N, 83.008W), and I saw one well enough to be sure it was a **Cuban fig-eating bat**. There is said to be a small bat cave on the hill above the waterfall, but the directions given by locals were so contradictory that we never found it. Mistnetting at the river bridge failed (but look for Cuban nightjars there).

2. Parque Nacional La Güira* half an hour farther W has a road crossing the mountains. A trail branches off that road (at 22.6535N, 83.4452W) and leads through bird-rich pine forest to the ruins of a research station. The ruins had some guano inside but no bats day or night. Just before the ruins the trail enters dense forest where we saw a **Desmarest’s hutia** (locally called *jutía conga*) with a baby up in the trees. As all hutias we saw, these ones disappeared from view within a few seconds. Hutias have bright whitish eyeshine and seem to be most active in pre-dawn hours. They are also said to bask in early morning sunshine in treetops sometimes, but we never saw that. You have to walk really quietly to have a chance of seeing them; practice in advance if you are uncertain of your stalking skills.

3. Cueva Los Portales* (22.6695N, 83.4794W), at the other side of the mountains on the same road, is mostly known as Che Guevara’s headquarters during the missile crisis, when he hid underground expecting the rest of the country’s population to get nuked. During the day the cave had only **Jamaican fruit bats** and a small colony of **Mexican freetail**s (in a crack in the ceiling of the main hall on the side nearest to the river). You can find the freetail by sound; they look very different from the ones on the mainland and I wouldn’t be surprised if they get split someday. At night a few **Cuban brown bats** roosted in small side passages between the main hall and the river (splitting them from big brown bat of North America isn’t yet universally accepted, but after seeing them up close I have no doubts). There was also a cluster of **big freetail**s night-roosting in the part of the cave on the far side of the river.

4. Viñales is a town in the western part of the same mountain range, surrounded by hundreds of tower karst outcrops locally known as *mogotes* (the direct road from the previous site to Viñales was impassable; take the longer one farther north). There are ~10,000 known caves in the area, including a few “hot caves”, but tourists can normally visit only three: Palenque (reportedly no bats), Cueva del Indio and Gran Caverna de Santo Tomas. The latter two have “hot” chambers with lots of bats (Cueva del Indio once had 12 species), but the parts open to visitors have only a few **Jamaican fruit bats**. You can watch the bats emerge at dusk and try to pick out the tiny *murciélagos mariposas* (**Gervais’ funnel-eared bats**) in flight (we didn’t do that). A few miles from Gran Caverna de Santo Tomas there is a nature trail (starting at 22.5603N, 83.8319W) where you can find *Microcycas calocoma*, arguably Cuba’s most interesting plant. There we saw a rat that had a long tail, a steel-grey back and pale-grey flanks and belly; it had to be a **black rat**, but black rats in the Greater Antilles never look like they are supposed to, and seem to be evolving into a multitude of species.

5. Parque Nacional de Guanahacabibes protects the westernmost part of Cuba. Its star attraction is Cueva La Barca, with 12 bat species (the world record), including Cuban greater funnel-eared bat, which is officially known only from that cave. The cave is a strictly protected area; obtaining a visiting permit takes 18+ months and a lot of luck, and I wouldn't recommend trying, because nobody knows anything about the disturbance tolerance of this species (known as fossils from all over Cuba). Like most Cuban national parks, this one is generally closed to visitors except for a few trails you can only use with a guide. One short trail leads from the park office (watch for bee hummingbirds there) to Cueva de Perlas with plenty of **Jamaican fruit bats**. After using all my powers of persuasion, we were allowed access to a small, mostly flooded cave near Cueva La Barca, where we found more Jamaican fruit bats, one **Leach's single-leaf bat**, and one small bat that looked very much like the locally famous **Cuban greater funnel-eared bat**. Unfortunately, as in most Cuban caves, the moment you get inside you cause a storm of Jamaican fruit bats flying around and making all other bats take off as well. Using red light sometimes buys you a couple minutes, but as soon as you make a noise or use a camera flash, all hell breaks loose. So even though I'm pretty sure I saw Cuban greater funnel-eared bat, I have no photo to confirm it. The park is overrun by **feral pigs** (some so tame they follow you around in the forest), and we saw a **Desmarest's hutia** on the side of the access road late at night. If you take the self-driving tour to the tip of Cuba (as most guided tours in Cuban national parks, it costs \$10 pp), look for huge Cuban iguanas.

6. Isla de Juventud is a large island, accessible by ferry. We didn't visit it, but it is said to be in better condition than the main island, with extensive swamps, pine forests and mangroves, and some large caves. **Isla de Pinos hutia** was described from it, but has been lumped with **prehensile-tailed hutia**.

7. Reserva de Biosfera Ciénaga de Zapata* (Zapata Swamp) is extremely popular with birders, but its army of birding guides knows almost nothing about mammals. The basic tour for non-birders is a road through the mangroves to Las Salinas, where you can see flamingoes. The ranger station at the end of that road (22.1109N, 81.2816W) has a bat colony on the second floor, but we weren't allowed to enter the building because our obligatory guide insisted that we needed the park director's permission for that. So we still don't know what species they were, although I suspect **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bat** (we found its night roosts in a few abandoned buildings in the forests of the area). One trail you can take without a guide (although that might change by the time you visit) is La Turba Trail; it starts ~300 m S of the park gate (at 22.4331N, 81.1425W). Birders visit it to see Zapata sparrow and Zapata wren; we also saw a Zapata rail there. At night we saw a rat that had very white belly; I strongly suspect it was **Asian house rat** (it has recently been found to be common in the Florida Keys, so why not Cuba?). More intriguingly, we saw white eyeshine in a tree (at 22.4193N, 81.1833W) that looked like the eyeshine of a small hutia. I wonder if it was the **dwarf hutia** (*hutia enana* in Spanish), endemic to Zapata Swamp and not seen since 1937 (tracks and droppings were recorded in the 1980s). The trail is pretty much the only place where you have a chance of seeing the endemic Cuban crocodile in the wild, so be careful walking there at night and sleep in a car rather than in a tent. The park office is in Playa Larga; look for stygian owls around the cemetery (22.2812N, 81.2121W) at night. As you drive there, stop in the village of Palpite to look at bee hummingbirds at the feeders in the backyard of a pink house at 22.3262N, 81.1841W (ask for *zunzuncitos*). Hotel Playa Larga (22.2818N, 81.1959W) has flocks of **Jamaican fruit bats** visiting fruiting trees, and **Wagner's bonneted bats** drinking from the pool. East from the hotel is a mangrove lagoon (22.2801N, 81.1846W) where you can sometimes see **greater fishing bats**. The Cuban subspecies of this bat is inexplicably rare; we didn't see any in numerous coastal caves we explored, and they were missing from many seemingly perfect habitats. Farther east is Cueva de Los Peces (22.1665N, 81.1363W), a cenote which is apparently the only place in the world where you can cave-dive without a cave-diving certificate (assuming the right guide is at work that day and nobody has taken home the dive center's only flashlight). Nearby is a small cave (at 22.1726N, 81.1371W) with **Jamaican fruit bats**.

8. Jardines de la Reina are a chain of barrier islands far off the S coast, accessible only by private boat. Most people visit them during live-aboard diving tours; we didn't have time or money for that. According to many trip reports, as soon as you land there you are greeted by herds of tame **Desmarest's hutias** and Cuban iguanas waiting for scraps.

9. Embarcadero de Baragua (21.5617N, 78.6530W), located on the S coast at the end of a long dirt road through forest and mangroves, is a bunch of ruined buildings of unknown purpose, guarded by a very aggressive *vokhra* (if he acts up, placate him friendly by politely saying “*chinga tu madre, cabron!*”). It is the most accessible place to see **Cabrera’s hutia**, which until recently was believed to be endemic to a bunch of nearby islets. We spent a few hours after sunset spotlighting the last mile of the access road and saw only one, but there were lots of small droppings on the road, so it might be easier after midnight. Look also for these hutias’ large communal nests in trees (we didn’t see any). On the way back we saw lots of **house mice** around 21.6405N, 78.6096W.

10. Finca La Belen* in Sierra de Najasa is mostly a birding destination, famous for a cemetery (21.0045N, 77.7439W) where people come to see Cuban palm crow, Cuban parakeet and a few other endemic birds. A row of tall palms behind the cemetery holds colonies of two endemic bats: **Cuban yellow bat** in palm crowns and **little goblin bat** in one hollow trunk (look for the palm densely covered with epiphytes). You can get reasonably good views of both at dusk if you have a strong flashlight and good binoculars. The finca (ranch), located at 21.0105N, 77.7372W, has a few trails and a free swimming pool (they’ll probably allow you to mistnet there); one of the trails leads to a large cave where we saw lots of – you guessed it – **Jamaican fruit bats** and one **Cuban fruit-eating bat**. Be careful using wooden ladders in the cave: one broke under my feet.

11. Parque Nacional Disembarque de Granma is located on the peninsula forming the western tip of the mountainous SE part of Cuba. It has a lot of caves; a few are located in sinkholes along the Archeological Trail (trailhead at 19.8542N, 77.7181W) which can be walked without a guide. We explored these caves at night and don’t know if it’s legal to enter them. Most had **Jamaican fruit bats** and/or **Waterhouse’s leaf-nosed bats** (plus lots of huge crabs, hermit crabs, and boas), but one semi-flooded passage led to an almost-“hot” chamber with a few very shy **Cuban flower bats** and two species of Nataliids: the tiny **Cuban lesser funnel-eared bat** and the even tinier **Gervais’s funnel-eared bat**. There are two larger bat caves in the park, but they are accessible only by long hikes with a particular guide who was absent during our visit, and the trails were closed anyway.

12. Parque Nacional Pico Turquino is the only place in Cuba where you can drive up to the transitional zone between montane rainforest and cloud forest. The road is very steep; our car didn’t make the last 500 m. At dusk we saw a few very light-colored bats flying around (at 20.0354N, 76.8993W); I guess they could be some of the nectar-feeding species that were missing from the lowlands. We also saw a pair of warblers there (at 20.0174N, 76.8981W) that appeared to be an undescribed species.

13. Gran Piedra is a hilltop nature reserve near Santiago de Cuba; I think it’s the highest point on the island accessible by road. We saw a **small Indian mongoose** there (at 20.0103N, 76.8993W).

14. Viaducto La Farola is a stretch of mountain road across the eastern tip of Cuba (best around 20.1842N, 74.4728W) which, in retrospect, is probably the best place to try looking for **Cuban solenodon** without a permit. We drove there in heavy rain on our way to the next site and didn’t stop, in part because there were too many fresh-looking rockslides.

14. Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt in the far E of the island is where the largest surviving population of **Cuban solenodon** still hides. Unfortunately, the only trail normally open to visitors (starting at 20.5123N, 74.6798W), although interesting (mostly for its herps), is very short. We walked it by ourselves at night and upon returning to our car were “arrested” by a *vokhra* who claimed that it’s illegal for foreigners in Cuba to walk more than 200 m away from a road. Next morning our guide told us that a week earlier he had found a **Cuban red bat** sleeping on a branch near the trail, but it was never seen again. There is a longer trail leading to a bat cave, but the only guide who could take people there was absent at the time of our visit, and the trail was closed anyway (no, I’m not copy-pasting this). You can also take a short rowboat trip around the lagoon where **manatees** are sometimes seen in the morning (we did it around noon and didn’t see any). At night the closed dormitory in the office compound had a few **Wagner’s bonneted bats** (difficult to see well), fruiting trees throughout the compound were visited

by hundreds of **Jamaican fruit bats**, and I saw one **black-tailed hutia** (locally called *jutia andaraz*) in tall trees just outside (at 20.5105N, 74.6713W). To see the park's rugged interior, you need to organize a small expedition. According to the guides, the last such expedition in December 2015 camera-trapped a few *almiquís* (solenodons), and saw a small hutia with a cub, possibly belonging to an undescribed species or a species currently known only from fossils.

15. Parque Nacional La Mensura further W in the same mountain range has montane pine forests (where we didn't see any mammals or their sign despite a lot of night walking) and a beautiful waterfall called Salto del Guayabo. The small restaurant at the waterfall viewpoint (20.5690N, 75.7356W) is said to be visited by numerous hutias at night, and, indeed, the surrounding pathways were covered with **Desmarest's hutia** droppings, but on the day of our visit it started raining as soon as the sun had set. Hutias don't like rain, so we didn't see them (according to our various local informants, hutias also hate cold, heat, moonlight, fog and wind; how they ever manage to get out of their nests is a mystery).

16. Jardines del Rey* are barrier islands some of which are connected to the N shore of Cuba by causeways. The islands are being covered by all-included hotels at a frightening rate; beware of countless heavy trucks and tour buses when driving there. On Cayo Coco there is a small, almost-deserted nature reserve called Baga (22.5158N, 78.5110W) where you can reportedly see **Desmarest's hutias** early in the morning, while the abandoned visitor center has day-roosting **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bats**. **Bottlenose dolphins** are occasionally seen from the lighthouse at Cayo Paredon Grande; except for rare winter visits by **humpback whales** to NE coast, they are the only cetaceans sometimes visible from Cuban shores.

17. Mabuya is a small village near the N coast. As we drove past it at dusk, we saw a stream of **little goblin bats** crossing the road near a little school building (22.2087N, 79.0202W), and tracked it back to a hollow palm about 50 m S of the road. It's amazing how many bats can fit into one tree hollow.

18. Caveria Norte is another group of barrier islands, some of them accessible by causeways. The uninhabited Cayo Fragoso (blissfully lacking a causeway) is the last place where **long-eared hutia** (locally called *jutia rata*) occurs. A few years ago it was introduced by fishermen to the nearby Cayo Santa Maria, but is now almost extinct there due to rampant hotel building (the entire island and the few adjacent ones look like a huge construction site). After much effort we managed to see one little hutia in a small nature reserve (at 22.6534N, 78.9959W; look also for Gundalch's hawks there), but they might be gone by the time you visit, so better plan on a boat trip to Cayo Fragoso.

19. Escaleras de Jaruco is a small nature reserve half an hour SE of La Havana, with a bunch of *mogotes* looking like a smaller version of the ones around Viñales. The developed part includes a small cave (Cueva de General Aguirre, 23.0436N, 82.0706W) which had a few **Jamaican fruit bats** and a lonely **Mexican freetail** (I don't remember ever seeing the mainland ones hanging out by themselves). If you follow the same trail to the crest of the hill, you'll find a larger cave with lots of (no kidding) Jamaican fruit bats and a few **Cuban evening bats** (you'll have no more than two seconds to see them before they get spooked by the fruit bats). We parked on a side road (branching off at 23.0351N, 82.0717W) and walked it a few times at night. As soon as we got out of the car, we saw a pair of charming **prehensile-tailed hutias** in the trees near a *mogote* cliff. They were making alarm calls, loud whistles ending with clicks. A few minutes later I spotted an incredibly bright-colored **Cuban red bat** hanging from a vine, but it took off almost instantly. A building on the right side of the road had lots of **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bats** at night (but none during the day). We returned to the car to sleep, but were soon awakened by three gunshots, the last one very close. Then we saw a guy with a flashlight walking by; I'm pretty sure he shot one or both of the hutias we saw earlier. Very few times in my life have I felt so sorry I didn't have a gun: Cuban legal system supports the concept of citizen's arrest, and it would be fun to use.

20. On our last night we stayed at Casa de Piedras near the **Havana Airport** (23.0079N, 82.3950W). It had *both* the shower and the toilet more or less working, which is very unusual for Cuban hotels. There were lots of **Jamaican fruit-bats** around the pool at night, but none got caught in our net (neither did **Cuban evening bat**, said to be very common in La Havana).