

Trip Report: Puerto Rico
5th - 8th March 2010 (David Southall)



Considering that the avifauna we have encountered on previous visits to Bonaire and Trinidad was more closely related to that found in northern South America than the Caribbean, a long weekend in Puerto Rico presented us with our first opportunity for true Caribbean birding. With only three nights and two full days, we decided to spend one night in San Juan – exploring the historic, old city district – before moving to the south-west corner of the island for two nights.

In addition to scouring various trip reports for tips on how to best invest our limited time in pursuit of Puerto Rican endemics and Caribbean specialities, we were fortunate to receive excellent pre-trip advice from José Salguero (driicterus@yahoo.com and mobile phone +1-787-642.1430). José was most generous in sharing location information and travel advice that facilitated our preparations for this brief visit and he also spent one day expertly guiding us in search of south-western species on the upper elevations of the Mariaco State Forest and the adjacent coastal lowlands. Despite the weekend's weather being dominated by a low pressure system that brought persistent drizzle and intermittent heavy rain, I was fortunate enough to encounter 29 lifers, including 14 of the island's 16 endemic bird species – see the trip list at the end of this report.



Puerto Rican Tody (Guánica) – our first Tody!

After Emma and I enjoyed an evening walk through the historical streets of old San Juan and an excellent tapas dinner, I rose early to spend Saturday morning in the Piñones State Forest. This area of coastal mangroves and flooded forest is located only 15 minutes from San Juan, just east of the airport. I spent a few hours exploring a quiet bicycle trail and elevated boardwalk that meandered alongside the coastal PR-187 road. Persistent drizzle did not help proceedings, however I did secure good views of my first island endemic - a highly inquisitive Puerto Rican Flycatcher that was highly responsive to calls downloaded from Xeno-Canto - and Red-legged Thrush (another lifer) plus a variety of anole lizards periodically inflating their brightly coloured throats.



Displaying Anole lizards (Piñones)



Caribbean Elaenia (Guánica); Puerto Rican Flycatcher (Piñones)

Our lunchtime drive across the island towards the south coast included a detour in search of Plain Pigeon (we did not find any between heavy rain showers, but we did see several interesting species including introduced Bronze Mannikins acrobatically jumping and then snuggling together on some roadside cables) and a brief stop at a lookout adjacent to the main highway resulted in good views of a Mangrove Cuckoo and several Gray Kingbirds (a common sight across most habitats on the island).

On arrival at our rather manicured and well-watered hotel adjacent to the coastal dry forest at Guánica the rain was lifting, so we continued along PR-333 to the car park at the end and then walked a coastal trail amidst sparse vegetation. Although we saw few dry-forest birds, we admired a Little Blue Heron fishing on the shallow reef and an Osprey catching a heavy fish before struggling back to land to enjoy the fruits of its labours. Back at the car park our persistence was rewarded with close-up views of a Puerto Rican Tody foraging in dry forest bushes. Although we ultimately saw many, many pairs of Tody's - especially in the Guánica Forest Reserve along PR-334 - we never tired of these tiny and charismatic gems, with their characteristic buzzing calls.

Shortly before dark we drove the short distance back through town to the PR-116 and then along PR-334 to the main entrance to the forest reserve. Finding the entrance barrier already locked we parked outside and walked up the road in search of anything new lurking in surrounding dry forest, but especially Puerto Rican Nightjar. We heard some calls and just as the final light was fading we were excited to flush a bird from the side of the road that, in true nightjar fashion, floated from its resting spot to a branch where it hid in the near total darkness.



Little Blue Heron (Guánica)

We spent the whole of Sunday birding in the company of José, who met us in Guánica and then navigated as we drove for half an hour up into the nearby highlands of the misty Mariaco State Forest. At our first roadside stop on a ridge at about 600m altitude we quickly ticked off a succession of endemics including pairs of Puerto Rican Tanager and Puerto Rican Spindalis feeding in *cecropia* trees, Puerto Rican Vireos and Puerto Rican Bullfinches working their way through thicker vegetation, a Puerto Rican Woodpecker and even a highly elusive Elfin-Woods Warbler that flitted rapidly from tree to tree. We failed to track down a Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo that was heard calling, but given the fresh wind and intermittent drizzle this was without doubt a highly successful first couple of hour's birding! With a steady rain falling and the temperature dropping we decided to head towards Hacienda Juanita on the far side of the park in search of a warming coffee and a well-earned brunch.

Despite the wet conditions a scouting of the grounds revealed both of the island's endemic hummingbirds – a male Green Mango feeding from the large, purple banana flower and a much smaller male Puerto Rican Emerald feeding on the pink flowers of a large tree overhanging the restaurant! Buoyed by our success we enjoyed a very good value breakfast at one of the few spots on the restaurant balcony that was out of the wind

and rain, with occasional interruptions to check out several species that passed by - including the new to us Greater Antillean (Puerto Rican) Oriole, which may yet be determined to be an endemic species rather than subspecies. Suitably nourished and warmed we once again set off for the park's higher elevations where we walked a side road and trails at about 800m altitude, securing wonderful views of a pair of hyper-active Lesser Antillean (Puerto Rican) Pewees working their way through dense undergrowth accompanied by another Elfin-Woods Warbler.



Antillean Mango (near Combate)

With no apparent let up in the rain that would give us further opportunities for photography, and having at least seen the park's key endemics, we decided to head down to the coastal zone in search of other endemics and better weather. José took us to a variety of locations near to La Parguera in search of surprisingly elusive Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds, and although we saw several lifers - including an Antillean Mango and enjoyed a boardwalk excursion through mangroves - we struggled to find any sign of this IUCN listed endangered species. Finally, at the beach in the town of Combate we found a mixed flock of Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds, Greater-Antillean Grackles and (hinting at one of the Blackbirds biggest threats) the occasional Shiny Cowbird scavenging for food scraps along the roadside and in a picnic park. It was rather surreal to find an endangered species in such an urban setting amongst such common scavenger birds, and local people enjoying their BBQs appeared bemused at the interest that we were paying to these 'everyday birds'. (After mistakenly leaving my tripod on the curb-side when we drove away, I was very grateful for the honesty of these locals who had kept it safe and would not even accept a reward by way of thank you when we rushed back half an hour later in search of the missing tripod!).



Yellow-shouldered Blackbird (Combate); Puerto Rican Vireo (Guánica)

With the coastal weather having improved significantly, we headed back towards Guánica and PR-334 where José's Puerto Rican Screech-Owl calls secured us great views of several warblers that came to investigate. The star attraction amongst the migrant warblers was the very attractive endemic Adelaide's Warbler that absolutely glowed with gold, gray and white in the late-afternoon sunshine. Tantalizing Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoos were heard calling frequently, but despite some bush-bashing we saw only Mangrove Cuckoos and neither heard nor saw Screech-Owls or Nightjars.



With José Salguero at the entrance to the Guánica dry forest on PR-334

Prior to dawn on our final morning I returned to Guánica for some solo birding, hoping to finally locate a Lizard-Cuckoo. Although I was unsuccessful in that regard, a great morning's birding under blue skies along several of the 4WD trails that branch off from the PR-334 inside the park was highlighted by many pairs of Puerto Rican Tody, an inquisitive pair of Puerto Rican Vireo, family groupings of Puerto Rican Bullfinch, Puerto Rican Spindalis and Black-faced Grassquit, a Black-whiskered Vireo (we had heard many calling the day before, but not seen any), a nesting Zenaida Dove, several Adelaide's Warbler and several highly vocal Caribbean Elaenia. Without doubt a great way to conclude our birding activities before making the two-hour drive back to San Juan and our flight home.



Zenaida Dove on its nest (Guánica)



Puerto Rican Tody (Guánica)



Dry Forest in Guánica

1. Trip Bird List¹

(Confirmed personal sightings only for DJS – excludes birds heard only unless otherwise indicated; in order of appearance on the plates of Raffaele et al's Birds of the West Indies)

Locations where species seen in sequence of travel: P=Piñones State Forest (early morning visit on March 6th to coastal mangroves, flooded forest and coastline, just east of San Juan and the international airport); H=Highland areas along PR-52 highway (afternoon on March 6th driving across centre of island between San Juan and Ponce); G=Guánica State Forest and Biosphere Reserve (evenings of March 6th/7th and morning of March 8th in dry forest and adjacent coastline located in south-west of the island); M=Mariaco State Forest (morning on March 7th in highland forest up to 800m altitude, north of Guánica); C=Combate, La Parguera and nearby coastal villages (afternoon on March 7th in the south-west of the island between Cabo Rojo and Guánica).

Magnificent Frigatebird (P)	Lesser Antillean (Puerto Rican) Pewee (M) * E
Royal Tern (C)	
Little Blue Heron (G) *	Cave Swallow (C)
Great Egret (P; H)	
Cattle Egret (C)	Northern Mockingbird (H; G)
	Red-legged Thrush (P; M; G)
Ruddy Turnstone (P)	
	Puerto Rican Vireo (M; G) * E
American Kestrel (C; G)	Black-whiskered Vireo (M; G)
Turkey Vulture (C; G)	Elfin-Woods Warbler (M) E
Osprey (G)	Black-and-white Warbler (G)
	Northern Waterthrush (heard only) (C)
Scaly-naped Pigeon (M)	Prairie Warbler (G)
Rock Dove (C)	Yellow Warbler (C)
White-winged Dove (P; H; M; G)	Northern Parula (P; G; M)
Eurasian Collared-Dove (C)	Adelaide's Warbler (M; G) * E
Common Ground-Dove (P)	American Redstart (M)
Zenaida Dove (P; H; M; G) *	Black-throated Blue Warbler (M)
Mourning Dove (C)	
White-winged Parakeet (C)	Antillean Euphonia (M)
	Bananaquit (P; G; M)
Mangrove Cuckoo (H; G) *	Puerto Rican Spindalis (M; G) E
Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo (heard only) (M; G) E	Puerto Rican Tanager (M) * E
Smooth-billed Ani (C)	
Puerto Rican Nighthawk (G) E	Venezuelan Troupial (C)
	Greater Antillean (Puerto Rican) Oriole (M) E
Puerto Rican Emerald (M; C; G) E	Greater Antillean Grackle (P; G; C) *
Antillean Mango (C) *	Shiny Cowbird (M; C)
Green Mango (M) E	Yellow-shouldered Blackbird (C) * E
Puerto Rican Tody (G; M) * E	Yellow-faced Grassquit (C)
	Black-faced Grassquit (P; C; M; G)
Puerto Rican Woodpecker (M; C) E	House Sparrow (P)
	Puerto Rican Bullfinch (M; G) E
Puerto Rican Flycatcher (P; G) * E	
Gray Kingbird (P; H; G) *	Orange-cheeked Waxbill (C)
Caribbean Elaenia (G) *	Bronze Mannikin (H)
Pearly-eyed Thrasher (P; G) *	

Combined total: 60, with 29 confirmed “first time ever” species for DJS of which 14 are Puerto Rican endemics and a further two are endemic sub-species that are not currently considered as endemic species on the AOU website (Greater Antillean (Puerto Rican) Oriole and Lesser Antillean (Puerto Rican) Pewee) ...

¹ First sighting ever for DJS; * = photo available from trip; **E** = Endemic species; **E** = Endemic sub-species