

Cuba March 2012

People to People - Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Exchange

Kim Kaeser

Friday March 9 – Santiago de Cuba

The delegation arrived in Cuba mid-morning and were welcomed by our primary bird guide Ernesto Reyes, our tour guide, Ariel Sanchez, and master eco-tourism authority, Rosendo Martinez, at the airport. Our driver, Carlos, loaded up the bus with our luggage and we headed into the center of Santiago de Cuba and then walked around the historic Parque Cespedes, admiring the architecture, old American cars, musicians, and the Basilica Metropolitana Santa Ifigenia (which was preparing for the Pope's historic visit). Our guide then took us to the Hotel Casa Granda, climbed the stairs to the rooftop terrace, where we spent time absorbing the spectacular view and our first taste of Cuban coffee.

We dined at a Government run outdoor cafe that was pretty good in retrospect. After that we headed to Natural History Museum for a meeting with Dr. Freddie Rodriguez about raptor migration and potential areas where we might spot Gundlach's Hawk. Next, a briefing on how Cuba protects its parks, refuges and important habitats, while steadily increasing its ecotourism footprint, by the Cuban National Park System (SNAP) Specialist, Rosendo Martinez. The Cuban system for protecting areas of importance is pretty ingenious - they employ the people that have lived in these areas for generations. They are educated on conservation and ecology and trained to spot and record the day to day changes in the environment and its plants and animals. Another really amazing thing Cuba does, is to require a local guide for treks into their wilderness. This has to cut down on habitat destruction, while educating visitors about the site and providing income to the locals.

After this we all piled into the back of a very old pick-up/ SUV type vehicle (Taxi). It had benches in the back and filled with exhaust fumes when stopped. We were invited by Julio Larramendi (world famous nature photographer and author) to watch a very special dance. "Intangible Cultural Heritage Society Tumba Francesa La Caridad de Oriente, founded on February 24, 1862, in Palmar, Limoncito, under the name Lafayette. The group was declared Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. "This legendary musician/dance company tradition preserved in all its splendor contributions bequeathed by French culture and Dahomeyan, as shown in

tradition and genuine expression of popular culture generated in eastern Cuba, thanks to the emigration of French and French Haitians devoted to the cultivation of coffee." read the historic plaque. It was really, really cool! All Caribbean drums and whistles, and colonial era swishing skirts!

Back to the hotel to get ready for dinner - we had a few hours so two other delegation members and I decided to follow the migrating happy hours around the hotel (4-6 at the pool, 6-8 rooftop bar, 8-10 - we never made that one!). We sampled a Cuban Mojoto (wonderful!!), Cuban Daiquiri (not quite the same) and a lovely concoction called The Pink Flamingo. Since it was Happy hour, we were served 2 of each drink...at once. Needless to say, we could not make it to the 8pm meeting time for dinner, we stumbled to the Italian restaurant in the hotel and ate some very interesting interpretation of Italian food and off to bed.

What an action packed first day!!

Saturday March 10 – Santiago de Cuba

Up early for some birding at San Miguel de Parada, a conservation area and fauna refuge right next door to an oil refinery. We had hoped to see some aquatic birds since the area is normally a large marsh surrounded by mangroves, however what we found was quite the opposite. It was dry and resembled a moonscape. We walked across it hoping to get past the dry landscape and closer to the bay but the mangroves were too thick so we walked around it and through the surrounding woods.

The guides were locals (in muck boots and carrying machetes) and explained that we were visiting during the dry season, however they could not recall it ever being as dry as we were witnessing and attributed it to the effects of climate change. We did spot lots of small birds in the surrounding scrub, but no sight of any water fowl.

Shoes soaked and mud splattered up to our knees, we gave up after 4 hours.

Next we stopped at the Cementerio de Santa Ifigenia (Cemetery) to watch the very impressive changing of the guard at Jose Marti's grave. I didn't realize the guards goose-stepped; it was mesmerizing to watch these very young (almost boys) men march. I loved the concept of Marti's grave, a hexagonal building with windows situated so the sun would always shine on him. Hundreds of sparrows had taken up residence in the carvings on the outside of the tomb, their song echoing inside.

We stopped along the road when we saw a flock of snowy egrets (about 25-30) in a small creek. Everyone got out to take pictures. I discovered a bit late that the field I was running through was also the local horse crap dump...yuck!

After that we headed to Jardín de los Helechos (Fern Garden) for lunch and a tour. We saw thousands of plants and hundreds of ferns - I was amazed to see the world's smallest orchid and a fern that looked exactly like a 4 leaf clover! What an amazing place, so compact and yet so peaceful and visually stunning.

From there we headed to Parque Histórico El Morro, an imposing Spanish Colonial fort overlooking the bay of Santiago de Cuba, to watch the sunset, but a thunderstorm started to blow in so we headed back to the hotel. It was interesting watching the lightening over the mountains, while the sky over the ocean and the Fort was calm. Just as well, we were covered in caked mud from our morning adventures!

After our nightly review and bird count, we all met for dinner in the hotel and ate at a big table with our three Cuban guides, driver, and two Cuban biologists who composed the group. Already, one day into our trip, the bonds of friendship were strengthening. The Cubans are disarmingly open, eager to share their knowledge and experiences and not afraid to question us on ours! It was a lively dinner and very nice!

Sunday March 11 – Reserva de la Biosfera Baconao

Headed out early in jeeps for Parque Nacional Gran Piedra. Holy Crap!! The road we had to travel to get there! Straight up sometimes and hairpin curves, but the views were breathtaking, to see the mountains unfold into the sea, just spectacular!

Once we drove to the visitors center, we parked and started walking down the mountain in search of birds. Directly across from one of the jeeps, among the pine trees, was a nesting Cuban Trogon! Close enough to inspect without binoculars! Walked down the hill to the Jardín de Piedra and saw the Cuban Pygmy Owl sitting on an overhead branch. After a tour of the gardens, back up the hill - man, was that steep!

After that walk, we checked into our Casita's - adorable brick cottages on the side of the mountain with unbelievable views from the large decks! Decorated in a fabulous '60's kind of way and very comfortable! The Casita I was assigned had a large orange tree draping the corner of the deck, it drew in the Cuban Emeralds (a brilliant green hummingbird), I was able to sit quietly and view them at arm's length! Up close, they sound like tiny helicopters - bwap, bwap, bwap....What a thrill!

Lunch and then scale Gran Piedra in search of Gundlach's Hawk! To the top of the rock!

The climb up the mountain is a killer - 454 steps up and then you climb a ladder and rocks the rest of the way. I kept thinking as I was climbing, if I have a heart attack and die right here, at least it's doing something I love in a place I always wanted to be! I

made it to the top, about 45 minutes after everyone else, but I made it! The views reminded me of when I first saw the Grand Canyon, so expansive and grand that my mind had trouble accepting it was real. The pictures don't do Gran Piedra justice. We called for Gundlach's Hawk, this is where Dr. Freddie has seen some nesting pairs, but no luck.

Mary Anne and our faithful driver Carlos broke out in spontaneous Salsa dancing at the base of the big rock - where do these people get all their energy? Carlos is quite the fancy dancer!

After climbing down the mountain we headed over to Cafetal La Isabelica, an ancient restored French coffee plantation. Lots of Cuban Emeralds and Trogons sighted on the grounds. The tour was really interesting and we all had coffee in a little garden before we returned to the Casitas and dinner. After dinner everyone gathered at the hotel bar for our nightly bird review and count. We discussed the observations of the day, had drinks then off to bed.

Spotted: Cuban Trogons, Cuban Bullfinch, Oriente Warbler, Cuban Vireo, Cuban Grassquit, Black & White Warbler, Cape May Sparrows, Red-legged thrush, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Red-tailed Hawk, at least 6 Cuban Emeralds, Whiskered Vireo, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Mockingbird

Monday March 12 – Reserva de la Biosfera Baconao

Early morning birding to try again for Gundlach's Hawk. Still no luck. Around 11am we headed down the mountain to Siboney. What a charming little seaside village, with beautiful turquoise waves lazily rolling onto the beach. We ate at a restaurant that was associated with one of the guys from the Buena Vista Social Club, they played the DVD in an endless loop until a musician arrived. The guitar player was good! Dr. Freddie Rodriguez and Miguel Abad from BIoEco joined us for lunch and accompanied us to the Eco Station, (Dr. Freddie is the Director) Estacion Científica Emil Racovitza, for a talk on Siboney-Justici habitat and the scientific work going on there. The terrain there is weird, at first glance it appears to be a lava bed, but on closer examination you realize it's ancient sea floor. High above loom very interesting cliffs, marine terraces that rise up to 8 levels, with visible caves - we were told there are multiple species of bats that live in these caves and the scientists at the station are studying them. We met with Dr. Freddie's students and they briefed us on the banding efforts at the station and how they were dealing with the lack of a Cuba-wide banding system and communication with banding in other countries. Dr. Freddie also talked to us about the rare endemic

Cuban Gnatcatcher spotted in this area...and so we were off to find it! We did! I saw two of them and we all got photos!

Still packed into jeeps, we headed back into Santiago de Cuba and along the way Dr. Freddie saw a Gundlach's Hawk flying over! All the vehicles ground to a halt while everyone poured out and ran as fast as they could up a hill by the side of the road to see if they could spot the hawk. One of our travelers came face to face with a large black snake half way up the hill! We got a quick glimpse but no photos. This particular spot was interesting to me, rolling hills on the outskirts of town, with very obvious signs of drought. The grass was dry and crunchy, some of the trees stark and withered, the only real green was seen in the cactus used as fencing.

Back in the jeeps, we headed to The Hotel San Juan. It literally backs up to San Juan Hill. The hotel grounds had enormous trees with vines dripping from them, it was very lush and tropical - a haven for birds! My room was the very last room in the complex. I was also directly across from the lions at the zoo. I kept hearing them roar during the night and thought I had serious plumbing problems. At dawn, when I stepped out my door, there they were! Roaring loudly for their breakfast. I watched them pace for awhile and thought about how...I have never slept that close to lions before...ahhh, Cuba!

We met in the Hotel lobby to consolidate our bird counts and discuss observations from the day's activities.

Spotted: Frigate, Giant Kingbird, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Cuban Pewee, Cuban Emeralds, Cuban Trogons, Palm Warblers, female Black Throated Blue Warbler, Cuban Green Woodpecker

Tuesday March 13 – Santiago de Cuba - Guantanamo

Heading to Baracoa today! Late start due to a fellow traveler's lost camera charger. Finally on the road and we stopped briefly at Plaza de la Revolución - what a cool stop this was! Such a historic spot and here we were standing in front of the stage being assembled for the Pope to say Mass in just a few days.- It was exciting to see the Pope on the news when I got back home and know I had actually stood in that spot just a few days before. The Monumento Antonio Maceo is overwhelming, it's SO big! We got pictures and then back on the road.

The mountain range on the trip to Guantanamo is spectacular - so nice not to see them scarred by roads and houses. The terrain changed and we passed massive fields of sugar cane and then it morphed into rolling, rock strewn fields, suitable habitat for

burrowing owls. We stopped, but no luck. Another stop was by a river where we observed water birds and waterfowl. We arrived at the ICAP (Cuban Institute for Friendship Among Peoples) headquarters in Guantanamo hoping for permission to go to the Hatibonico-Batiquirí-Imias Park and the *monitongos* natural areas closer to the US Naval base...permission granted and then denied within half an hour. Bummer. Coffee at the Delegation HQ was the best so far in Cuba!

Back on the bus, interesting rock formations on one side, turquoise sea on the other. Slowly the terrain turned to desert and we saw succulents and cacti. We made several stops to look for the White-tailed Tropic Bird. At one stop, a seaside hotel/camp we saw several birds who nest in the dramatic cliffs overlooking the Caribbean sea. Turns out the Cuban Sparrow's habitat is in this area, too. But the weirdest observation at this site was all the cut up bones and teeth I kept stumbling over! Some were old and weathered, others still had hair and bits of flesh attached. Based on the size of the jaw bones, knee joints and teeth, I believe them to be horse remains. I'm not eating at this restaurant! Kinda creepy!

We ate our boxed lunches in the horse boneyard & rudimentary seaside vacation spot for Cubans only. Back on the bus we began the climb into Sierra del Purial along La Farola. It's hard to describe how beautiful the mountains are, every turn revealing another spectacular vista. There appears to be no trace of development in these mountains, a pristine landscape. As we neared the top, the road got narrower and the turns seemed sharper, while the views got even more dramatic! We stopped at Alto del Cotilla, the highest point in the mountain drive where you can see the Caribbean on one side and the Atlantic on the other - WOW! - and I don't just mean WOW about the views - we were swarmed by locals trying to sell us bananas, chocolate, *cucurucho* (A delicious coconut, nuts and fruit treat pushed into a cone made of palm bract or sheath!) and endangered snail jewelry. It was a mob scene and almost frightening! But we all got out, some bought food while others berated the snail vendors, we took some pictures and then started the descent into Baracoa!

Baracoa, the first colonial settlement in Cuba, is a riot of colors and music. The town is known for its eccentricity, artists, chocolate and the best food in all of Cuba. As soon as I stepped off the bus a young, tattooed man walked up to me and handed me a flower. I thought he was going to hassle me but he just gave me the flower, smiled and went on his way. The sea is beautiful and this intoxicating little town is like nowhere I have ever been. I was offered sugarcane juice, delicious!

We hung out in town, around the Hostal La Habanera and then headed up the hill to Hotel El Castillo where we stayed. The hotel is built atop the foundation of El Castillo, an ancient fort that protected the town. The views from the open air bar, pool and

courtyard are amazing, a picture perfect view of El Yunque, the bay, and the expanse of the town below. Loved the rooms, dark old English furniture and wide expansive windows that looked down on the town.

We all met at a picnic table by the bar and went over the bird count and then split up until dinner. We dined at a private restaurant and it was wonderful! Seems the further we get from Santiago de Cuba, the better the food gets!

Spotted: Rock Pidgeon, Loggerhead Kingbird, Anhinga, Cuban Tody, Black-Whiskered Vireo, Mourning Dove, Zenaida Dove, White-collared Swifts, Neotropic Cormorants, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egrets, Green Heron, Osprey, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, White-tailed Tropic Birds, American Coots, Limpkin, Killdeer, Black-necked Stilts, Cuban Emeralds

Wednesday March 14 – Guantanamo - Baracoa

Early morning historical walk around Baracoa and visits to several artists' studios. Art Historian Rosendo Romero introduced us to the many different styles of painting and multiple artists' studios. The rest of the day was spent exploring the town, had cake at Casa de Chocolate and photographed the interesting architecture found throughout Baracoa. Bought 2 paintings.

Lunch at the Fortaleza de la Punta with the whole delegation. The biologists from Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt joined us. The restaurant is built into the center of the old Fort, you can walk around the turrets and see beautiful sea views, it is in remarkably good condition.

Then off to see Museo Arqueologico Cueva del Paraiso (Taíno Archeological Museum), located in a cave on the side of the mountain - a really interesting and challenging place. Quite impressive how they have set the displays into the crevices of the cave.

3 members of the delegation went with Ernesto for a hike along the river bordering town to look for birds. I returned to the hotel for a much need nap.

The delegation assembled later at hotel El Castillo for our evening bird count and wrap up of the day's events. That evening we were joined by Elexis, Professor of History and the town art registrar (he certified our art so we take it out of the country) and Dr. Pun, the head surgeon for Baracoa, and his charming wife.

Thursday March 15 – Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt

Headed out early for the park - it is literally paradise. We unpacked the bus and set out for a hike with our local guide, Indio. We quickly found the bee hummingbird and *Eleutherodactylus Iberia* (the world's smallest frog). The hike was amazing, up and down hills, crossing multiple streams...and then, in the middle of nowhere...a guy has a table set up and he's selling coconuts and fruit! We all stopped to drink the coconut water and snack on some fruit. Had my first Chinese water apple - I'm hooked! We headed back to camp.

The biologists who run the Park shut down their office in town to camp with us double as cooks and musicians. Our first meal was a delicious black bean soup! The best I've ever eaten. After eating we started to set up the tents; we had an option of sleeping on bunks in the chickee huts or in a tent facing Taco Bay - I opted for a tent!

After that we took a boat ride around the bay, looking for aquatic birds. Very relaxing, but no birds in sight.

After our evening bird count meeting we ate dinner, which was delicious, then everyone powered up their computers to download all the pictures from the day. The shots Julio and Ernesto took of the birds were jaw dropping! Some locals came and started singing and playing music, and the rum flowed. It was a magical evening.

Spotted: Cuban Crow, Great Egret, Cuban Parrot, Cuban Emerald, Northern Mockingbird, Cuban Trogon, Rock Pigeon, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Cuban Tody, West Indian Woodpecker, Bee Hummingbird!

Friday March 16 – Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt

Delegation is up at 5:30 for a 4 1/2 hour hike - I decided to stay behind and sleep in. SNAP (National System for Protected Areas) was sponsoring a Fisherman's Festival at the camp - I'm so glad I stayed and got to experience this! All the local fisherman showed up with either a craft, an invention or a fish dish - they all took turns explaining what they brought and then telling stories. What blew me away was how every story revolved around protecting the environment like designing a hook system that would collapse flat and break down in the salt water if it was cut free, or deliberately not keeping certain fish because they had noticed less of them. Every participant was keenly aware of their responsibility to leave something for their children and grandchildren. The biologists gave presentations on protecting the mangroves and

estuaries. Rosendo gave a talk on how important their work was to protecting the park and habitats, then he showed them a video on protecting the nesting turtles.

After all the serious stuff, the fisherman broke out the rum and started playing their musical instruments and singing!

Once everyone was back from their hike we had lunch and then decided to try again for the Gundlach's Hawk. We hiked around and climbed to a decent height but no luck.

Dinner that night was a roast pig. I saw 2 shooting stars as I got ready to get in my tent. This really is paradise. I have never seen a place so beautiful or people so warm and inviting.

Saturday March 17 – Holguin - Pinares de Mayari

Leaving paradise today but not without music, singing and dancing first! Wow, what a send off! What an honor to be treated this way by the Cubans.

Today we lost Rosendo, Julio and Nancy, who had to go back to Havana. The group dynamic was different without them; everyone missed them. All the excitement and fun of our farewell party dimmed as our three new friends departed in their taxis. Our adventure in the paradise that is Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt was over.

We headed to Holguin and passed the nickel mines - scarred landscape and huge red mud run off in to the bay - this did not look like they were caring for the environment - what a stark contrast from everything else we'd seen so far. I missed not having Rosendo there so I could ask why? I wonder if this is the trade off, overcompensating on protection to make up for the destruction caused by the industrial areas? After this we began another long climb from Mayarí, up dusty red soil roads, to Pinares de Mayarí. We were supposed to stay at the Eco Station, but permission was pulled at the last minute so we ended up at Villa Pinares de Mayari. The Villas were Russian built log cabin chalets - very strange architecture from all we'd previously seen! Very comfortable and the grounds were spacious and well maintained, with peacocks on patrol. Because the grounds were covered with mature trees and surrounded by pine forest, birding on the hotel grounds was very good, in fact you could just sit on your porch and see multiple species!

After lunch, the delegation went to the Eco Station for a hike. Ernesto had been stationed there early in his career, so he took great pride in showing everyone around.

We assembled in the lodge to go over the bird count and discuss the differences in climate and habitat before dinner.

Dinner in the lodge was nice and the Director from the Eco Station dropped by for a visit.

Later in the night Ernesto and delegation members went in search of the Cuban Screech Owl...and they found it!

Sunday March 18 – Pinares de Mayari

Early morning trip to Salto El Guayabo. If you turn one way, spectacular views across the mountains and valleys all the way to bay, turn around and it's breathtaking waterfalls cascading down the mountains! Half of the delegation hiked down the waterfalls, the other half took a less strenuous hike and enjoyed the views and people of the park.

Later that afternoon we visited La Plancha, walking around the gardens and enjoying delicious traditional hand ground coffee. The main observation here was how dry it has been in this area, the normally lush grounds were sparse with vegetation and the water level in the pond was down several feet! And yet, along the road there were deep crevices where heavy concentrated rain had eroded large quantities of soil.

Bird Count and observations, reviewing the pictures from the day, then dinner.

That evening, after dinner, we celebrated a fellow traveler's birthday - dancing and singing around a bonfire! The hotel set up an outdoor bar and even the nurse and chef joined in! We danced until we were exhausted! We are all learning a lesson from the Cubans, celebrate the joy in your life every chance you get, be happy!

Monday March 19 – Holguin

We packed up early and started the trip towards Holguin.

We stopped at Biran to see if we could get into see the Castro Family farm, now a National Historic Site. It was closed to the public for pest extermination work. Our Ecotur Guide Ariel Sanchez, former leader of the Young Communists Party, spoke to the guards and they allowed us to have a quick, informal tour. That was really special to all of us, the houses and grounds, seeing the personal effects of family and Fidel, the grave site of Fidel's parents - Amazing! It was interesting to see firsthand just how wealthy and powerful Fidel's father was. We all wondered about the father-son dynamic and how it shaped Fidel's future in the opposite direction.

Next stop was Holguin and the Loma de la Cruz - Sole got out to climb the steps up the hill, no one else did - Ariel watched her head off and immediately saw a guy emerge

from the bushes and follow Sole. Ariel bolted from the bus and ran after her, scaring the guy off! Who knows what might have happened, Sole is pretty tough, but the guy could have caught her by surprise. Ariel showed what he was made of in these few seconds!

The bus finally lumbered up to the top and we got out to enjoy the expansive view over the city.

We stayed at the Hotel Pernik - with the Holguin baseball team! The baseball stadium is a few blocks from the hotel so we decided to go to a game between Holguin and Pinar del Rio on our last night in Cuba.

Dinner at the hotel and off to the game. The Cubans take their baseball as serious as Americans! Best new thing, fire roasted peanuts sold in paper cones recycled from newspaper or old books - delicious!!

Tonight we said goodbye to Ernesto - I am shocked at how sad I feel as the Cubans leave us and go back to their lives. They are so smart, funny and passionate, with a touch of naiveté, that makes their company so enjoyable! My heart is so heavy as this trip ends...

Tuesday March 19 – Holguin

Our last day in Cuba.

Headed out to tour the Holguin Jardín Botánica (Botanical Garden) - the man that took us around spoke very slowly so I could actually understand his Spanish! Beautiful, expansive gardens with an impressive variety of plants and endemics. After the tour we had lunch at Restaurant Mayabe - an outdoor restaurant with beautiful views over the city and mountains. The food was very good and our last chance for delicious Cuban Rum was not wasted!

On to the airport where myself and a fellow traveler broke down in tears - it was very emotional to leave. This had been such a wonderful experience and we'd developed a bond with the people and the country we now had to acknowledge was ending. The immigration man was rather curt as he was checking me out to leave the country; when I asked if he would stamp my passport, it was as though a veil lifted - he smiled warmly and asked me if I had a good trip as he stamped my passport. When I told him how I had fallen in love with his country, I thought he was going to jump from his seat and hug me, he was so delighted!

We only saw a sliver of Cuba; there are so many more endemic plants, and animals to search for. There is so much to learn about how they manage their protected areas and balance the increased ecotourism. So many of their endemic animals are limited to such small ranges that their fight to preserve is critical. This trip, a small taste of Cuba, has me wanting to see and explore the other National Parks and protected areas, I can only imagine the wonders they hold!