

PUERTO RICO

Mar 18, 2012 to Mar 24, 2012
George Armistead & Eric Hynes



With an engaging personality to go along with its good looks, it's no wonder the dapper little Puerto Rican Tody was a favorite for many. The todies are one of only two families endemic to the Caribbean islands, the other being the Palmchat of Hispaniola. (Photo by guide George Armistead)

Our 2012 sojourn into the commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the smallest island in the Greater Antilles, proved fruitful and relaxing, and yielded many memorable birds.

An early morning getaway the first day got us out of town and into the Haystack Hills. We were floored to step out of our vans and immediately hear a pair of Puerto Rican Screech-Owls dueting. Soon, we had them in the telescopes for leisurely studies, and we watched them drift off to sleep just as the other forest birds came alive. Zenaida Doves, Puerto Rican Bullfinches, and Antillean Euphonias were calling, and then we discovered a lovely pair of Lesser Antillean (Puerto Rican) Pewees picking bugs amid the sun-dappled mid-story canopy of this humid patch of forest. No parrots were to be seen or heard (at least with any certainty), but sightings of about nine endemics had us off to a roaring start. We lunched at some cliffs where White-tailed Tropicbirds sailed around in display, with males courting females, against cerulean skies. Then came the rains. Afternoon showers were to be a daily occurrence on the tour, but thankfully the birding gods mostly smiled upon us allowing us good weather nearly every morning and at other critical points. Our second morning we visited the incomparable Laguna Cartagena, where we hit upon the trifecta of Caribbean waterfowl in a big way. White-cheeked Pintails were in evidence while West Indian Whistling-Ducks and Masked Ducks were counted in dozens! Amazing! Also there were Purple Gallinules, Soras, and a nice array of ducks and herons.

An afternoon downpour spoiled our best shot at Key West Quail-Dove, though fleeting sights of three birds at least indicated

we were in the right area. Best of all was after a picnic dinner, when in one of our luckier moments on the trip, a Puerto Rican Nightjar began calling nearby, and soon we were enjoying prolonged views of one of the world's rarest nightjars. We spent the following morning in the Maricao highlands where we quickly tallied the island's most unique species, the Puerto Rican Tanager. That was followed up by brilliant sightings of the island's rarest bird aside from the parrot, the Puerto Rican Sharp-shinned Hawk. A handsome male sat up and preened for us at some length, and he provided us our 2nd most popular bird of the trip. It took some work to get our first good sighting of an Elfin-woods Warbler, but after that we seemed to stumble across them effortlessly. We enjoyed several simply magical sightings of this island icon.

A final morning in the dry forest was undertaken before heading east. We heard several more Key West Quail-Doves but never glimpsed a feather on them, but did enjoy multiple good views of the trip's favorite bird, the tody. Todies simply must be seen to be believed. There are no words that do justice to their charms. After some sweet sightings of them and some of the odd and squirrely lizard-cuckoo we headed east to El Yunque. Our lodging for the final two nights is tough to beat. With a wonderful waterfall view, and lush forest all around, the Scaly-naped Pigeons dodging this way and that, the Puerto Rican Orioles industriously working away at their nest, and the Loggerhead Kingbirds sputtering and stuttering in between bouts of harrasing orioles, there was plenty to look at. Our final day afield, we headed down into the lowlands and easily tallied our final two targets in some snazzy hummingbirds. Green-throated Caribs were most accommodating, and the dapper little Antillean Crested Hummingbird put in several appearances as well.

It was a pretty good haul, all in all. Eric and I want to thank everyone for making the trip such a success. The birds were great, and we enjoyed some good food, but birding with people of such good cheer really made it a great experience. Thanks again, and we hope to see you out birding again soon.

--George

For more information about this tour, including future departures, visit our website at www.fieldguides.com. And to see this same triplist online, go to <http://www.fieldguides.com/triplists/ptr12LIST.pdf> and you will find the list in its entirety.

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

WEST INDIAN WHISTLING-DUCK (*Dendrocygna arborea*) – 52 were visible at Laguna Cartagena. This species is mostly resident, but wanders because of the often ephemeral habitats that it prefers. It is rather secretive as whistling ducks go, being mostly crepuscular or nocturnal, and is the rarest species in the genus. As a whole the population appears to be increasing in part due to conservation efforts.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL (*Anas discors*) – Several hundred at Laguna Cartagena.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

WHITE-CHEEKED PINTAIL (*Anas bahamensis*) – Seen 3 days, with dozens present at Cabo Rojo.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – A scarce migrant in Puerto Rico, seeing two females at Laguna Cartagena was unusual.

MASKED DUCK (*Nomonyx dominicus*) – An astounding total of 33 birds at Laguna Cartagena was simply amazing, and in-line with other reports of high counts recently. Some observers have seen over 100 there in the past few months.

RUDDY DUCK (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*) – Several seen the final day afield, with one pair building a floating platform, common among grebes. These platforms are used apparently for both nesting and copulation. Grebes are unusual in that females will often mount males as well, but copulation seems to occur only when males mount females. We also got to hear one give their fantastic vocalization at Humacao.

Phaethontidae (Tropicbirds)

WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD (*Phaethon lepturus*) – About 20 at lunch one day.

Fregatidae (Frigatebirds)

MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD (*Fregata magnificens*)

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

BROWN BOOBY (*Sula leucogaster*)

Pelecanidae (Pelicans)

BROWN PELICAN (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*)

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – As is common in Puerto Rico, we saw many stalking pastures and weedy roadsides.

SNOWY EGRET (*Egretta thula*)

LITTLE BLUE HERON (*Egretta caerulea*)

TRICOLORED HERON (*Egretta tricolor*)

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*)

GREEN HERON (*Butorides virescens*)

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – Several around the hotel in La Parguera, and at Humacao.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – This species seems to be increasing on the island. We saw them 3 different days at different sites.

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*) – The assertion in many books that this species was introduced to the island appears unfounded. Fossils are known from neighboring islands as far back as the Pleistocene, and the species is mostly migratory, and thus a highly capable flier. More likely there was no food or habitat until Europeans settled the island, cleared forest and introduced livestock. Their partiality to only the southwest side of the island remains a point of curiosity.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – Several nice studies, with one feeding on a large fish, another sky-dancing, and one heard calling distantly from the forest at Guanica.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (CARIBBEAN) (*Accipiter striatus venator*) – YES! An extremely rare bird, and one we were lucky to find in the Maricao forest. It was voted the 2nd most popular bird of the trip. Approximately 150 individuals remain after the population has been ~halved since 1992. Habitat loss, hurricanes, and nest predation by Pearly-eyed Thrashers are all problems for this bird, that may deserve species status. Tanagers and hummingbirds appear to be popular prey items. This form appears more solidly ruddy along the flanks and upperbreast than the mainland form.

RED-TAILED HAWK (JAMAICENSIS) (*Buteo jamaicensis jamaicensis*) – Common, and seen almost daily. They average slightly smaller than those in the continental U.S.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

AMERICAN KESTREL (EASTERN CARIBBEAN) (*Falco sparverius caribaeorum*)

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – A fair number were seen this year, including one bird Doug spotted at close range up in a tree that had just caught a Black-faced Grassquit. We watched the falcon make quick work of the little bird.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Two sightings.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)



*Mangrove Cuckoos are widespread and common throughout the Caribbean islands, and, contrary to their name, occur in a variety of habitats, not just mangroves.
(Photo by guide George Armistead)*

CLAPPER RAIL (*Rallus longirostris caribaeus*) – Several spectacular sightings.

SORA (*Porzana carolina*)

PURPLE GALLINULE (*Porphyrio martinica*)

COMMON GALLINULE (*Gallinula galeata*)

CARIBBEAN COOT (*Fulica caribaea*) – All the coots we observed had white frontal shields. David Sibley's blog provides a good summary of this bird, and its tenuous status as a species.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

WILSON'S PLOVER (*Charadrius wilsonia*) – A nice close group of 3 birds at Cabo Rojo was a treat.

SEMIPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-NECKED STILT (*Himantopus mexicanus*)

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (*Actitis macularius*)

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

LESSER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa flavipes*) – A fly over at Cabo Rojo was calling.

SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER (*Calidris pusilla*)

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*)

STILT SANDPIPER (*Calidris himantopus*)

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

LAUGHING GULL (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) – A single individual at Fajardo was nice to see. Several folks noted the scarcity of gulls, which is actually typical in the tropics; gulls are mostly found in more temperate climates. In some cases tropical islands are surrounded by relatively deep water, and often gulls seem to prefer areas of relatively shallow water. Also, some theorize that the beach-scavenging niche in the tropics is often fulfilled by crabs, which are less sensitive to the high temperatures in these areas.

ROYAL TERN (*Thalasseus maximus*)

SANDWICH TERN (CABOT'S) (*Thalasseus sandvicensis acufavidus*)

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) [I]

SCALY-NAPED PIGEON (*Patagioenas squamosa*) – A common bird in Puerto Rico's humid forests. We saw many.

RINGED TURTLE-DOVE [FERAL] (*Streptopelia 'risoria'*) – The domesticated form of African Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*) this bird is abundant on the Southwest side of the island. [I]

WHITE-WINGED DOVE (*Zenaida asiatica*)

ZENAIDA DOVE (*Zenaida aurita*) – Common.

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*) – A few seen on the Southwest side of the island.

COMMON GROUND-DOVE (*Columbina passerina portoricensis*) – Daily.

KEY WEST QUAIL-DOVE (*Geotrygon chrysia*) – We heard several, but only got brief glimpses of three birds that seemed good candidates for this species. This was really the only species for which the heavy rains ended up hurting us.

RUDDY QUAIL-DOVE (*Geotrygon montana*) – One flushed off the road in Rio Abajo and was seen by just a couple people.

Psittacidae (Parrots)

MONK PARAKEET (*Myiopsitta monachus*) [I*]

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

MANGROVE CUCKOO (*Coccyzus minor*) – Seeing about 8 one morning in the southwest was sort of shocking. We



With only about 1200 birds remaining, the Yellow-shouldered Blackbird is one of PR's rarest endemics. Fortunately, they are still relatively numerous and easy to find in their stronghold in the southwest of the island. (Photo by guide George Armistead)

tallied them several different days.

PUERTO RICAN LIZARD-CUCKOO (*Coccyzus vieilloti*)

– A spectacular endemic that indeed eats its fair share of lizards, but also takes insects, and possibly even bird eggs. Other bird species respond to its call at times with alarm. We saw them several times nicely. [E]

SMOOTH-BILLED ANI (*Crotophaga ani*)

Strigidae (Owls)

PUERTO RICAN SCREECH-OWL (*Megascops nudipes*) –

Talk about getting off to a good start. This was essentially the first bird we saw on the tour. We stepped out of our vans the first morning and enjoyed seeing a pair of birds roosting in some bamboo. This can be a tough bird at times, but we managed to see it twice quite well. [E]

Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)

PUERTO RICAN NIGHTJAR (*Caprimulgus noctitherus*) –

It was looking pretty grim for this bird, during our visit as the heavy rains seemed to have rendered them inactive. After some trying, we heard one sound off nearby and managed a good long look at it. A critically endangered species (less than 2000 total), this small Whip-poor-will type, was thought extinct until its rediscovery by George Reynard (of Philadelphia; the cradle of American Ornithology!) in 1961. [E]

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)

ANTILLEAN MANGO (*Anthracothorax dominicus aurentus*) – Daily in the southwest.

GREEN MANGO (*Anthracothorax viridis*) – Multiple good sightings of this endemic. [E]

GREEN-THROATED CARIB (*Eulampis holosericeus*) – A handsome regional endemic that we enjoyed nice views of.

PUERTO RICAN EMERALD (*Chlorostilbon maugaeus*) – Several good sightings. [E]

ANTILLEAN CRESTED HUMMINGBIRD (LESSER ANTILLES) (*Orthorhyncus cristatus exilis*) – A fantastic little hummer, and another regional endemic. One young male we saw was having a distinctly bad hair day!

Todidae (Todies)

PUERTO RICAN TODY (*Todus mexicanus*) – An overwhelming favorite. Who doesn't love a tody!? Nobody. They are tiny, colorful, charming and absurdly cute. The local name is the San Pedrito (Little St. Peter), and we found cooperative birds at several sites. They look like little Christmas tree ornaments, and folks are often surprised at how small they are. This family was once much more widely distributed across North and Central America, but today is confined to the West Indies. [E]

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle alcyon*) – One at Cabo Rojo was well spotted by Miriam, and we saw a couple others.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

PUERTO RICAN WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes portoricensis*) – Surely one of the world's most handsome woodpeckers, and happily very common in Puerto Rico. [E]

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

CARIBBEAN ELAENIA (*Elaenia martinica*) – Marilyn and Dwight especially enjoyed this pesky flycatcher. Though these birds are rather dull in appearance, they make up for it with personality. We saw a couple in the "dry" southwest.

LESSER ANTILLEAN PEWEE (PUERTO RICO) (*Contopus latirostris blancoi*) – A smartly proportioned little tyrannid, we saw several well. Many folks would split the Puerto Rican form as another endemic to the island.

PUERTO RICAN FLYCATCHER (*Myiarchus antillarum*) – Not the most flashy *Myiarchus*, but still nice in its own right, this species was once considered a subspecies of Stolid Flycatcher. It is a frequent target of the Shiny Cowbird. [E]

GRAY KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus dominicensis*) – The national bird, and a good one as they are everywhere.

LOGGERHEAD KINGBIRD (PUERTO RICAN) (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus taylori*) – These birds are an oddity in that



A denizen of highland forests, the striking little Elfin-woods Warbler was the last Puerto Rican endemic to be discovered, as late as 1968! (Photo by guide George Armistead)

they are forest kingbirds, often lurking just inside the canopy, particularly in montane forest but even in the arid scrub of the southwest. Some authorities recommend this subspecies should be split. Unlike forms elsewhere in the Greater Antilles, this one's tail is entirely dark at the tip.

Vireonidae (Vireos)

PUERTO RICAN VIREO (*Vireo latimeri*) – Also known as Latimer's Vireo, and though its song may somewhat recall a peppershrike, this species appears most closely related to the group of scrub-dwelling vireos that includes White-eyed.

[E]

BLACK-WHISKERED VIREO (*Vireo altiloquus*) – "Sweet John Chewitt"! They were singing all over the place and we saw several as well.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

CARIBBEAN MARTIN (*Progne dominicensis*) – Several scattered sightings.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – One large group of molting birds in the southwest were funny looking.

CAVE SWALLOW (CARIBBEAN) (*Petrochelidon fulva puertoricensis*) – Endemic subspecies, nests commonly underbridges. Seen several days, but mostly fleetingly.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

RED-LEGGED THRUSH (EASTERN) (*Turdus plumbeus ardosiaceus*) – A handsome bird that could be split several ways eventually. The birds on PR have nicely streaked throats.

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*)

PEARLY-EYED THRASHER (*Margarops fuscatus*) – With human settlement and development this native bird has increased dramatically, and appears spreading north. It commonly spoils nests of other birds, taking eggs from endangered species such as Puerto Rican Sharp-shinned Hawk and Puerto Rican Parrot.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia noveboracensis*)

ELFIN-WOODS WARBLER (*Setophaga angelae*) – WOW!

Amazing studies this year. Several seen stunningly well.

Discovered only in 1968 and described in 1972, given its habits, we agreed it isn't too surprising that it went overlooked for so long.

Found from 1200 ft asl, on up, only about 1200 individuals comprise the whole population.

NORTHERN PARULA (*Setophaga americana*)

YELLOW WARBLER (GOLDEN) (*Setophaga petechia*

bartholemica) – I believe I may have referred to these as Mangrove Warblers, but the ones in Puerto Rico are of course among the "Golden Warbler" group. There are about 17 subspecies in this group, and those further south in the Caribbean have more chestnut on the crown than those in the north. We found them commonly along the south coast.

BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER (*Setophaga caerulescens*)

– One in the Maricao highlands.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (*Setophaga coronata*) – Miriam had one at Cartagena.

PRAIRIE WARBLER (*Setophaga discolor*)

ADELAIDE'S WARBLER (*Setophaga adelaidae*) – A startlingly beautiful endemic. Jim and I were surprised nobody selected it as a favorite for the trip. [E]

Coerebidae (Bananaquit)

BANANAQUIT (CARIBBEAN) (*Coereba flaveola portoricensis*) –

An interesting species, that surely constitutes several species. Some authors are proposing a three-way split. Long placed by

taxonomists in the family Coerebidae, today most folks believe them a subfamily of tanagers, closely related to



The other endemic warbler of Puerto Rico, the Adelaide's Warbler, was once lumped with both St. Lucia Warbler and Barbuda Warbler; all three are considered good species now. (Photo by guide George Armistead)

bullfinches, grassquits, and Darwin's finches. We saw "BQ"s everywhere, all the time.

Thraupidae (Tanagers and Allies)

PUERTO RICAN TANAGER (*Nesospingus speculiferus*) – The only endemic genus to the island and so really the island's most unique species. It is not super snazzy, but is still more attractive than illustrated by most artists. Nice views during our visits to the mountains. The local name for the bird is "Llorosa" which means crier or whiner, and refers to its loud call.

PUERTO RICAN SPINDALIS (*Spindalis portoricensis*) – These birds are funny. Males are stupendous lookers, females are distinctive yet unfamiliar, and both may be easily encountered, or frustratingly difficult to find, depending on the day. We found them easily at several spots this year. The spindalis, the bush-tanagers, the Puerto Rican Tanager, and palm-tanagers of Hispaniola may be more closely related to wood-warblers than they are to tanagers.

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies)

YELLOW-FACED GRASSQUIT (*Tiaris olivaceus bryanti*) – Seen well in the southwest.

BLACK-FACED GRASSQUIT (*Tiaris bicolor omissus*)

PUERTO RICAN BULLFINCH (*Loxigilla portoricensis*) – One of the most oft-heard birds of the trip, and we all enjoyed their loud calls very much. [E]

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

INDIGO BUNTING (*Passerina cyanea*) – Two at Cartagena.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

YELLOW-SHOULDERED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius xanthomus*) – With a total population of around 1200 birds this is very much an endangered bird. We saw them splendidly in the southwest at a couple sites. The Shiny Cowbird has been very hard on this species. [E]

GREATER ANTILLEAN GRACKLE (*Quiscalus niger brachypterus*) – Abundant in the developed areas of the country, we still admired their dramatic sounds and postures.

SHINY COWBIRD (*Molothrus bonariensis*)

PUERTO RICAN ORIOLE (*Icterus portoricensis*) – A handsome endemic that we saw at several sites, including a nest in Maricao that a ranger there showed to us. The youngsters cause confusion at times.

VENEZUELAN TROUPIAL (*Icterus icterus*) – Strikingly plumaged we enjoyed seeing several in the southwest. [I]

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

ANTILLEAN EUPHONIA (*Euphonia musica sclateri*) – A very dapper little bird, we enjoyed several good sightings.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) [I]

Ploceidae (Weavers and Allies)

RED BISHOP (*Euplectes orix*) – A.k.a. Southern Red Bishop. Northern Red Bishop (*E. franciscanus*) is also known as Orange Bishop, and replaces Southern Red north of the equator in their native Africa. [I]

Estrildidae (Waxbills and Allies)

ORANGE-CHEEKED WAXBILL (*Estrilda melpada*) [I]

INDIAN SILVERBILL (*Euodice malabarica*) [I]

NUTMEG MANNIKIN (*Lonchura punctulata*) [I]



A surprising 8 species of woodpeckers are endemic to the Caribbean islands; all but one of them are single island endemics, like the handsome male Puerto Rican Woodpecker shown here. (Photo by guide George Armistead)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 110 bird taxa and 0 mammal taxa