

Bahamas – 31 March to 4 April 2005

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Group in Abaco

Back in January, birding friend Gordon Brown and I were talking and he suggested we take a short trip that spring. Our schedules wouldn't permit an extended trip, so we decided to try for a long weekend close to home. After a brief discussion, we agreed that the Bahamas would make a suitable destination. The islands are accessible to birders and the birdlife is sufficiently different from Florida to warrant a visit. After consulting a few friends and on-line resources, we decided that Abaco was our preferred destination because it was home to more endemics than any other island. The best time to bird there is from late March through early May; because of scheduling problems we decided that a trip on the front end of this window of time was best. Other trip participants would be our fathers, Jim Dinsmore and George Brown, and Peter Frechtel.

Our plan was to rendezvous in Marsh Harbour on 31 March, bird for 3 full days, and then fly home on 4 April. Consultation with the American Birding Association bird-finding guide to the Bahamas indicated that this was an appropriate amount of time to sample most of the islands habitats. We rented a minivan in advance from Sea Star Car Rental at a cost of \$343; this vehicle was fine for our birding needs. Our lodging was at The Regattas of Abaco, a very nice beachfront motel in Marsh Harbour at a cost of \$220 per night, plus a 15% tax. We had a 2-bedroom suite overlooking the ocean with a kitchenette and TV. For meals, we bought breakfast, lunch, and snack items in a local grocery store to save time and money; we ate dinners at local restaurants.



The Regattas of Abaco

Once the travel arrangements were set, we were ready to bird Abaco!

31 March

All of our flights to Marsh Harbour were scheduled to arrive between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. Unfortunately, everyone made it on time except me; weather delays in Atlanta caused me to miss my connecting flight to Marsh Harbour (the last of the day!) by less than 15 minutes, and I had to wait a full day for the next flight. Those that did arrive birded locally around Marsh Harbour and found a nice assortment of endemics and winter residents. A couple of Magnificent Frigatebirds soared over the motel, prompting Gordon to call the area prime frigatebird habitat. Jim arrived at about 2:30 p.m. and was met at the airport by Gordon and George. They promptly drove to the dump west of Marsh Harbour (very smelly!) and saw Little Blue Heron, Glossy Ibis, Black-necked Stilt, Tree and Barn swallows, and several species of warblers. They then returned to the airport to pick up Peter at a little after 4

p.m. and briefly birded some mangroves south of Marsh Harbour where they saw Thick-billed Vireo, Bananaquit, and Black-faced Grassquit before returning to town for dinner. Near the motel office they saw a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a small flock of Cedar Waxwings. While walking around Marsh Harbour before dinner, a cheerful little boy about 6 years old stood at the end of his driveway, holding up an illegible sign and yelling something

incomprehensible. Gordon was in the lead. No one paid attention to him; Gordon deduced that he was begging for money. When Gordon walked by, an adult, maybe his father, stood in the front yard and good-naturedly told the boy to utter a profanity. The boy followed instructions, giggled, and ran back towards the house as if someone was chasing him! Dinner at the Conch Inn, where not surprisingly conch was a prominent menu item! Mostly clear, temperature 73-85°F, wind southwest 10-15 mph. (95 miles by car)



Bananaquit

1 April



Thick-billed Vireo

The group left the motel a little after 6 a.m. and headed south from Marsh Harbour. The first stop was a logging road in some pine forest a few miles south of Marsh Harbour. There, they saw their first Cuban Emerald, Loggerhead Kingbird, Thick-billed Vireo, Olive-capped Warbler, Black-faced Grassquit, and several other species. Next, they continued south to Bahama Palm Shores settlement

about 20 miles south of town. On the way, several Bahama Swallows were perched on wires along the highway. At one of the first stops, Gordon jokingly tapped on a dead palm tree with a woodpecker hole in it, not really expecting to find one in residence. He was thus surprised when a West Indian Woodpecker popped out and gave everyone a great look! This species has apparently become quite scarce on Abaco since the flurry of hurricane activity in fall 2004. Other birds in this area included a small flock of Bahama Parrots, La Sagra's Flycatcher, many Thick-billed Vireos, Red-legged Thrush, 8 species of warblers, Bananaquit, Greater Antillean Bullfinch, and Baltimore Oriole. They then headed back towards Marsh Harbour, making a quick stop at Different of Abaco where they saw White-cheeked Pintail and Common Moorhen.

After additional delays stateside, I finally arrived in Marsh Harbour just before 1 p.m. The rest of the group met me at the airport, much to my delight since I had been unable to contact them, and then we all returned to the hotel where I unpacked and we ate a quick lunch. We spent the afternoon birding a few local spots around Marsh Harbour so that I could catch up on some of the birds I had missed. We found no interesting birds in the Sugarland Farms area, but at Different of Abaco (apparently temporarily closed for business) we saw 9 White-cheeked Pintail and 2 Common Moorhens in the mangrove. Farther south at Bahama Palm Shores we spent a couple of



La Sagra's Flycatcher



Bahama Parrot

hours in the mid-afternoon heat birding the coppice thickets amongst the scattered homes. In addition to the expected residents the rest of the group had seen here this morning, we had great looks at 4 Bahama Parrots and found our first rarity, a Lincoln's Sparrow. Farther south we made a quick stop at Crossing Rock. Bahama Swallows were numerous in the settlement and from the beach we saw several distant shearwaters moving north offshore. At least one appeared larger and darker, a possible Sooty Shearwater; the remaining birds looked smaller and were probably Audubon's Shearwaters.

As the sun was setting we made our way back to Marsh Harbour, bought some pizzas to cook in the motel, ate a relaxed dinner, and called it a day. Mostly clear, temperature 71-84°F, wind south-southeast 10-15 mph. (140 miles by car)

2 April

We arose early this morning (4:30 a.m.), fixed breakfast, and were on the road by 5:30 a.m. We drove south and birded Abaco National Park until 8 a.m. The birds were very active and in the vicinity of the “Y” and the road south to Hole-in-the-wall we saw several pairs of Bahama Parrots, numerous Cuban Emeralds, 2 Cuban Pewees, several cooperative Bahama Mockingbirds, heard several Bahama Yellowthroats

(but saw only one), plus the expected winter residents. At 8 a.m. we took a short hiatus and drove north to Crossing Rock to ocean watch. The winds were strong out of the southeast, creating favorable conditions for seabirds to pass close to shore. In a half hour of watching we saw 2+ Audubon’s Shearwaters, 20+ unidentified shearwaters (most were probably Audubon’s), and a small flock of Sanderlings and Ruddy Turnstones on the beach.



Abaco National Park



Bahama Mockingbird

After a second stop in the national park (the birds were very quiet by 10 a.m.), we headed west to Sandy Point. We spent nearly 2 hours birding the town and nearby mangroves and saw a nice diversity of birds. Bahama Swallows were numerous and we saw 20+ throughout the town; the only bird that was more numerous was Eurasian Collared-Dove. On the flats to the

northeast of town we saw a Brown Pelican, Double-crested Cormorants, 2 American Oystercatchers, and several Royal Terns. We then checked the mangroves south of town and found several Yellow Warblers plus an assortment of winter residents. At noon, we headed back to the national forest, where we ate lunch and birded for about an hour. The birding was very slow, and we decided to return to Bahama Palm Shores, where we birded until about 2:15 p.m. We didn’t see many birds and were unable to find a West Indian Woodpecker, a bird I was still missing. We were back at the motel by 3 p.m.



View from Sandy Point

We decided to relax and take the afternoon off. Several of us took a swim on the motel’s beach and then made a run into town to visit the local Internet café and restock our beer supply. We had reservations for dinner at 6:15 p.m. at Wally’s, a local restaurant that was highly recommended. All of us ate seafood (I had the seafood platter, which included fried conch, grilled grouper and shrimp, and fried turtle) and found the meal o.k., although the portions were small. We

were back at the motel by 8 p.m. and in bed shortly thereafter. Partly to mostly cloudy, temperature 67-79°F, wind southeast 15-25 mph, shifting to southwest in the afternoon, rain showers in late afternoon (164 miles)

3 April



Western Spindalis

a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, an early Black-whiskered Vireo, 12 species of warblers including Worm-eating, Greater Antillean Bullfinch, and a stunning male Painted Bunting. We returned to the motel by 11 a.m., ate a quick lunch, and then caught the 12:15 p.m. ferry to Elbow Cay. Elbow Cay is a quaint resort island with a mainly yachting community. We were unable to rent a golf cart (they were booked through July!), so we walked the mile or so south of Hope Town to the native coppice where Key West Quail-Doves were reputed to reside. In the mid-afternoon heat there was little bird activity and we didn't see or hear any quail-doves. However, we did see an assortment of winter residents plus a Merlin that zipped by for a nanosecond, our only Ovenbird of the trip, and our first Western Spindalis. We caught the 3 p.m. ferry off the island and were back at the motel by 3:45 p.m.

We slept in this morning, but still lost time due to the shift to Daylight Savings time. After a quick breakfast at the motel we headed south towards Bahama Palm Shores, arriving there at 6:45 a.m. On the way we saw our only Cattle Egret of the trip just south of Marsh Harbour. The woods were quite birdy at the south end of the development and in a couple of hours we saw Snowy Egret, Bahama Parrot, a cooperative West Indian Woodpecker,



Elbow Cay lighthouse

After a short siesta and a cold beer, we drove north to Treasure Cay at 4 p.m. There we birded the golf course ponds and beachfront until dark. Soon after arriving in town we saw our first European Starlings of the trip, a species we would have been happy to miss! The pond along the eleventh fairway was the only pond with water, and it held a nice assortment of waterbirds including 35 White-cheeked Pintails, Least and Pied-billed



White-cheeked Pintail

grebes, a Green Heron, 2 Soras, and several Common Moorhens. In the thickets along the tenth fairway we found a Black-throated Blue Warbler and a Western Spindalis. Along the beach in town we found a few gulls and terns plus a distant Merlin. As we exited town we spotted another Merlin, our third of the day! We were back in Marsh Harbour by 7 p.m., but quickly

realized that nearly all of the restaurants were closed on Sundays. After some discussion Jim and George decided to get a sandwich at Mango's while the rest of us returned to the motel for sandwiches. After dinner we made plans for our last morning of birding and began packing for our departure. Mostly clear, temperature 72-76°F, winds northwest 10-20 mph. (132 miles)

4 April

We got a fairly early start this morning (6:30 a.m.) and headed south towards a patch of native pine forest off the highway, just south of the turnoff to Bahama Palm Shores. We birded this area for 2 hours and saw lots of birds including Bahama Woodstar, Cuban Pewee, Bahama Mockingbird, hordes of Olive-capped Warblers, and Western Spindalis. But the real highlight was seeing and hearing several cooperative



Olive-capped Warbler

Bahama Yellowthroats, a species we had seen only briefly up to this time. We then dropped Peter off at the airport at 9:15 a.m. and the rest of us returned to the motel to clean up and check out. We shopped in town for about an hour, ate a quick lunch at Jamie's (a relatively cheap sandwich shop with excellent food), and were at the airport by 1:30 p.m. in time for Jim and I to make our flights that afternoon. Gordon and George took a walk along the mangrove coast south of the motel and rescued a large sea hare (a shell-less gastropod which swims by means of an undulating mantle) from a rock crevice.



Cuban Pewee

The sea hare thanked them by promptly releasing its dark red ink once it was handled. The ink apparently is a toxic material that deters predators; they suffered no harm from the experience. They returned to the airport in time for their late afternoon departures. Partly cloudy, temperature 64-74°F, wind calm. (52 miles)

In the end we saw a total of 91 species during the trip, including all the expected endemics and local specialties except for Key West Quail-Dove. Most of the target birds were surprisingly easy to find in the proper habitat. For some species (e.g., West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Pewee, and Bahama Mockingbird) we were expecting to see more during the trip. Conversely, there were several species, especially Thick-billed Vireo, that were more numerous than we expected. And given the abundant coastal habitat, we saw surprisingly few “coastal” species – only a few frigatebirds, 1 Brown Pelican, and only a handful of Royal Terns.

Lastly, here are a few general comments for birders considering a trip to Abaco in the Bahamas. Although the Bahamas have their own currency, we had no trouble paying in U.S. dollars. Many eating establishments were closed on Sunday, and reservations were needed for many on Friday and Saturday evenings. We experienced quite a few problems trying to make phone calls to the U.S. with calling cards, but later found an Internet Café that worked well. There is a reputed \$15 exit fee for the country, but none of us ever paid one. For more information about any of the trip details, please contact Stephen J. Dinsmore (sdinsmore@cfr.msstate.edu).



Jim, George, Gordon and Steve

Species list (91 species)

Blue-winged Teal
White-cheeked Pintail
Northern Bobwhite
Least Grebe
Pied-billed Grebe
Audubon's Shearwater
Brown Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Magnificent Frigatebird
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Little Blue Heron
Cattle Egret
Green Heron
Glossy Ibis
Turkey Vulture
Red-tailed Hawk
American Kestrel
Merlin
Sora
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher
Black-necked Stilt
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Spotted Sandpiper
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Royal Tern
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
Zenaida Dove
Mourning Dove
Common Ground-Dove
Bahama Parrot
Smooth-billed Ani
Cuban Emerald
Bahama Woodstar
Belted Kingfisher
West Indian Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Hairy Woodpecker
Cuban Pewee
La Sagra's Flycatcher
Loggerhead Kingbird
Thick-billed Vireo
Black-whiskered Vireo
Tree Swallow
Bahama Swallow
Barn Swallow
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Red-legged Thrush
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Bahama Mockingbird
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler
Olive-capped Warbler
Pine Warbler
Prairie Warbler
Palm Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Worm-eating Warbler
Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush
Common Yellowthroat
Bahama Yellowthroat
Bananaquit
Western Spindalis
Black-faced Grassquit
Greater Antillean Bullfinch
Lincoln's Sparrow
Indigo Bunting
Painted Bunting
Red-winged Blackbird
Baltimore Oriole
House Sparrow