

BIRDS OF CUBA: A PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDE—Arturo Kirkconnell, Patricia E. Bradley, and Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet. 2020. Comstock Publishing Associates, Ithaca, New York. 384 pages. ISBN 9781501751561. \$32.95.

While birdwatchers in Cuba have a variety of field guides available, this is the first offering of a photographic guide to the birds of the island. Led by two of the region's premier ornithologists, with many excellent photographs by the late Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet and other contributors, this book does a fine job of capturing the island's birdlife in vivid colors. Although my own personal preference is not towards photographic field guides, this guide is mostly well done! The layout is pleasing and simple, the text spare but focused, and the photographs large and sharp, with high quality and mostly true color reproduction.

*Birds of Cuba* presents 378 species, curiously short of the 386 species (plus another 26 species classified as unconfirmed) that were included in the authoritative and recently published *The Birds of Cuba: An Annotated Checklist* with the same lead author (Kirkconnell *et al.* 2020). While the excluded species were undoubtedly vagrants and of minor importance to most birdwatchers, I cannot help but wonder which species they were and why they were not included here, because like many birdwatchers, I want to know that my complete guide is actually complete!

The book begins with more than 30 pages of introductory material. Some of the themes of the introduction seem a little extraneous. For example, there is a list of geographical facts and a history of Cuba in seven sentences! Slightly more interesting are sections on geology, origins of the avifauna, and a history of ornithology in Cuba, although I am not sure these themes really need to be included in a field guide. Similarly, a long section on "The Avifauna" characterizes the basic biology of landbirds, waterbirds, threatened and restricted range species, and migratory birds.

More useful and relevant to the birdwatcher are sections on the vegetation of Cuba and descriptions of 26 habitats or habitat sub-types. These descriptions frequently include useful maps, and very nice photographs by Arturo Kirkconnell that are, in my experience, particularly difficult to shoot in a manner that actually shows the character of the landscape. A short section on conservation highlights environmental laws, protected areas, and the five greatest threats to Cuban birds. Finally, while *Birds of Cuba* is not a bird-finding guide, the authors list 41 sites for watching birds in Cuba. However, few details are provided for the visitor; there is one sentence on general location of the site, one to two sentences on what birds to expect at each site, and in general, only scant travel advice.

Of course, the heart of this guide is the photographs. There is at least one image for each species, with at least three images for

each endemic and native resident bird. With multiple images, the authors are often able to show a variety of angles, birds in flight, and different plumages for males, females, or immature birds. Migratory species are depicted in their non-breeding plumage, but also in breeding plumage for some regularly occurring species. Although my preference would be to include all species in a similar manner, here vagrants and introduced species are illustrated with a single small photo and short description in appendices.

Each regularly occurring species receives full treatment on an entire page. Species accounts include local names, number of subspecies, description, voice, similar species, habitat and behavior, range (including a range map of Cuba), and status. Undoubtedly, a highlight of this field guide is the amount of information packed into each species account. There is a certain art to distilling so much information into just the right amount of the most valuable data, and these authors do it well!

The one-species-per-page format is great for depicting several, large format photographs, but one drawback is that it makes it difficult to compare similar species, whether they be congeners or just look-alikes. I also found occasional confusion when the standard one-species-per-page format expands to two pages for Cuban endemics. When these two pages do not face one another, for example with the Cuban Black Hawk, the second page of photographs might be associated with the following species on the facing page (in this case the Broad-winged Hawk). More complete photo captions would help here.

Although I am not a photographer, I found the selection of photos used in *Birds of Cuba* to be of the highest quality. For example, the full-page photo of the Bee Hummingbird on the frontispiece is simply exquisite! With multiple images used to illustrate many species, the opportunity exists to illustrate diverse plumages and field marks. Some species, like the Cuban Trogon, include images from a variety of different perspectives to capture all of the key field marks and even behavioral cues to identification. However, for other species there is less success in this approach. Perhaps this is due to a lack of photographic material, or the field marks are less obvious in a natural field setting. For example, four of the five gorgeous photos of the Gray-fronted Quail-Dove seem not to illustrate any variation in plumages or field marks. While *Birds of Cuba* goes further than many photographic guides in illustrating age, sex, and seasonal differences in plumage, when not all plumages are presented, I am invariably left questioning what I might be missing or what I might be misidentifying.

While I find the color photos overwhelmingly well reproduced with true colors, there are a few exceptions. For example, the colors of the Palm Warbler, female Black-throated Blue Warbler, and the Blackpoll Warbler appear "washed out" to me. I do not think these are printing errors; rather, they look like my old Kodachrome slides that were stored away and somehow lost their color over the years. Luckily, these issues are relatively rare; most images are bold and vibrant.

Finally, I do not normally look for errors of fact, but like many readers, I have a particular interest in the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Much to my surprise, I found a comment that the species was “officially considered extirpated from the United States.” This is, in fact, not the case (nor should it be), despite the much publicized debate over the identity of a “now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t” woodpecker championed by Cornell researchers 15 years ago. Thus, I found it particularly surprising that this error would pass the editors at Comstock, an imprint of Cornell University Press, of all places! In this era of conspiracy theories run amok, one might conjure up all sorts of explanations!

Overall, this is a well-designed, well-made book. The softbound covers and binding appear durable, the size convenient, and the

typeface small but clean and readable. I find that this field guide is a fine alternative for those traveling or living in Cuba, but especially for readers who prefer photographic guides over more traditional images.

### Literature Cited

Kirkconnell, A., G.M. Kirwan, O.H. Garrido, A.D. Mitchell, and J.W. Wiley. 2020. *The Birds of Cuba: An Annotated Checklist*. British Ornithologists’ Club, Tring, United Kingdom.

—Steven C. Latta

*Department of Conservation and Field Research, National Aviary, Allegheny Commons West, Pittsburgh, PA 15212, USA; e-mail: [steven.latta@aviary.org](mailto:steven.latta@aviary.org)*