



A [Tropical Birding](#) SET DEPARTURE tour

Puerto Rico: Enchanted Island Endemics

February 18-23rd, 2023



Puerto Rican Tody is cute, colorful, endemic, and abundant – what more could you want?

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Photos by Phil Chaon

TRIP REPORT

The Caribbean is full of great destinations for easy, quick and rewarding birding trips. Only a short, direct flight from many US cities, Puerto Rico is a great introduction to the region. Our 2022 Puerto Rico was extremely successful with over 100 species seen including all Puerto Rican endemics and another 12 Caribbean endemics to boot.

Wasting no time we started birding almost as soon as we left the airport. A 10-minute drive from the arrivals area, we swung into a neighborhood in San Juan to visit a reliable stake-out for the stunning **Green-throated Carib**. In addition to this uncommon and range-restricted hummingbird we met a few of the most common birds in Puerto Rico including **Greater Antillean Grackle**, **Zenaida Dove**, and **Bananaquit**.

Leaving the bustling metro area, we headed to Cabachuelas State Forest with a few hours to spare before sunset. We were greeted in the parking lot by a pair of **Puerto Rican Flycatchers**, a bold and conspicuous island endemic. After watching a pair sally from an exposed perch, we turned our search to a less obliging species. A short while later we came across a pair of roosting **Puerto Rican Owls**, which were just beginning to wake up in the fading afternoon light. We were very appreciative of the long daytime views and an excuse to avoid an extra early wake up the following morning. We ended the day with a double dose of cuckoos with a vociferous **Mangrove Cuckoo** and a bizarrely proportioned **Puerto Rican Lizard-cuckoo** both performing well for us.

We started our first full day at Rio Abajo State Forest, a lush tropical forest home to most of Puerto Rico's endemic birds. Within a few minutes of arrival we were joined by several other birding tours that just happened to be visiting that day. While we quickly went our separate ways, sharing information between guides led to some great sightings over the morning. We started things almost immediately with Puerto Rico's rarest endemic – **Puerto Rican Parrot**! With fewer than 250 birds in the wild, seeing three of these big charismatic birds was an amazing treat. After watching the parrots feeding at close range for nearly half an hour, we turned our attention to another difficult endemic – **Puerto Rican Oriole**, which happened to be building a nest right above our heads! The clearing we were in was so birdy we spent most of the morning stationary as **Red-legged Thrush**, **Black-whiskered Vireo**, **Antillean Euphonia**, **Broad-winged Hawk**, **Loggerhead Kingbird**, **Black-throated Green Warbler**, **Lesser Antillean Pewee**, and many others came to join us. Just before leaving the clearing we tracked down a pair of the incomparable **Puerto Rican Tody**. This spectacular viridian sprite is a major highlight of any trip to the country and part of a family entirely restricted to the Caribbean.

After the jam-packed morning we treated ourselves to a leisurely lunch where we tried some great local food including island staples like empanaditas, queso frito with guava sauce, arroz mamposteo and seafood mofongo.

A two hour drive later and we had traded the lush mountains for the dry thorn forest of the South-western corner of the island. This biologically rich area would be our base for the next three nights and we quickly set out to visit Laguna Cartegena. Exploring this large freshwater wetland, we were immediately greeted by an endemic **Adelaide's Warbler** right in the parking lot. From there we turned to more water birds and quickly found some spectacularly colored **Purple Gallinules**, as well as good numbers of **Green Heron**, **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron**, **Sora**, **Ruddy Ducks** and a Palm Warbler. The real highlights of the evening came at the end with a spiffy flock of **West Indian Whistling Ducks** and 7 (!!) cooperative **Least Bitterns**. At the end of the long day it was nice to unwind with some cocktails by the beach at our resort.

The main feature of our second day was a trip up to the Maricao State Forest. Found near the highest point of the island, this stunted woodland has a nice combination of stunning vistas and some great specialties. We took our time walking slowly down an old jeep track where we quickly found most of the birds we were looking for. **Pearly-eyed Thrasher** sang at eye-level while a pair of **Elfin-woods Warblers** came by to check us out. **Puerto Rican Woodpecker** put on a real show, feeding on a bare tree just meters away, glossy black and crimson shining in the sun. **Black-faced Grassquit** required a little more work but eventually emerged from the undergrowth for a nice look. A group of **Puerto Rican Tanagers** gave us great looks at the sole member of this family entirely restricted to Puerto Rico. Leaving the jeep track behind took a little bit of effort but with some help from a few friendly motorists we extracted our van from a hidden patch of mud. Back on our way, we headed to the main headquarters of the park where after a short vigil, a pair of **Puerto Rican Emeralds** appeared at a large patch of blooming Turk's Cap for a late morning snack.

With all our targets in the bag we headed down to the coast to check out a tern roost. In the midday sun we had large numbers of terns lounging on the pilings. The majority of the birds there were **Sandwich** and **Royal Terns** but there were also several **Common Terns** and even a pair of diminutive **White-winged Terns**, a vagrant from the old world. Aside from the terns there were plenty of **Magnificent Frigatebirds** drifting lazily overhead, some plunge-diving **Brown Pelicans** and a small flock of **Cave Swallows** feeding over a nearby ballfield.

Post-lunch we made our way to the very southwestern tip of the island where a small but productive pond held a bonanza of new species. A large flock of White-cheeked Pintail preened on the close shoreline while some more extensive scopework turned up **Stilt Sandpiper**, **Least Sandpiper**, **Least Grebe**, **Wilson's Snipe** and **Lesser Yellowlegs**. The trees along the waters edge provided our first looks at White-crowned Pigeon as well as a few small flocks of **Bronze Munia**, **Orange-cheeked Waxbill**, **Pin-tailed Whydah** and **Monk Parakeet** (all exotic additions to the islands avifauna). A flock of blackbirds in the distance caught our attention and we ventured into a nearby neighborhood where we were greeted by several brilliant, OSHA-approved **Venezuelan Troupials** and a dozen or more endemic **Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds!** With all of the days targets seen well, we opted to head back to the resort for a little bit of R&R. Following a lovely open-air seafood dinner, we were treated to a real spectacle – a blooming Ceiba tree filled with hundreds of **Antillean Fruit-eating Bats!** A fantastic way to end the day and one the big highlights of the trip.

Our last day in the southwest was spent doing some leisurely clean-up around this corner of the island. A long morning walk through the dry forests of Guanica was a nice way to get better views of **Puerto Rican Tody** and the handsome **Puerto Rican Bullfinch**. After a late breakfast, we enjoyed watching a **Puerto Rican Mango** attending to a nest with two nearly fully grown chicks. This attentive mother was not allowing for any other avian visitors and pugnaciously pursued nearby **Gray Kingbirds** and **Puerto Rican Spindalis**!

The remainder of the morning was spent exploring the surrounding mangroves and salt-flats. The mangroves held several raucous pairs of **Clapper Rails**, with a few even venturing into the open for us! Our trip to the salt flats upped our shorebird tally with **Semipalmated Plover**, **Semipalmated Sandpiper**, **Whimbrel**, **Willet**, and **Ruddy Turnstone** all on the list. After a brief siesta we returned to Laguna Cartegena and while Masked Duck continued to elude us, we did manage looks at a petite **Yellow-breasted Crake** scurrying across the floating bed of water hyacinth. Following dinner we strolled across the street from our resort to check out a few **Puerto Rican Nightjars** that were loudly calling and feeding under the street lights.

Our last full day on the island started with a late leisurely breakfast. After packing up we cruised along the south coast before stopping at a known stake-out for **Antillean Crested Hummingbird**. It took some patience but eventually one of these electric-crowned imps put on a good show, robbing nectar from large pink flowers. Continuing with our quest for difficult hummingbirds we headed into the mountains to try for the endemic **Green Mango**. Despite our best efforts, the mango only gave brief views. However, we were consoled with nice looks at **Puerto Rican Oriole**, **Cape May Warbler**, **Northern Parula** and a family of **Antillean Euphonias**!

Lunch was served on a nice shady patio with sweeping views of the mountains and plenty of **Puerto Rican Spindalis**, **Gray Kingbirds** and **Scaly-naped Pigeons** to keep us entertained while we ate. Before heading to our resort at the northeast corner of the island we stopped by a lovely riverside park to wait for a group of **Plain Pigeons** to come to roost. Some ice cream and a few cocktails celebrated the end of a great trip.

With only a few hours before our return to San Juan for our afternoon flights a few of us opted to check some nearby mangroves for a reported group of American Flamingos. The flamingos were nowhere to be found but we did see plenty of shorebirds, a **Northern Waterthrush**, and several **Caribbean Elaenias** before we returned to the resort for a final breakfast and a quick shower before our flights. It was a lovely week with great birding success, a clean sweep of the island endemics and some truly stunning habitats. The trip was also full great food, wonderful company, and comfortable beach-front accommodation. An unbeatable combination and a long list of reasons to visit the Island of Enchantment.

GALLERY



Finding a pair of Puerto Rican Owls on a day roost was a great way to start the tour!



The crest of Antillean Crested Hummingbird is truly electrifying!



Elfin-woods Warbler is notoriously shy but performed well for our group!



Puerto Rican Emerald is one of the five hummingbirds on the island (all island or regional endemics)



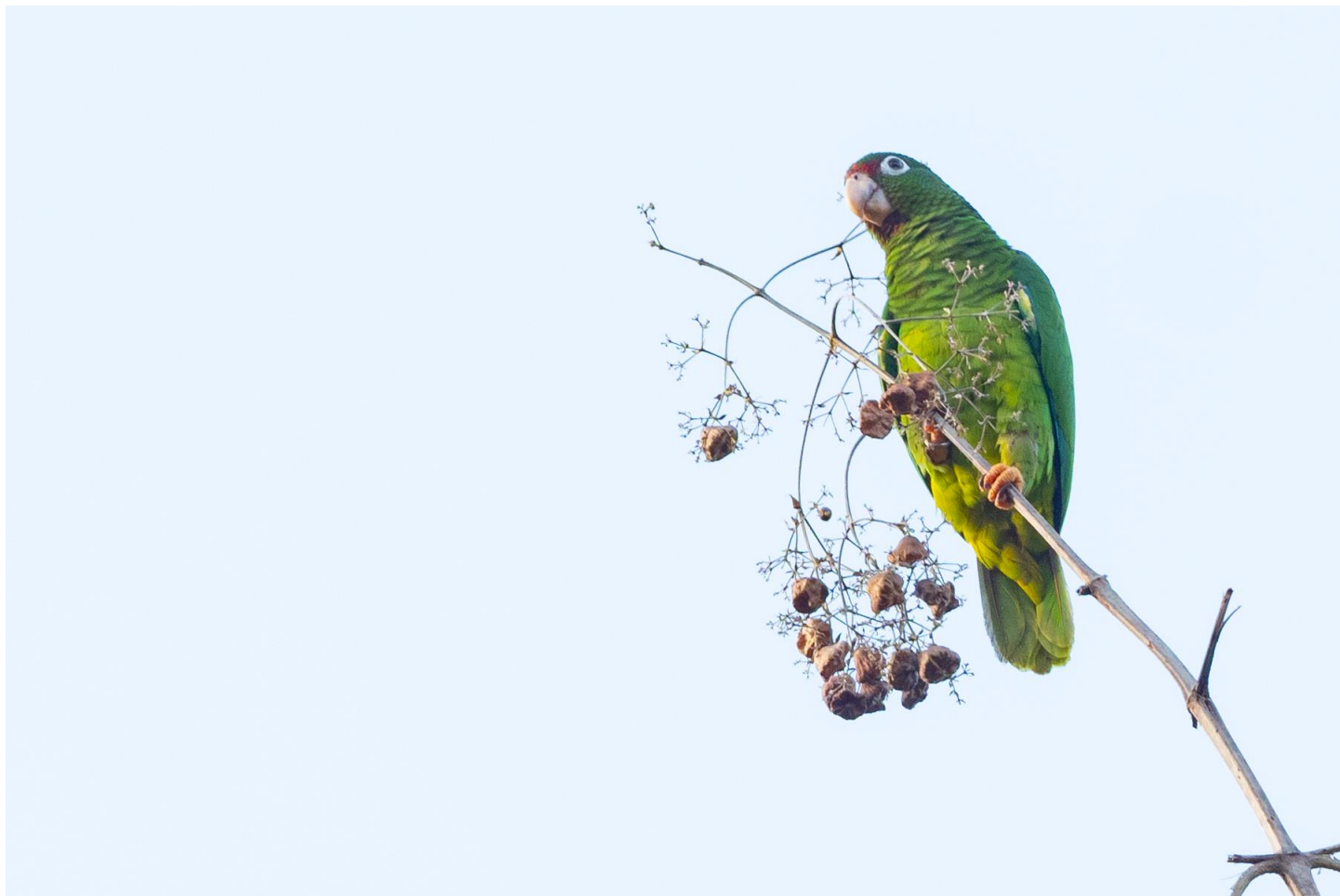
Antillean Fruit-eating Bats, cloaked in pollen, were a nightly spectacle at our resort accommodations.



Puerto Rican Tanager is the sole member of the family Neospingidae.



Pearly-eyed Thrashers are a noisy and charismatic backyard bird in Puerto Rico.



The critically endangered Puerto Rican Parrot was remarkably cooperative and rounded out our full sweep of island endemics.

TRIP LIST

West Indian Whistling-Duck (CE)	<i>Dendrocygna arborea</i>
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>
White-cheeked Pintail	<i>Anas bahamensis</i>
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>
Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>
Red Junglefowl	<i>Gallus gallus</i>
Least Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus dominicus</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>

Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Scaly-naped Pigeon (CE)	<i>Patagioenas squamosa</i>
White-crowned Pigeon (NE)	<i>Patagioenas leucocephala</i>
Plain Pigeon (CE)	<i>Patagioenas inornata</i>
Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
African Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia roseogrisea</i>
Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>
Ruddy Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon montana</i>
White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>
Zenaida Dove (NE)	<i>Zenaida aurita</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Smooth-billed Ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>
Mangrove Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus minor</i>
Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo (PE)	<i>Coccyzus vieilloti</i>
Puerto Rican Nightjar (PE)	<i>Antrostomus noctitherus</i>
Puerto Rican Mango (PE)	<i>Anthracothorax aurulentus</i>
Green Mango (PE)	<i>Anthracothorax viridis</i>
Green-throated Carib (CE)	<i>Eulampis holosericeus</i>
Puerto Rican Emerald (PE)	<i>Riccordia maugaeus</i>
Antillean Crested Hummingbird (CE)	<i>Orthorhyncus cristatus</i>
Clapper Rail	<i>Rallus crepitans</i>
Sora	<i>Porzana carolina</i>
Common Gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>
Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio martinica</i>
Yellow-breasted Crake	<i>Hapalocrex flaviventer</i>
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Stilt Sandpiper	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>
Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>
Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>
Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>

Solitary Sandpiper	<i>Tringa solitaria</i>
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>
Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>
Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>
White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>
Least Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus exilis</i>
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>
Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>
Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Broad-winged Hawk	<i>Buteo platypterus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Puerto Rican Owl (PE)	<i>Gymnasio nudipes</i>
Puerto Rican Tody (PE)	<i>Todus mexicanus</i>
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>
Puerto Rican Woodpecker (PE)	<i>Melanerpes portoricensis</i>
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
Monk Parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>
Puerto Rican Parrot (PE)	<i>Amazona vittata</i>
Caribbean Elaenia	<i>Elaenia martinica</i>
Lesser Antillean Pewee (CE)	<i>Contopus latirostris</i>
Puerto Rican Flycatcher (PE)	<i>Myiarchus antillarum</i>
Gray Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus dominicensis</i>
Loggerhead Kingbird (CE)	<i>Tyrannus caudifasciatus</i>
Puerto Rican Vireo (PE)	<i>Vireo latimeri</i>
Black-whiskered Vireo	<i>Vireo altiloquus</i>

Cave Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon fulva</i>
Pearly-eyed Thrasher (NE)	<i>Margarops fuscatus</i>
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
Red-legged Thrush (CE)	<i>Turdus plumbeus</i>
Bronze Mannikin	<i>Spermestes cucullata</i>
Orange-cheeked Waxbill	<i>Estrilda melpoda</i>
Pin-tailed Whydah	<i>Vidua macroura</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Antillean Euphonia (CE)	<i>Chlorophonia musica</i>
Puerto Rican Tanager (PE)	<i>Nesospingus speculiferus</i>
Puerto Rican Spindalis (PE)	<i>Spindalis portoricensis</i>
Puerto Rican Oriole (PE)	<i>Icterus portoricensis</i>
Venezuelan Troupial	<i>Icterus icterus</i>
Baltimore Oriole	<i>Icterus galbula</i>
Yellow-shouldered Blackbird (PE)	<i>Agelaius xanthomus</i>
Shiny Cowbird	<i>Molothrus bonariensis</i>
Greater Antillean Grackle (CE)	<i>Quiscalus niger</i>
Northern Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia noveboracensis</i>
Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>
Elfin-woods Warbler (PE)	<i>Setophaga angelae</i>
Cape May Warbler	<i>Setophaga tigrina</i>
Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>
Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga petechia</i>
Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>
Palm Warbler	<i>Setophaga palmarum</i>
Adelaide's Warbler (PE)	<i>Setophaga adelaidae</i>
Black-throated Green Warbler	<i>Setophaga virens</i>
Bananaquit	<i>Coereba flaveola</i>
Puerto Rican Bullfinch (PE)	<i>Melopyrrha portoricensis</i>
Black-faced Grassquit	<i>Melanospiza bicolor</i>