



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 2/2014

GRAND BAHAMA

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Between 29th of December 2013 and 2nd of January 2014, the northernmost island of the Bahamas, Grand Bahama, was visited as an extension to a private nine day birding tour in Cuba. This report will provide some information and suggestions based on experience gained during those four days. I stayed in downtown Freeport, making trips from there.



Fig. 1. A dark-backed male *townsendi* Western Spindalis. Perhaps a full species?

The Bahamas is not as easy to access as one might expect. There are many islands and the birds are somewhat scattered in the archipelago. On this short visit, there was no real chance to see Bahama Oriole (only on Andros) or Kirtland's Warbler (mostly on Eleuthera), for example.

Moreover, the local air connections are neither as reliable nor as direct as one might hope. I flew to Freeport on Bahamasair, from Havana via Nassau, and departed to Miami, again via Nassau.

Bahamasair unfortunately belongs to the airlines which are always late, even though the company operates from small airports with no congestion and does not serve anything on board. The delays tend to be hours and at least double the scheduled flight times, leaving less time for activities in the destinations. It apparently is a cultural matter, unwillingness to follow the schedules. Therefore, prepare for a degree of stress and confusion. Moreover, both Freeport and Nassau have separate terminals for domestic and international flights, even though one building was more than sufficient for the little traffic they handle.

As an example of a stressful situation, when leaving Freeport, the airport information table declared the flight to Nassau to be on time, even though the departure time had already passed. Soon afterwards, there was new information: the plane had left! Turning to a local gentleman next to me, I asked if he knew what was going on. *Don't worry, the plane has not arrived yet. Maybe in an hour...* We waited for one and half hours, and the plane arrived, even though the information table had closed the flight. I had another flight to catch in Nassau, and managed to do so because it was late, too. Sky Bahamas, another regional airline, appeared to be on time. It might be a good idea to try them for domestic connections, instead of the national carrier.



Fig. 2. A snack bar at Freeport Domestic Terminal; they had some tasty chicken pies for sale!

One needs to rent a car to be able to observe birds on Grand Bahama. My choice was KSR Rent-a-Car, whom I contacted half-a-year before the visit in order to guarantee a 4x4 with a high clearance, a Suzuki Grand Vitara. Rental cars can be next to impossible to find on Grand Bahama around Christmas and the New Year. The 4x4 was not absolutely necessary for the itinerary, but it certainly made things easier on the somewhat rough Owl Hole Road, one of the key sites on the island. A sedan is sufficient there, but requires careful, slow driving.

As a consequence of the Bahamasair delay on arrival, I had to pay KSR an additional USD 25 for a late pick up. Fortunately, I had called them in Nassau and there were other similarly delayed customers on board. All in all, the rental cost USD 299 for the four days. A total of USD 50 was spent on petrol during the visit, a half tank. Petrol was cheap in the Bahamas, if judged by European standards, just like it is in the USA. It was also easily available, with many 24/7 petrol stations scattered all over Freeport.



Fig. 3. My KSR Suzuki Grand Vitara at Owl Hole Road, parked by a small coppice among pines.

Accommodation is a bit scarce in Grand Bahama, unless one desires to stay at a beach resort or at the more expensive private establishments, both of which may be somewhat awkward choices if birding is the theme of the visit. Personally, I needed a bed, a shower, a fridge and a television. My choice therefore was Royal Islander Motel (USD 73 per night for a double; reserved by Agoda). It had comfortable standard motel rooms.

Unfortunately, the motel also had some problems at the peak winter holiday season. After an initial peaceful night, the place got full of youth and military personnel with pathological addictions for alcohol and cigarettes, not to mention loud music in the case of the former. As a rule, I had five guys drinking and smoking in front of my door and AC, at night and in the afternoons. I survived, but could possibly have done better somewhere else.

Otherwise, the Royal Islander was fine. At the KSR they recommended the Castaways Resort, also in downtown Freeport (about USD 100). Both of these places are close to the Freeport airport. Leave the roundabout in front of the domestic terminal and drive south towards downtown along the East Mall Drive. The accommodations are at the end of the street, in a convenient location for excursions along the main Freeport east-west thoroughfares of Grand Bahama Hwy and East Sunrise Hwy.

Food may initially be difficult to find in Freeport, if one prefers healthy and tasty alternatives to fast food. I arrived late on the Saturday evening. Because of the delay, the larger supermarkets were already closed and they were going to remain so the next day. On arrival, drinks and food were bought at a convenience store (signposted) right before the Royal Islander, on the left. Later on, I spent some time trying to locate a supermarket in the town center. There are none there. Eventually, well-stocked Solomon's supermarkets were discovered at Queens Hwy, short distance from the airport towards West End (opposite KSR office), and at Seahorse Shopping Center, along Seahorse Rd. The hotel restaurant meal times did not really agree with my timetables; leaving before sunrise and returning after sunset.



Fig. 4. Driving east towards Owl Hole Road on the East Sunrise Hwy, before sunrise.

BIRDS AND BIRDING SITES

In regard to birds, there were four target species which needed to be seen, two of them relatively difficult in mid-winter: Bahama Woodstar, Bahama Swallow, the recently split Bahama Warbler and Bahama Yellowthroat. In addition, the following potential splits were on the list: *bahamensis* Loggerhead Kingbird, *insularis* Brown-headed Nuthatch (Grand Bahama Nuthatch) and *townsendi* Western Spindalis. Olive-capped Warbler was also high on the wish list, together with *crassirostris* Thick-billed Vireo, even though I had just seen these species in Cuba.

I also played a lot of Kirtland's Warbler calls around coppices, without success. The species is very rare on Grand Bahama, even though there have been a number of reports during the past decades, as a result of confusion in identification. Among the usual target species, I had no specific interest for Key West Quail-Dove or Bahama Mockingbird (saw one). They both apparently are somewhat difficult to locate on Grand Bahama, without local knowledge.

The main birding sites of the visit included: 1) Pine Ridge Landfill, 2) Garden of Groves and the former Shannon Golf Course, 3) eastern end of Fortune Beach, 4) Owl Hole Road and 5) coastal tracks at the end of the OHR. Some observations were also made in Freeport, at residential areas. The Rand Nature Centre (in Freeport, at East Settler's Way, see Internet maps) was visited only briefly, in vain hope to get up-to-date information on Bahama Woodstars.



Fig. 5. An *orpheus* Northern Mockingbird, the most common passerine in Freeport.

In regard to access, I would recommend having a look at Google maps and satellite images. Road maps were available at the car rental and were supplemented by Internet prints. The landfill is located and signposted east of the airport, along the Grand Bahama Hwy. The birds of the landfill may be observed from the access road (bring your scope), which also goes through some interesting habitat. I met the general manager Lew Carroll there, and he graciously invited me to go in (the place was closed on Sunday; birders are welcome). Consequently, I took the 4x4 on top of the mountain of rubbish, from where close looks of the swallows could be had. As a bonus, I could also see half of the island. It is the highest point of Grand Bahama!

Garden of Groves, a busy tourism business, is also easy to locate on maps (corner of Midshipman's Rd/East Sunrise Hwy), at the southeastern end of Freeport. Personally, I did not go in to the park (entrance fee applies), but did my birdwatching around the small forest, at the public section of the parking lot and at the adjacent abandoned Shannon Golf Course, now completely overgrown.

Erika Gates, a well known local birder and businesswoman, has transformed the latter into a quad exercise track, and one has to be early (before 10 AM) or late to be able to walk into the bush. So much for the 'nature trail', mentioned in earlier trip reports! The quads may also be seen at Owl Hole Road, even though thankfully not during my visits.



Fig. 6. The entrance of Garden of Groves parking area, with access to Shannon Golf Course.

Leaving the Garden of Groves, one may turn right and continue to the seashore, following the Magellan Drive. Turning left at a junction (Fortune Bay Drive), one soon discovers an empty lot on the right, with an access to the shore. This is the eastern end of Fortune Beach. From there, at low tide, it is possible to scan a section of particularly productive tidal flats by a scope. There are wintering shorebirds, gulls, terns and some resident birds. I went there three times, twice at high tide, and always saw something new.

The Owl Hole Road is the key site for Grand Bahama endemics close to Freeport. In order to go there, one needs to cross the channel east of the town. There are two ways to do it: 1) by driving the Grand Bahama Hwy till a fallen bridge, turning right to Fortune Bay Drive, then left to East Sunrise Hwy, and again left in order to cross a bridge on Casuarina Rd, or 2) by driving on the East Sunrise Hwy and Casuarina Rd all the way.

Going straight on, one will arrive at the Grand Bahama Hwy on the eastern side of the channel. After some kilometers of a straight highway, before the one and only curve to the right (signposted), a gravel track leaves the tarmac to the right. This is the Owl Hole Road, even though there are no signs to indicate it. On the opposite side of the highway, another track goes to the left, the central pineland region being crisscrossed by a grid of such tracks.



Fig. 7. The Owl Hole Road junction at dawn, with some visible hurricane damage.



Fig. 8. A bush of small red flowers; look for Bahama Woodstars here, but...



Fig. 9. ...expect to find a Cuban Emerald!

The Owl Hole Road initially follows an abandoned phone line but soon veers sharply left. After 200 meters, one begins to enter the prime pineland habitat for Bahama endemics. Look for coppices, pockets of lush vegetation along the road. Mixed species bird parties favor the pines, but are not always easy to locate. In general, the forest may at times appear remarkably birdless but persistence will pay off, sooner or later. I birded this area six times.

Further along the road, a space for parking on the left indicates an unmarked path to the hole itself. American Barn Owls breed there, in season. Driving forward, one enters the low coastal forest, the edge of which was quite productive. At a T-junction, one may continue either left or right (better choice). Along this track, there were a lot of small red flowers which are favored by hummingbirds. The thickets were also a good place for various other species. One may continue till a parking space on the left, an access to a fine secluded beach, and turn the car there. There is no sense in driving further, as the forest will soon end. Or leave the car at the T and walk...

When visiting the Owl Hole Road, I arrived at the open pineland at first light, birded there, and entered the coastal coppices as soon as things warmed up a bit. On the return drive, another period of observations was spent among the pines. In the afternoon, I did the same routine, spending the last hour of sunlight at the pineland. Only three other cars were seen on the road.

Unfortunately, it often was cloudy at the time of the visits, as an arctic cold front was pushing towards the Caribbean around the New Year 2013-2014. There consequently was but little movement in the pines for most of the time. As soon as the sun came out, one could hear and see the birds, roaming around the seemingly endless habitat (plenty of hurricane damage).

All in all, it is small island with easy to visit birding locations. With some preparations (e.g. studying Google Maps and downloading mp3s at Xeno.Canto), there is no need to hire a guide. One runs out of the species fast enough by oneself. The following list will include all the bird species I observed on the island, 58 altogether, with some additional information.

I did not try to maximize my Bahama list but rather attempted to see the target species as well and as often as possible. Somehow I missed (Eastern) Red-legged Thrush and Crescent-eyed Pewee, both of which I had fortunately seen before. They probably are easy at Rand Nature Centre or inside the Garden of Groves.

FP = Freeport residential areas, FB = Fortune Beach, GG = Garden of Groves and Shannon Golf Course, OHR = Owl Hole Road, CT = OHR coastal tracks, PRL = Pine Ridge Landfill.

SPECIES LIST

Magnificent Frigatebird: One at OHR.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: One adult in winter plumage at FB; *graellsii*.

Ring-billed Gull: Up to six at FB.

Royal Tern: One at FB.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron: Two immatures on the track at CT.

Piping Plover: Up to five at FB.

Black-bellied Plover: A maximum of 44 in winter plumage at FB, one at CT.

Western Sandpiper: 5 PHL, 2 FB.

Sanderling: Two at FB.

Ruddy Turnstone: Two at FB.

Double-crested Cormorant: One at FB.

American Kestrel: Three at PHL, one at F; two at OHR; the subspecies *sparverioides* has split potential.

Red-tailed Hawk: A resident pair at PHL; subspecies *umbrinus* (also in Florida).

Turkey Vulture: Up to 30 on a daily basis, especially at PRL.

White-crowned Pigeon: A number of individuals daily at OHR, CT, GG and FP; GG maximum 10.

Rock Dove: A few at FP.

White-winged Dove: One at FP.

Collared Dove: Several at GG, common to abundant at FP; e.g. 40 birds in one residential garden.

Common Ground-Dove: A few OHR, GG, FP; *bahamensis*.

Mourning Dove: Relatively common at PRL, FP.

Zenaida Dove: One along the Grand Bahama Hwy; *zenaida*.

Smooth-billed Ani: One at FP, Churchill Rd.

Cuban Emerald: Common at GG, OHR and especially at CT. Over 20 seen daily.

Bahama Woodstar: Live nomadic lives under the dominance of Cuban Emeralds. May visit some feeders or gardens 'regularly', but that may be once in two days. One immature and brief view of a flying adult were had at CT. Focusing on the trackside rows of bushes with small red flowers was a good decision but much work and four visits were required to score. I did also check a few dozen streetside gardens in Freeport, probably alarming some residents. Well, at least their dogs.

Belted Kingfisher: One at FP.

Hairy Woodpecker: Three at OHR; subspecies *piger*.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker: One at GG, at the Shannon Golf Course building.

La Sagra's Flycatcher: One at the end of OHR, one at CT, one at GG; *lucaysiensis*.

Loggerhead Kingbird: Two at OHR, one at PRL, one at FP; the distinctive *bahamensis* will probably become a full species as soon as the Loggerhead taxonomy is completely reviewed.

Purple Martin: One adult at FP.

Tree Swallow: About 10 with the following species, PRL.

Bahama Swallow: A maximum of four adults at PRL, together with Tree Swallows, feasting on the abundant flies. Bahama Swallows tend to leave Grand Bahama in mid-winter but these birds had decided to stay. It was very satisfying to prove a theory true by finding them at the landfill!

Blue-grey Gnatcatcher: Up to 8 at OHR daily; some consider the *caesiogaster* subspecies to have split potential.

Brown-headed Nuthatch: A total of 6 were seen at OHL. According to Erika Gates, there are about 15 birds there, and along the track on the opposite side of the highway. The subspecies *insularis* is likely to be a full species, with significantly longer bill and different calls. According to the locals, they do not respond to the recordings of the U.S. birds.



Fig. 10. A *bahamensis* Loggerhead Kingbird, with its rufous uppertail coverts; another future split.

Grey Catbird: Common OHR and CT, and frequently seen by the road, and especially at GG. The Shannon Golf Course main building thicket had a maximum of 20 birds.

Bahama Mockingbird: One in FP, Churchill Rd; *gundlachi*.

Northern Mockingbird: The most visible passerine overall, especially common in FP suburbs; subspecies *orpheus*.

Thick-billed Vireo: Three were seen and photographed at CT. Subspecies *crassirostris*.

Yellow-throated Vireo: One observed at OHR.

Black-and-White Warbler: Five at OHR-CT.

Prairie Warbler: One wintering individual seen at OHR on each visit.

Bahama Warbler: A total of three seen at OHR; the extra long bill attracts attention.

Yellow-throated Warbler: One at Rand Nature Centre parking area.

Yellow-rumped Warbler: A few at GG and OHR.

Olive-capped Warbler: Only one male at OHR, despite extensive mp3 play. A few possibles there were left unidentified.

Black-throated Green Warbler: Single individuals at OHR-CT.

Pine Warbler: The most common warbler in pine forests, OHR; *achruster*.

Palm Warbler: Common throughout, especially at PRL, OHR.

Bahama Yellowthroat: Two adult females seen at OHR, one in the pine forest and one towards the end of the road, 50 meters before the T-junction.

Common Yellowthroat: One immature was seen at the OHR.

Northern Parula: Two at CT.



Fig. 11. An adult Bahama Swallow at the landfill; deep tailfork and white underwing coverts.

American Redstart: Four were seen at GG.

Bananaquit: A total of 5 at CT; the Bananaquit complex may eventually be split into several species. The Grand Bahama subspecies is *bahamensis*.

Western Spindalis: Six adult males and three females at OHR-CT, two females at GG. I do not know why *townsendi* was not split as Bahama Spindalis, together with Puerto Rican, Jamaican and Hispaniolan Spindalises. That would appear more logical than the present arrangement, if judged by a 'layman taxonomist'. Perhaps there is a cline between Grand Bahama and Cuba?

Black-faced Grassquit: Three at OHR, towards the end; *bicolor*.

House Sparrow: Common in FP.

Greater Antillean Bullfinch: A total of four were observed at CT; *violacea*.

Indigo Bunting: One female/immature at the Casuriana Rd – Grand Bahama Hwy junction.



Fig. 12. A La Sagra's Flycatcher, at the end of Owl Hole Road.



Fig. 13. An immature Greater Antillean Bullfinch at a coastal coppice.



Fig. 14. The endangered Grand Bahama Nuthatches face an uncertain future. A taxonomic upgrade could be one way to save the (sub)species. The length of the bill, one of its distinctive features, does not show well in this photo.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The people of the Bahamas are extremely nice. The infrastructure and the services are there, not to mention the interesting birds. The islands have an enormous client potential among the U.S. birders, right across the border. Nevertheless, remarkably few birders visit the islands, and tend to do it in groups. It is a pity that the flight schedules are so unreliable and there consequently is the stress of potentially losing one's international connections, in other words many hundreds (even thousands) dollars or euros. If I was in charge of tourism in the Bahamas, my first task would be to correct this minor but crucial detail.

It was a relief to finally arrive in Comfort Inn Airport in Miami, take a rest in their bed and open the high definition television to enjoy the adventures of Ms. Lara Croft... No need to make plan Bs, Cs and Ds in case the Bahamasair would be late for an additional hour or more! I did not mind that it was an extra hotel night, which I had scheduled and booked only because of the reputation of the airline. At that rewarding moment, I was also blissfully unaware of the forthcoming ordeal of 38 hours of 'controllable' delays with Air Canada. All in all, I had ten delayed flights in a row on this memorable journey to the Caribbean, via Canada for the first and also the last time...



Fig. 15. Observing Ms. Croft at Comfort Inn in Miami, after finally arriving in the USA.