

## FEBRUARY 2012 GRAND BAHAMA TRIP REPORT

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### Introduction:

We decided to take advantage of an inexpensive package deal from Expedia and re-visit this Caribbean island. The package included direct flights (only 2 hours and 20 minutes) on Vision Airlines from Baltimore to Freeport, and 4 nights at the Radisson Grand Lucayan Hotel. We arrived late afternoon of February 5<sup>th</sup> and departed early morning on February 9<sup>th</sup>. This gave us just over three days of birding.

Upon arriving at Freeport AP we picked up our rental car from Brad's Car Rental and drove to the upscale Grand Lucayan. We checked in, unloaded our luggage and had just enough time for a quick trip down to the Garden of the Groves [about fifteen minutes from the hotel]. At that time of day the Gardens were closed so we birded for a short while on the new trail on the adjacent abandoned golf course.

Our first birding trip here was in April 1993. Since that time the island has experienced at least two major hurricanes (in mid-2000s). These have had a devastating impact on the very extensive pine forest habitat that dominates much of the island. Many hundreds of acres of pines have been destroyed leaving a depressing scene of thousands of dead trees. Several species of birds appear to have been greatly impacted and are now in much reduced numbers.



Caribbean Pine woods with palm understory



Hurricane damage at Dover Sound

### Contacts:

**Birding:** Our thanks to Bruce Purdy (bbfpo@yahoo.com) and Erika Gates (erikagatesgb@aol.com) who gave us information on where to find certain target

species; Erika also invited us to her wonderful garden that is a paradise for birds. Bruce is the current compiler for the Grand Bahama Christmas Bird Count. Erika operates both Garden of the Groves and Grand Bahama Nature Tours. ([www.grandbahamanaturetours.com](http://www.grandbahamanaturetours.com))

**Car Hire:** We rented a mid-sized Pontiac from Brad's Car Rental (<http://www.bradscarrental.com/>) for \$50/day. Smaller cars are less expensive but none were available when we were there. Easy pick-up and drop-off at airport.

**Itinerary:**

**2/5/12** Brief late afternoon birding at the entrance to the Garden of the Groves and the trail onto the adjacent abandoned Shannon golf course. In 1993 when we birded the golf course the grounds were still being extensively mowed and there was little in the way of birds. Mowing was discontinued some years ago and now the secondary growth [coppice] has grown up. This has resulted in an extensive area of native coppice habitat. A new nature trail adjacent to the Garden is being created and we followed the newly-cleared track for about a mile. We saw a higher density and diversity of birds in this area than any other site on the island.

**2/6/12** We birded the abandoned golf course trail from dawn to 9.00 a.m. when the Garden of the Groves opened up. We then paid our entry fee and started to bird this area. Unfortunately after a short while, it started to rain very heavily and we had to abandon our birding. The Gardens, now locally owned, are an excellent place to start birding. It has a number of short trails around ponds and tall trees, with lots of undergrowth and food plants. It was easily the best site for White-crowned Pigeons. The ponds held a small party of White-cheeked Pintail and two Fulvous Whistling Ducks [both species of questionable provenance].



**Bahama (Blue-gray) Gnatcatcher**



**Cuban Emerald (male)**

We met Erika Gates at the office and she pointed various good sites out on our map while we waited for the rain to stop. After the rain subsided we drove east across the canal to an extensive area of undamaged pine woodland where the endemic *insularis*

race of the Brown-headed Nuthatch (a probably split as Bahama Nuthatch) can be found. Unfortunately no nuthatches but we obtained brief but good views of Olive-crowned Warbler and Gail also saw a couple of the recently-split Bahama Warbler. We then drove out to McLean's Town at the far eastern end of the island and birded the newly opened Crabbing Bay Nature Trail. This trail and the adjacent town are the only places on Grand Bahama for the West Indian Woodpecker. Alas, it was very quiet when we were there and no woodpeckers were seen. Other specialty birds seen today included the Greater Antillean Bullfinch, Cuban Emerald, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Loggerhead Kingbird, Western Spindalis, Red-legged Thrush and Thick-billed Vireo.



**Loggerhead Kingbird**



**Thick-billed Vireo**



**Bahama Red-legged Thrush**



**Pine Warbler**

2/7/12 Today we focused on sites on the western side of the island. We again had an early morning visit to the abandoned golf course and Garden of the Groves. After a very enjoyable 2-3 hours of birding we headed over to the Rand Nature Center. Birds were not very active at this site, which has sustained quite a lot of habitat damage in the hurricanes. The most productive area was immediately behind the visitor center, where

native coppice held a nice variety of Neotropical migrants. We followed this up with a mid-day visit to Erika Gates' home in Lucaya. Erika's garden is a wonderful bird oasis with thick layers of natural habitat, including flowering hummingbird plants, water features and bird feeders. The garden is the best place to see the Bahama Woodstar on the island. Unfortunately we dipped on the Woodstar but did enjoy a beautiful male Painted Bunting.

Finally we decided to drive up to the west end of the island. The drive went passed a depressing area of abandoned commercial properties. At West End there is a gated resort, with a sign indicating visitors are welcome. We did not enter but focused on the gull, terns and shorebirds along the edge of the bay. In retrospect this may have been a mistake as there have been several good records from the resort gardens, which have traditionally been one of the few reliable spots for seeing the Bahama Woodstar. (We had it here in 1993). The most interesting birds seen along shoreline were two adult Lesser Black-back Gulls and four Western Willets.



**Western Spindalis (male)**



**Black-faced Grassquit (male)**

**2/8/12** We made an early start to reach the nuthatch site east of the canal. Bird activity was good with brilliant views of a male Olive-capped Warbler plus several Bahama Warblers. The most numerous species was the distinctive, dull Bahama race of Pine Warbler. However despite detailed directions and being at spots where the birds have been seen fairly recently, we dipped again on the nuthatches. We then drove to Lucayan National Park. The most interesting area was the trails through the mangroves and beachside coppice. We had great views of both a female Bahama Yellowthroat and a male Greater Antillean Bullfinch. Also unexpected was a very tame Sora in the mangroves.



**Sora**



**Greater Antillean Bullfinch female**

We drove back to our hotel and had lunch in one of the many restaurants in the area, and then a short rest at the hotel. We then decided to drive to the Dover Overlook. This area had been very birdy on our last visit but was now almost obliterated by the hurricanes, although there remains still very impressive miles of mangroves. The best we could manage was very distant views of a party of swallows. Unfortunately they were much too distant to ID. We ended our short birding trip to Grand Bahama with a final walk along the very productive trail at the abandoned golf course adjacent to the Garden of the Groves.

### **General Birding Comments:**

We visited Grand Bahama in May 1993, also for three days, and were very interested in comparing that trip with the birds seen on this latest trip. Clearly, May is a better time to visit for the Bahamian specialties than February as several specialty species such as the Bahama Swallow are much easier to see in the spring. We were still struck by how less numerous many species seemed to be than on our 1993 visit. This is of special concern since many represent distinctive Bahamian subspecies.

For example, we did not see any Bahama Mockingbirds on this trip despite looking for them. In 1993, we recorded several birds at the eastern end of the island without too much difficulty. The Northern Mockingbird is very common everywhere and may be displacing the native species. Other species that were much harder to find included Bahama Yellowthroat and Olive-Capped Warbler. Very likely, the latter has been impacted by the large-scale hurricane damage to the native pine forests, which is its predominant habitat on the island. We never had a whiff of Zenaida Dove, Least Grebe, Key West Quail Dove or Cuban Pewee all of which we saw last trip. Obviously some species, such as Gray Kingbird and Black-whiskered Vireo, are not generally present in February so were not expected.

**Bird List:** In all, we recorded 75 species, including one heard only. These included eleven Greater Antillean endemics and a number of endemic subspecies, some potential splits.

**Pied-billed Grebe** *Podilymbus podiceps* An adult with one young bird seen at the main pond in the Garden of the Groves.

**Brown Pelican** *Pelecanus occidentalis*: Four birds seen mainly along the shoreline at the west end of the island.

**Double-crested Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax auritus*: Recorded on two dates with a daily maximum of ten birds.

**Great Blue Heron** *Ardea herodias*: A total of five birds recorded over two days.

**Fulvous Whistling Duck** *Dendrocygna bicolor*: Two birds seen on each visit to the Garden of the Groves. Unclear whether these are truly wild birds or not although Arlott [*Birds of the West Indies*] indicates it is a resident in the Bahamas.

**White-cheeked Pintail** *Anas bahamensis*: A party of seven birds seen on the pond at the Garden of the Groves. We understand that the birds were imported from a dealer in Florida a few years ago with the hope that they may start to breed. The birds are not pinioned and included what appeared to be a couple of immatures.

**Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura*: Common & widespread.

**Red-tailed Hawk** *Buteo jamaicensis solitudinis*: Two individuals of the resident race seen.

**Merlin** *Falco columbarius*: We were a little surprised how widespread this species was. Recorded daily and more regularly than the American Kestrel. A good site was the abandoned golf course with probably two different individuals seen there.

**American Kestrel** *Falco sparverius sparveroides*: A total of five birds of the pale endemic race were seen.

**Caribbean Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus ridgwayi*: Two individuals seen.

**Sora** *Porzana carolina*: Great views obtained of a single bird feeding along the edge of the mangroves at Lacayan Nat. Park.

**Common Gallinule** *Gallinula galeata*: Several birds seen at the Garden of the Groves.

**American Coot** *Fulica americana*: Two-three birds seen at the Garden of the Groves.

**Black-bellied Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*: We spent minimal time checking for shorebirds but did see about six birds at a couple of coastal stops.

**Semipalmated Plover** *Charadrius semipalmatus*: Just a couple of individuals seen at same site as previous species..

**Western Willet** *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*: Four large, long-legged and billed birds consistent with Western form seen along the shoreline at the far west end.

**Greater Yellowlegs** *Tringa melanoleuca*: Just a single bird heard calling off Crabbing Bay trail.

**Spotted Sandpiper** *Actitis macularius*: A couple of birds seen at West End.

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*: A total of eighteen birds seen mainly along the shoreline at the west end.

**Sanderling** *Calidris alba*: A total of ten birds seen at a couple of stops along the coast.

**Short-billed Dowitcher** *Limnodromus griseus*: Two birds seen along the shoreline at West End.

**Ring-billed Gull** *Larus delawarensis*: Small numbers recorded daily.

**Laughing Gull** *Larus atricilla*: Somewhat more abundant than the previous species, with up to twenty-five seen daily.

**American Herring Gull** *Larus argentatus smithsonianus*: An immature seen along the shore at West End.

**Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus graellsii*: Two attractive adults seen along the shore at West End was unexpected.

**Royal Tern** *Sterna maxima*: Our only tern sighting was of ten birds seen resting on fish traps at West End.

**Rock Pigeon** *Columba livia*: Common & widespread around Freeport.

**White-crowned Pigeon** *Patagioenas leucocephala*: We were pleased to see a number of his large attractive pigeon. The species is hunted and most sightings were restricted to the Garden of the Groves where it is protected. Also we saw a couple of birds at Erika Gates's garden. In all up to eight birds daily.

**Eurasian Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto*: Common & widespread across the whole island. It was much more numerous than in 1993, when we only encountered it in more developed areas near Freeport. This time it was common out at McLean's Town and everywhere in between.

**Mourning Dove** *Zenaida macroura*: Just one bird seen at West End.

**Common Ground Dove** *Columbina passerina bahamensis*: Up to six birds recorded daily. Less common than in 1993, when we remarked "never saw so many as on G.B."

**Smooth-Billed Ani** *Crotophaga ani*: Small parties seen fairly regularly with up to ten birds daily.

**Cuban Emerald** *Chlorostilbon ricordii*: Fairly common & widespread with at least ten birds recorded daily.

**Belted Kingfisher** *Megaceryle alcyon*: A single bird seen at the West End.

**Hairy Woodpecker** *Picoides villosus piger*: Not as common as expected with a total of four birds seen. The hurricane damage to the pine woodlands has probably impacted this species numbers. This subspecies is endemic to northern Bahamas.

**Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker** *Sphyrapicus varius*: Slightly more numerous than the previous species with a total seven birds seen.

**Eastern Phoebe** *Sayornis phoebe*: Just a single bird recorded.

**La Sagra's Flycatcher** *Myiarchus sagrae*: Good views obtained of about five individuals of this Greater Antillean endemic. Unlike most *Myiarchus* flycatchers, this species tended to stay low down with many of the birds low down in secondary growth. A good site was in the brushy coppice of the abandoned golf course adjacent to the Garden of the Groves.

**Loggerhead Kingbird** *Tyrannus caudifasciatus*: Surprisingly only one individual seen. This was at a beach overlook just before Rocky Creek at the East End of the island. We saw many more on our April trip, and possibly most birds leave the island during the winter months (as do Gray Kingbirds, of which we saw none). The bird here is an endemic race, *bahamensis*, with browner back and faintly yellowish underparts.

**Blue-Grey Gnatcatcher**: We recorded both the eastern north American form [*Polioptila caerulea*] and the Bahama race [*Polioptila c. caesiogaster*] and found the latter quite distinctive. This form has noticeably darker grey ariculars and crown contrasting with a very wide, bright white eye-ring. The tail appears shorter in proportion to the body and the bird, although active, is not as hyper as the mainland form. It was not seen to flick and twist its tail as does the common race. Finally, the call sounded less shrill.

**Bahamian Red-legged Thrush** *Turdus plumbeus plumbeus*: This tame and charismatic species was one of the most numerous endemics. It was recorded at many of the sites visited, including being common & tame in our hotel garden! Up to eight-ten birds seen daily without any real searching. Some authors propose that several of the subspecies of this bird actually represent full species. The endemic race found on the northern Bahamian islands is different from the two found in Cuba, having all-gray undersides and solid black throat.

**Grey Catbird** *Dumetella carolinensis*: Obviously a common & widespread winter visitor with up to twenty birds daily.

**Northern Mockingbird** *Mimus polyglottos orpheus*: Very common and widespread throughout the island and appears to have increased significantly since our 1993 visit.

**Eurasian Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*: Thankfully still a scarce bird. Our only sighting was a party of eight seen at the far West End.

**Thick-billed Vireo** *Vireo crassirostris*: The most common & widespread G.A. endemic. Recorded daily with a maximum of eight birds seen and at least the same number heard calling from its thick coppice habitat. Song similar to White-eyed Vireo but slower and lower in tone. Very common in the brushy habitat of the abandoned golf course adjacent to the Garden of the Groves.

**White-eyed Vireo** *Vireo griseus*: A single adult (that is, with white eyes) individual seen along Crabbing Bay Nature Trail.

Grand Bahama is a major wintering ground for neotropical warblers. We recorded twenty species of warbler of which sixteen were migrants from North America.



**Hooded Warbler** *Setophaga citrina*: A very tame male was an absolute gem of a bird at the Rand Nature Center.

**Northern Parula** *Setophaga americana*: A total of five birds seen mainly at the Garden of the Groves and the Rand Nature Center.

**Cape May Warbler** *Setophaga tigrina*: Four seen at the Rand Nature Center including some brilliant spring plumaged males.

**Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler** *Setophaga coronata coronata*: Common & widespread with a daily maximum of fifteen.

**Black-throated Green Warbler** *Setophaga virens*: Three birds seen.

**Black-Throated Blue Warbler** *Setophaga caerulescens*: Recorded daily in a variety of habitats and a daily maximum of six birds.

**Yellow-Throated Warbler** *Setophaga dominica*: Fairly common & widespread being recorded in a variety of habitats. These included the grounds of our hotel where they were quite tame. Also in the native pine woods in close proximity to the following species. In all, recorded on three of our four days with a daily maximum of eight birds.

**Bahama Warbler** *Setophaga flavescens*: This relatively recent split from the previous species was restricted to the pine woodlands east of the canal. A total of six birds seen including four on our final day. It often fed low down on the tree trunks in a treecreeper – like manner. The obvious yellow lower breast and belly plus longer bill and feeding behaviour all quite different from Y-T Warbler, as was the call note (we did not hear one sing).

**Olive-Capped Warbler** *Setophaga pityophila*: This Bahama/Cuba endemic was remarkably scarce with only two males seen both in pinewoods east of the canal. Very likely impacted by the devastation caused by the hurricanes to its pine wood habitat. One bird responded to pishing and came within a few feet at eye level. It had a brilliant yellow-olive crown and throat, was BEC's top bird of the trip.

**Pine Warbler** *Setophaga pinus acrustera*: Very common & widespread pine wood species. The Bahama race is very dull and somewhat smaller than mainland form, and the song is a simple trill. Recorded daily with a daily maximum of thirty birds. Given the scarcity of the two prior species, we wondered whether this common bird was out-competing the two rarer endemics.

**Prairie Warbler** *Setophaga discolor*: Fairly numerous with a total of ten birds seen in a variety of habitats including the pine woodlands.

**Palm Warbler** *Setophaga palmarum*: Easily the most numerous Neotropical migrant. Recorded daily in a variety of habitats and with a daily maximum of thirty birds.

**American Redstart** *Setophaga ruticilla*: Four birds seen including three at the Rand Nature Center.

**Black and White Warbler** *Mniotilta varia*: A total of five birds seen.

**Worm-Eating Warbler** *Helmitheros vermivorum*: Single birds seen on two occasions in the thick coppice of the abandoned golf course.

**Ovenbird** *Seiurus aurocapilla*: A total of four birds seen with sightings at the Garden of the Groves & the Rand Nature Center.

**Northern Waterthrush** *Parkesia noveboracensis*: A single bird seen at the Rand Nature Center.

**Louisiana Waterthrush** *Parkesia motacilla*: A single bird well seen along the stream at the Garden of the Groves.

**Common Yellowthroat** *Geothlypis trichas*: Common & widespread with a daily maximum of eight birds.

**Bahama Yellowthroat** *Geothlypis rostrata*: Much reduced since our 1993 trip when several birds were seen daily without much difficulty. On this trip we had to work very hard. Eventually, Gail had brief views of a probable female in bracken along the Crabbing Bay Trail. Finally, we both had great views of a female at Lucayan NP. The bird was in the low mangroves at edge of coppice. It was larger and bulkier and longer-legged than the previous species. Also the underparts were a very distinctive creamy-yellow quite different from the female Common Yellowthroat's brownish-tinged yellow underparts. The apparent decline of this species is very disturbing particularly as its range is restricted to the Northern Bahamas.

**Bananaquit** *Coereba flaveola bahamensis*: Widespread in small numbers with a total of ten birds seen during our trip. This subspecies has very little yellow on the underparts.

**Western Spindalis** *Spindalis zena*: This very attractive Antillean endemic was fairly common.. It mainly frequented coppice and flowering/fruiting trees. In all, we recorded about twenty birds during our trip. The race *townsendi* has a green back.

**Summer Tanager** *Piranga rubra*: A single female seen by Gail at the Rand Nature Center. This species is considered by Arlott to be an uncommon migrant and rare breeder on the Bahamas.

**Painted Bunting** *Passerina ciris*: A brilliant male watched at length at the feeders in Erika Gates' garden.

**Black-faced Grassquit** *Tiaris bicolor*: Common and widespread, principally in coppice and pinewoods edges. Our daily maximum count was fifteen birds.

**Greater Antillean Bullfinch** *Loxigilla violacea*: A total of five individuals of this GA endemic were recorded. The best site was the thick coppice of the abandoned golf course. Also, a brilliant male was seen along the mangrove trail, in beach coppice, at the Lucayan National Park. Interestingly, where we saw our first individual of this species in 1993.

**Red-winged Blackbird** *Agelaius phoeniceus bryanti*: A number of birds roosted nightly in trees around our hotel. Other than that just a few individuals recorded. An endemic subspecies found in NW Bahamas.

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*: Common around the town of Freeport.