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## Puerto Rico: Nature and Birding January 3-11, 2013

“Peg Abbott is a pro...full of knowledge and diplomacy. She is generous with her time and attention to our questions.”

- Rolla Wagner



Join us this January to explore, among varied island habitats, the only tropical forest in America's National Forest system – in Puerto Rico! The 28,000 acre-El Yunque National Forest is located in the rugged Sierra de Luquillo Mountains, just 25 miles east-southeast of San Juan. In addition to this lush, exciting gem of the US National Forest system, we visit Laguna Cartagena National Wildlife Refuge and several state forest and private reserves.

Puerto Rico has over 260 species of birds, more than a dozen of which occur nowhere else. With an excellent road system and an accomplished local guide, we have a great chance to see a good portion of the island's 17\* endemics, and a good number of the twenty-or-so additional Caribbean regional specialties. We visit several Important Bird Areas designated by Birdlife International.

There is a good field guide for the island, written by Herbert Raffaele, the *Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*. A nice addition is the newer, *Puerto Rico's Birds in Photograph* by Mark Oberle, which includes a CD with the bird sounds. We'll also focus on the island's lush (east side) and arid (southwest corner, due to a mountain rain shadow effect) flora.

We also plan to have a lot of fun, seeing this beautiful island part of our country. We plan to sample local foods, explore historic old San Juan, and enjoy the beach, some small towns and the local people.



*If snorkeling is of interest, and time to relax, you might consider adding some days in St. John or on Puerto Rico's Vieques Island, before or after the tour – perhaps over the New Year?*

*\*includes some recent and pending taxonomic splits*

## **ITINERARY**

### **Thurs., Jan. 3                      Arrival in San Juan**

Please plan to arrive today in San Juan Luis Muñoz Marín International **Airport (SJU)**, Puerto Rico. As international flights come in throughout the evening, we plan our first night with dinner at your leisure, but will set a time for those arriving earlier in the day (or week) to meet if they wish to do so. We'll give everyone the arriving flights of the group members, so we can best coordinate travel. We plan on lodgings in Old San Juan on the eastern side of the city, as is the airport. Taxi cabs are readily available, and fares are regulated by a dispatcher who gives you a ticket, with a fee of about \$20 into Old San Juan.

*Accommodations at Sheraton Old San Juan Hotel, San Juan.*

### **Fri. Jan. 4                              Old San Juan / El Yunque National Forest / Night Birding**

Wake up in old San Juan, a charming part of the city with a lot of history. This morning, we start the tour in a relaxed way, waking at a reasonable hour to rest up from travels, and meeting a local guide for a half-day walking tour of the city, followed by lunch at a delightful restaurant. We do NOT want to experience one of Puerto Rico's tapones (traffic jams) so it's best to leave the city just after lunch to continue on to our hotel for the next two nights, Hotel Yunque Mar in Luquillo.

At 2PM we meet our local birding guide to travel east, where we get settled at the hotel before heading out and for exploring late-afternoon and early evening in El Yunque National Forest, looking for some of our first endemic birds: the Puerto Rican (PR) Bullfinch, PR Tanager, PR Spindalis, and Green Mango. The El Yunque forest is located on mountain slopes, with grand scenery. The highest peak in the park, El Toro, is 3494 ft. high. Rainfall is abundant here on the wet side of the island (some 200 inches per year). Learn more about forest biodiversity, the prominent trees, and the myriad epiphytes that cloak them. As night arrives, we venture out for a nocturnal walk in search of the Puerto Rican Screech Owl, glow in the dark fungi, and newborn coquis, a fascinating group of frogs that calls long into the night. They live in moist forests, and the females lay eggs terrestrially. These hatch out as little froglets rather than tadpoles – fun!

*Accommodations at Hotel Yunque Mar (B,L,D)*

### **Sat., Jan. 5                              El Yunque National Forest / Optional Sunset Kayak Tour**

Today we walk forest trails on a birding trip at El Yunque, one of the oldest protected areas in the New World. It was established by the King of Spain in 1876, and made an official forest reserve in 1903. Today we are in search of several of the island's endemic bird species: PR Tody, PR Lizard Cuckoo, PR Oriole, PR Woodpecker, Elfin-woods Warbler, PR Flycatcher, and PR Emerald. There are also petroglyphs of the Taino culture we hope to see; streams and waterfalls abound.

We return to our lodgings after a picnic lunch, for an afternoon break. Those who wish can take an optional Sunset Bio-Lagoon Kayak Tour which allows us to admire another type of glow in the dark, this time a microorganism in the water. Their website describes the experience this way:

*An adventure not to be missed while in Puerto Rico! Join this fully guided night trip into one of the most amazing natural phenomenon of the world! Paddle your way into a mangrove archway canal leading to "Laguna Grande." There, you will meet our glowing friends, the Pyrodinium Bahamense, microscopic plankton capable of producing natural light when disturbed! Watch how every stroke of your paddle leaves behind a glowing swirl of blue light, and experience touching the pixie dust-like organisms that will literally make your body glow in the dark! Enjoy the magical adventure of visiting Laguna Grande and learn about its important and fragile ecosystems; and most importantly how to protect them. As not all might select the Kayak tour, dinner is at your leisure, at the hotel or a nearby restaurant. Accommodations at Hotel Yunque Mar (B,L)*

**Sun., Jan 6                      Hummingbird Morning!**

Our goal of the morning will be to see a variety of winged jewels: the little Antillean Crested Hummingbirds, Green-throated Caribs, Antillean Mangos, plus Puerto Rican Emeralds. Enjoy learning about the blooms they feed in as well!

After check-out at our hotel, we drive to limestone habitats of the North Belt region, looking along the coast for Greater Flamingoes, Caribbean Coots, perhaps White-cheeked Pintails or West Indian Whistling Ducks and, out to sea, Brown Boobies and White-tailed Tropicbirds.

After getting settled at our accommodations, enjoy an evening free to sample local cuisine, perhaps find some music, and enjoy the town of Hatillo.

*Accommodations for one night in Hatillo (B,L)*

**Mon. Jan. 7                      Cordillera Central in Search of Puerto Rican Parrots / Parador Villa Parguera**

We start the day with an early morning drive to the Cordillera Central (Central Mountain Range) in search of the Puerto Rican Parrot, an endangered species. Sightings are rare, but possible. It is a stunning Amazon, with bright green plumage, a white eye-ring and red forehead. Since the 1940's, they have only been found in primary montane forests of the Cordillera Central, where they are cavity nesters. Learn more about the extensive conservation program for this species, which includes some recent releases. It has been conducted for several decades, but the small population took a blow in 1989, when Hurricane Hugo destroyed habitat. Numbers are slowly on the rise. We will drive to Parador Villa Parguera, a country inn on the waterfront, where we stay for three nights as a base for varied exploring.

*Accommodations at Parador Villa Parguera (B,L,D)*

*[www.villaparguera.net/index-us.htm](http://www.villaparguera.net/index-us.htm)*

**Tues., Jan. 8                      Salt Flats / Arid forests / Laguna Cartagena National Wildlife Refuge**

Today we start with a morning trip to the salt flats looking for several species: Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds (endangered, and highly local in distribution), Venezuelan Troupials, the Antillean race of the Clapper Rail, and Caribbean Elaenias. The salt flat habitat is extremely valuable to a variety of shorebirds that winter in the Caribbean; learn more about their migration, conservation and plight. Peregrine Falcons and Merlin come here to feed.

Enjoy a picnic lunch, with very fresh pineapples and papaya, on our way to Laguna Cartagena [www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=41527](http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=41527). Part of our National Wildlife Refuge system, the lagoon is one of the most important freshwater habitats for migrant and resident water birds on the

island. Hills surrounding the lagoon are some of the oldest (geologically) on the island, hosting a number of endemic plants.

Before dinner, we will go on the quest to find the Puerto Rican Nightjar, once thought to be extinct, but located in specialized limestone habitat in 1961. The population is considered stable, but the species is listed as endangered because of its specialized habitat needs. Dinner is at your leisure, at the hotel or a restaurant of your choice.

*Accommodations at Parador Villa Parguera (B,L)*

**Wed., Jan. 9** **Maricao State Forest**

In the morning we will look for endemics, and the Bridled Quail-Dove, at Maricao, on the western edge of the Cordillera Central. While there are plantations of mahogany and pine here, there are also native forests. The drive up to the ridge is lovely, with a chance to see Ruddy Quail Dove. It is a wet area, and on a fascinating trail through a wind-stunted forest, we look for, and learn more about, the secretive Elfin Woods Warbler.

*Accommodations at Parador Villa Parguera (B,L,D)*

**Thurs., Jan. 10** **Guanica Forest Reserve**

After check-out from the hotel, we drive to the southwestern corner of the island, the dry side at Guanica, a fascinating cactus-scrub-subtropical dry forest, established as a Biosphere Reserve since 1975. Here, in the forest reserve, we look for the Adelaide's Warbler, with its loud trill alerting us to its presence. This busy warbler feeds mainly on caterpillars, while in fruiting shrubs we look for Antillean (Caribbean) Euphonias.

We then continue our journey to the South looking for the Plain Pigeon, another species which had numbers greatly reduced by Hurricane Hugo, but which is making a comeback.

We return to the same hotel in Old San Juan for a final evening and to enjoy a festive, celebratory dinner!

*Accommodations to be selected (B,L,D)*

**Fri., Jan 11** **Optional Old San Juan Historical Walking Tour / Departures**

Morning transfers to the airport – at the time of writing, several flights leave from 1:30PM onwards. (B) This morning, depending on flights, we may have time to enjoy a bit more of the historic city at our leisure, before transport to the airport.

*Please note: We are partnering for this trip with a fully licensed Puerto Rican tour operator with Certified Guides/Drivers by the U.S. and Puerto Rican Government and with all necessary permits and endorsements to offer our services, including night owling at El Yunque National Forest. The company has nearly twenty years of experience in tourism and birding. They are committed to sustainable tourism, your safety, and our experience.*

*Transport will be in a van, driven by our guide, mainly on modern roads similar to those on mainland USA. The pace of the journey is moderate, with walks on forest trails, warm to hot temperatures in the lowlands, cooler in the mountains. As with all of our journeys, we look forward to sampling local cuisine at some fun restaurants, and to giving you some down time to relax, knowing this is a vacation as well as a birding and nature adventure.*

**PLAN AHEAD!**

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance (formerly Access America).

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**COST OF THE JOURNEY**

The cost of this journey is \$2650.00 from San Juan based on double occupancy; single supplement is \$398.00. This includes all accommodations, meals as specified in the itinerary, professional guide services, other park and program entrance fees and miscellaneous program expenses.

Tour does not include: round-trip transportation from your home city to San Juan, optional activities, or items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone charges, maid gratuities, or beverages from the bar.

Group Size: Maximum of 12, minimum of 4 persons. Tour and Extension prices are based on 6 persons, with fewer than 6 a small group surcharge (typically \$100-\$300) may apply.

Guide: Peg Abbott

**TRAVEL INFORMATION**

Plan to arrive in San Juan at your convenience, and plan to take a taxi to the first night hotel. We have a city tour the following morning, and start with our local birding expert the following day. This evening is at leisure so all can take advantage of flights convenient from their home city. Those there by dinner can meet in the lobby at 6:00PM if they wish to dine together at a local restaurant.

You may want to arrive a day or two early (at your own cost) to take in the sights of the city. We suggest you plan departures after 1:30 PM on January 11<sup>th</sup>, though earlier or later flights can be accommodated. Our first night hotel is the Sheraton Old San Juan Hotel.

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**PHOTO CREDITS**

Puerto Rico scenic, Peter Padawitz; Puerto Rican Parrot, M. Stafford - both images c/o Welcome to Puerto Rico