

Birding in the Land of Fidel

by Michael J. Good, MS

I have recently returned from another ornithology trip in Cuba. On January 22, 2012 I woke up in room 676 of the Havana, Cuba Hotel Nacional, my mind quickly flashes back to the James Bond movie "*Die Another Day*" when (Peirce Brosnan) than James Bond, is flipping through "*Birds of the West Indies*" written by ornithologists James Bond, curator of Birds of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. I open up my copy and try to envision the types of experiences that ornithologists James Bond had in the Zapata Swamp and birding the countryside of Cuba. I was elated by the opportunity to once again run around the Cuban countryside birding my brains out with binoculars, a camera and my greatest asset, Arturo KirkConnell, author of the "*Birds of Cuba*". Arturo knows everything about birds in Cuba basing some of his knowledge on the great works of James Bond (the ornithologist).

The ornithologist James Bond was first smitten by birds in his Pennsylvania home called Spring House in Montgomery County near Philadelphia. Here he learned about a great variety of common birds and his ornithological career, eventually taking him to the American Academy of Natural Sciences, began to take shape. Spring House, his childhood home, was located on the great Minsi trail, a major trading and communication conduit in the 1700's among Mohawk, Iroquois and Lenape villages. The trail wound southward out of the Pocono Mountains eventually passing through Spring House and was a major crossroad in its day. Surprising to me is that Spring House looks exactly like the house I grew up in Bucks County where my early passion for birds began. James Bond's book "*Birds of West Indies*" is still used extensively in Cuba and other Caribbean Islands as a reference book when thinking about the historical avian constructs of the West Indies.

Here on Mount Desert Island, James Bond also began a book entitled the "*Birds of Mount Desert Island and where to find them*" of which I have a first edition in mint condition. These books have great historical context but the landscapes of the fifties and sixties have changed so drastically in 2012, almost as much as the political landscape and current fiasco playing out between Cuba and the US. James Bond's work is in the same historical importance as Ernst Mayr, the vanguard of Island Biogeography and a Bond contemporary along with Alexander Skutch. Using James Bond's book as a guide to the avian communities of the Caribbean and the conceptual framework of Ernst Mayr, one has the platform for a deeper understanding of Caribbean and pelagic island ornithology. Understanding how change has affected the populations we live with today will help us all better understand the avian complexities of the post-Bond era.

For example, the Great Fire of 1947 decisively changed the eastern half of the Mount Desert Island turning it to dust during the ten days it roared out of control pushed by strong winds. Land use and forestry have finished the work to make both the Caribbean, by sugar cane plantations and Mount Desert Island a much altered landscape since James Bond's day, perhaps even making some of his observations and descriptions useless.

Despite James Bonds history of exploration and study, Cuba, where I am working today, is still young ornithologically in comparison to North America. James Bond added greatly to our understanding of distribution but the details of the breeding biology of birds in the Caribbean and many resident species remain unknown and quantitative data on the distribution and abundance of migrant species are scarce. This can be said for the birds of Mount Desert Island as well.

Over the last twenty years a small group of people have been adding to the greater understanding of MDI birds realizing that James Bonds work was limited and can only speak to the past avian populations. Recently, MDI has come into ornithological vogue again since James Bonds days of living here. I find it most fascinating that so many eyes are now intensely looking for that "One Dovekie in Southwest Harbor" of whatever bird is on the hot list. Twenty years ago the local birding on MDI was almost non-existent and it was sometimes hard to even find enough birders to cover the entire Christmas Bird Count.

As I have mention, I recently returned from a bird survey in Cuba and James Bonds name comes up sometimes. Mostly in Cuba it is Jean Gundlach and Orlando Garrido and today, Arturo KirkConnell and William Suaraz, who have contributed the most to our current understanding of the Avian communities in Cuba. James Bond was able concentrated his work on the Zapata Swamp but in the 50's ran into some historical political problems which limited his in depth study of the Cuban countryside due to political disputes of his time (Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis). It is my understanding the Rodger Tory Petersen was also unable to secure travel documents or a license to travel in Cuba and that the Cuban government may have blocked him from entering the country. Today, Garrido & KirkConnell, "Aves de Cuba" or "Birds of Cuba" Field Guide is the source of insight and current field research, and with the backing and involvement of Havana Natural History Museum and field work of the Cuban Bird Survey program. James Bond was pivotal in laying down the groundwork of understanding of the avian distribution in the Caribbean.

I enjoy reading James Bonds first edition "Birds of Mount Desert Island and where to find them" because it gives the reader a reference point for the birds of the Down East Maine. Today, there are a great variety of Guide books for Maine. Birding Guides and new birding trail maps like the "**Downeast and Acadia Birding Trail Map**" for Hancock and Washington Counties and the more general "**Maine Birding Trail**", both of which are beginning to dissect the locations for birds of interest to the modern Birding community and provide a deeper perspectives on where to find specific species. It is only through field experience and working with living flocks of birds that one can truly understand density, distribution and makeup of the Birds of Maine and that is what fascinates on a daily basis. Arturo and I greatly enjoy the opportunity of showing interested birders the immense diversity and assemblage of birds in Cuba.

In Cuba, the native avian guilds of birds interact with the northern migratory breeding birds from Maine. For example, if you find a flock of Yellow-headed Warblers, endemic to Cuban forests, you inevitably find many immature and adult northern warblers like Black and White, Black-throated Blue, Ovenbirds or Blue-gray Gnatcatchers mixed in with Cuban Trogon, Cuban

Vireo, the radiant Cuban Tody and Cuban Green Woodpecker. A similar assemblage of birds can be found in Maine consisting of Black-capped or Boreal Chickadee, Downy Woodpecker and Brown Creepers all moving about with the migratory warblers foraging like they were in Cuba! Almost a mirror image in many respects.

My personal goals in Cuba are to recapitulate some of ornithologist James Bonds adventures in the Caribbean as he sought out and asked meaningful questions about the eastern breeding Neotropical Migrants. The flocks of birds in the Cuban forests are rich and numerous because Cuba is at the cross roads of migration to Central and South America. Just like in Cuba, we in Maine are beginning to dissect the locations for birds of interest to the modern Birding community. With trail maps like the "*Downeast and Acadia Birding Trail Map*" for Hancock and Washington Counties and the more general "*Maine Birding Trail*" we are well on our way to carrying the torch handed down by James Bond (the ornithologist).

James Bonds bird list for Mount Desert Island was about 260 species. I personally have found all of these on MDI and added one making my current list for MDI about 261 species. This list of birds can be found on the Acadia Birding Festival website www.AcadiaBirdingFestival.com. It seems there might be a group of birders around that could start adding birds to that list so I look forward to seeing what we can all collectively find. Of course, the mythical number of about 350 species on Mount Desert Island is interestingly similar to the same number of species on Cuba, 355 plus 26 Endemics. Our two regions are vitally important to the long term health of migratory Neotropical birds and I am happy to report that so far the Cuban government is being exceedingly responsible with the environment and conservation needs of an amazing number of birds.

Mount Desert Island and the Gulf of Maine archipelago are the pivotal point and conduit for migration into the Northern and Boreal Forest and Canadian Maritime. The migratory birds arrive at the coastline of Maine in spring with the energetic force of a sledgehammer emanating that Avian energy through the rivers, streams and associated wetlands of the Northern Forest of New England and Maine. The largest mass of the bird migration splits into the Boreal Forest and the tundra north of Canada and a smaller group up the eastern maritime coast.

Along the way Insects are consumed at almost exponential rates in Cuba, Maine and Canada keeping forests healthy and productive. Similar foraging habits and flock assemblages seen here in Maine are recapitulated in the southern cays and West Indies Islands throughout the winter months, albeit with different local birds. In Cuba and Maine, watersheds and associated wetlands are key to Avian conservation and for most of our common ecological woes. For example, the GOM declining fisheries are due to thousands of dams on our rivers and streams blocking the movement of potentially exponential numbers of Alewives and American Shad which traditionally migrated up to the base of Mount Kathadin. Removal of the *Great Works Dam on the Penobscot River this summer* is the type of project needed on all of our major waterways in the GOM to improve our devastated New England fisheries and the health of Neotropical breeding and migrant birds.

Our “Cuban Bird Survey” program in Cuba is timely because it coincides with a marked upsurge in concern for Neotropical migrants, particularly forest-dwelling land birds breeding in eastern North America. Results of population monitoring programs like Migration Monitoring Programs and Breeding Bird Survey’s have clearly demonstrated that a number of Neotropical migrants are in decline, some seriously. *Migrants pose complex conservation problems since their populations are impacted on their wintering grounds, during migration and on their breeding grounds like Maine.* Many researchers that I work with realize there is so much to learn about the status of Neotropical migrants on the wintering grounds and the factors affecting their populations. The same is true for the Birds of Mount Desert Island and that is why I have been gathering data together since 1993 building a list of birds and where to find them on MDI and the region. You can see an interactive map on the Acadia Birding Festival website.

While we northerners seek out the single Dovekie in South West Harbor there are millions of birds wintering in the West Indies dreaming about migrating North again and feasting on our incredible insect community in our wetlands and forests. James Bond (the ornithologist) helped point the way to better understanding these avian assemblages in the Caribbean and here on Mount Desert Island. Thanks to James Bond, I have a firm foundation to stand on when birding in Cuba and Maine. Spring is coming to Maine and I can’t wait!

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