



Brown Pelican



Northern Parula



Cayo de Tierra

Cayo Afuera

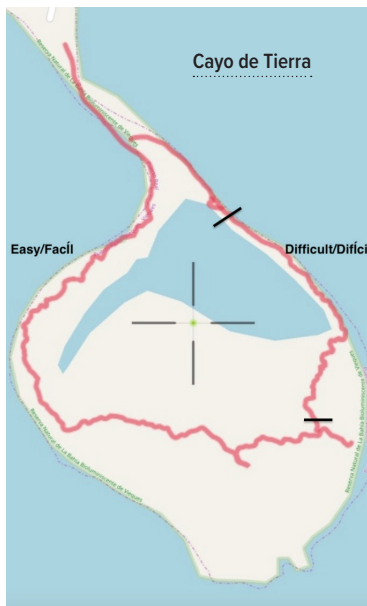
Kelly Thompson

THE CAYO DE TIERRA BIRDING TRAIL

BY: DAPHNE GEMMILL

Besides beaches and bioluminescence, Vieques has 105 fairly common to common birds and a variety of places and trails to see them. One popular bird walk begins at the Malecon in Esperanza, across the street from the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust. Walk 0.3 miles along Esperanza beach to Cayo de Tierra, the left of the two small islands off Esperanza. It's less than a mile around the Cayo. We recommend starting early in the morning when most birds are active.

The rocky outcropping along the shore at the far western end of the Malecon in Esperanza is a favorite winter spot for the Royal Tern, American Oystercatcher, and an occasional Belted Kingfisher. You can also see the Brown Pelican, Brown Booby, and Magnificent Frigatebird year-round. Laughing Gulls and Least Terns are seen in summer. Look inland to find a Pearly-Eyed Thrasher; a Eurasian Collared Dove, a recent arrival to the island; a Puerto Rican subspecies of Bananaquit; and the ubiquitous European House Sparrow on the wires or in the trees or bushes. Birders can even expect the unexpected, such as an Antillean Palm-Swift flying over the palms along the Malecon, the first and only record of this species appearing in all of Puerto Rico. To continue, walk east along the road past Bananas Café.



At the large parking area on the right, go down to the shore and walk east along the beach towards Cayo de Tierra. Along the way, listen and watch for Gray Kingbirds, Bananaquits, Pearly-Eyed Thrashers, and Northern Mockingbirds. In late spring and summer, you might see Least and Sandwich Terns.

Soon, you will see a sandbar that connects Cayo de Tierra to the mainland. [If you want to drive to this point, a dirt road off of Rt. 997 a short distance past the Green Store ends at the sandbar.]

Cross the sandbar to the island — beware, your feet might get wet! Watch for the Ruddy Turnstone, American Oystercatcher, Black-Bellied, Wilson's, and Semipalmated Sandpipers that regularly feed in the seaweed here. In the summer, the sandbar is a resting place for Least and Sandwich Terns. During migration, it is a hot spot for some of the rarer shorebirds, like Sand-erlings, and White-Rumped and Pectoral Sandpipers. [scenic and bird photos]

When you get to the island, walk to the right along the beach until you see a trail leading inland.



This trail is easier, and the climb to the top is not as steep as the trail the east side of the cayo. The first part of this trail is a mixture of small pieces of broken coral and sandy leaf litter before it turns to an earthen trail. On the left, several side paths lead to the edge of a small lagoon where Snowy Egrets and Great Blue, Little Blue, and Tricolored Herons feed. Black-Necked Stilts and White-Checked Pintails are often seen year-round. Spotted Sandpipers; Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs; Stilt, Semipalmated, and Least Sandpipers; and Belted Kingfishers can be seen from September to March. During droughts, this lagoon can dry up.

As you climb the trail, look for Scaly-Naped and White-Crowned Pigeons, White-Winged and Zenaida Doves, Common Ground-Doves, Mangrove Cuckoos, Gray and Loggerhead Kingbirds, Caribbean Elaenias, Puerto Rican Flycatchers, Adelaide's and Yellow Warblers; Bananaquits; and Black-Faced Grassquits in any season. Prairie, Northern Parula, American Redstarts, Northern Waterthrush, Black-and-White Warblers, and other migrants are here in winter.

At the top of the island, you will find three side trails to the right leading to scenic overlooks. The last one takes you to a cliff edge, which is a good spot to observe seabirds if the (preferably strong) winds are out of the south or southeast. Scan the water for Brown Pelicans, White-Tailed Tropicbirds, Magnificent Frigatebirds, and Brown Boobies. February, March, and April are the best times to spot a Red-Billed Tropicbird.

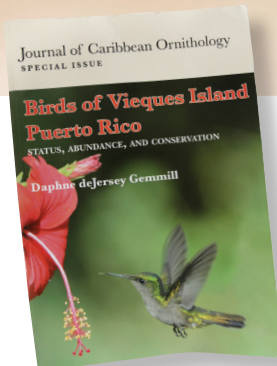
If you continue counterclockwise on the trail the walking becomes difficult due to a steep descent and a long stretch of loose coral to traverse. We recommend that you turn around and descend the same way you came. At this point you can return to your starting point or continue on to Sun Bay for a swim. Please share your sighting with others through eBird.org.



Belted Kingfisher



There are many iPhone and Android Birding apps, but our favorite one is All Birds PR -> Antigua, covering Puerto Rico + North East West Indies by Mullen & Pohland GbR (Apple users only). Other apps that may be useful are MerlinBird ID, BirdNET, Audubon, and eBird for the advanced user, especially in North America and Europe.



DAHPNE DEJERSEY GEMMILL'S BOOK *BIRDS OF VIEQUES ISLAND, PUERTO RICO*, covering 174 documented bird species, is available at the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust or purchase it through the online shop at www.audubonnaturalist.org.



Did you know that one of Puerto Rico's most important archeological finds was discovered in Vieques? The 2000-year-old carved jadeite talisman of an Andean Condor reveals the likelihood of far-reaching trading routes from South America since neither jadeite nor Condors are native to Vieques. This majestic bird amulet became the symbol of The Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust when it was formed in 1984.

BIRDING WITH THE VIEQUES CONSERVATION AND HISTORICAL TRUST (VCHT)

Bird Walks during the 2023/2024 season are scheduled for:

December 20th,
January 10th,
January 24th,
February 7th,
February 21st,
March 6th and
March 20th

All Bird Walks start on the Malecon in front of The Vieques Conservation Trust in Esperanza, 138 Flamboyant Street at 7:30 a.m. For more information and to sign up, visit www.vcht.org/birding.

Please bring binoculars if you have them. Wear sturdy shoes as the walks occur in the woods, on the beach and around lagoons. Bring a hat and water, and wear reef-safe sunscreen and bug repellent.

December 30, 2023

The Vieques Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) will take place on December 30. Regardless of your skill level, you are welcome to join us. Please email vcht.birding.team@gmail.com for additional information.

A visit to the Trust in Esperanza is worthwhile either before or after your bird walk. Check out the smallest aquarium in the world, the Taino exhibit, the bioluminescence room, and the gift shop. The gift shop sells a Vieques Bird Checklist (updated in 2022) and the popular The Birds of Vieques Island, Puerto Rico: Status, Abundance, and Conservation (2015) by Daphne Gemmill, along with local honey, jewelry, t-shirts, post-cards, books for all ages, and other items that make great gifts.