

FIRST RECORDS OF PIPING PLOVER (*Charadrius melodus*) AND AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*) IN THE JARDINES DE LA REINA ARCHIPELAGO, CUBA

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The Jardines de la Reina Archipelago (JRA) extends for 360 km off the southern coast of east-central Cuba, between Casilda Bay and the Gulf of Guacanayabo. The JRA consists of about 661 cays divisible into three island subgroups, the most important of which faunistically are the Ana María (Fauna Refuge) and the Doce Leguas cays (National Park) (Parada and García-Quintas 2012). The latter occupies around 87 km on the outer edge of the island shelf and is formed by a chain of cays separated by small straits; Caguama, Grande and Caballones are the largest cays (Parada and García-Quintas 2012). Typical vegetation types of the Doce Leguas cays include all floristic and physiognomic variants of mangrove forests as well as coastal xeromorph thicket on sand, and other vegetation complexes of sandy and rocky coasts (Parada and García-Quintas 2012).

In comparison with other sites in Cuba, the JRA is among the least studied ornithologically, with a few outstanding exceptions such as the exhaustive works of Buden and Olson (1989) and Socarrás et al. (2006). The number of studies has increased in the last five years (e.g., Parada and García-Quintas 2012, Parada et al. 2015, García-Quintas 2016). Most of these studies have focused on the communities of terrestrial birds, while investigations on waterbirds are scarce (García-Quintas 2016). It is important to increase knowledge of this region, due to its high degree of isolation, its conservation status, and because its natural history value is little appreciated.

During a sampling period (4 through 18 November 2017) in the coastal zones of six cays of the JRA, we recorded two new bird species for this region. Fieldwork was done between 0700 and 1200 h (standard Cuban time). The new species recorded were Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) and American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*). They were sighted in Grande and Caballones cays respectively. Piping Plover is especially notable because it is regarded as Vulnerable in Cuba and Near Threatened at the global scale (Blanco 2012).

Piping Plover—A shorebird with breeding range in northeastern North America that winters in the southeastern United States, the Bahamas, and the Greater Antilles (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2011). Several monitoring projects have shown that the coastal zones of Cuba have the highest number of records of winter resident and transient Piping Plovers in the Antilles (Blanco 2012). Typical habitats of this species are broad sandy beaches, although it may also use salt marshes and shallow coastal lagoons (Blanco 2012).

Several programs have been developed in Cuba for the study and conservation of Piping Plover and its winter habitats (e.g., Blanco et al. 1994, Blanco 1997, Blanco and Pérez 1997). These studies estimate that its population in Cuba is ca.140 individuals (2.3 % of its global population) and that its distribution range in Cuba is mainly northern coasts. Coco, Paredón Grande, and Antón Chico cays have the

greatest number of observed individuals (Blanco 2012). In southern Cuba, it has previously been sighted only on Largo cay, part of the Canarreos Archipelago.

On 6 November 2017 we observed one individual of Piping Plover foraging on a sand bank north of Grande cay, together with two Semipalmated Plovers (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) and a flock of Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*). This sighting constitutes the first report of this species for the JRA, and the second site for the species in southern Cuba. The observed individual was probably a transient. More sampling efforts will be necessary to evaluate the status of this species in JRA.

American Kestrel—A common permanent- (*F. s. sparveroides*), winter resident and transient (*F. s. sparverius*) raptor in Cuba, Isla de la Juventud (Isle of Youth) and some cays. American Kestrel exploits open terrain, rural farmland, and edges of forests, roads and dirt roads (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2011). It is the most abundant and widely distributed raptor species in Cuba, due to its versatility in habitat use and trophic requirements (Rodríguez 2004). It had not been recorded in JRA until 7 November 2017, in the over-sand shrubland of Caballones cay. The individual was an adult female hunting during the morning hours. It was probably a migratory transient.

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