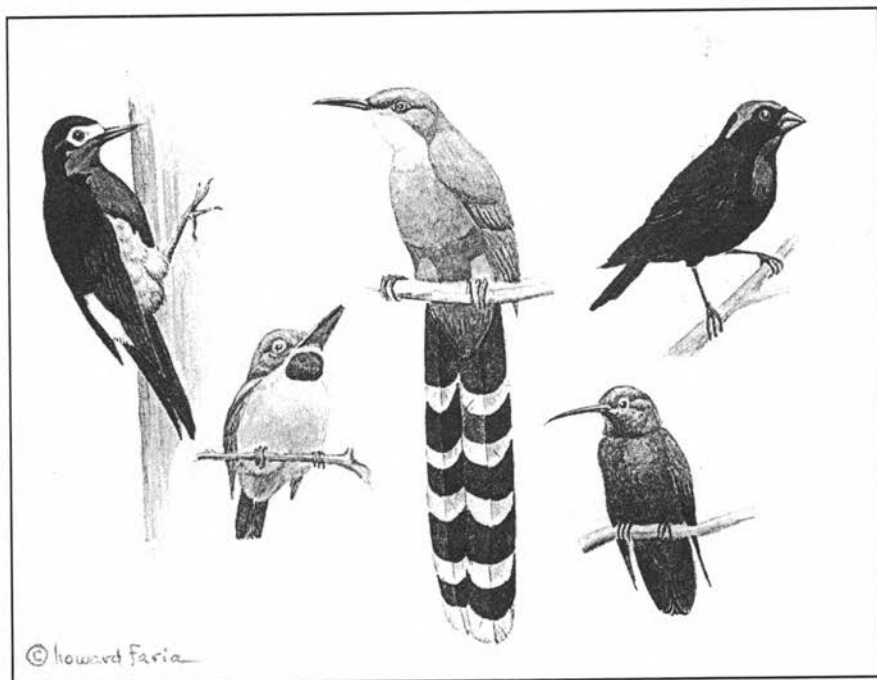


A WINTER GETAWAY: GUANICA STATE FOREST, PUERTO RICO

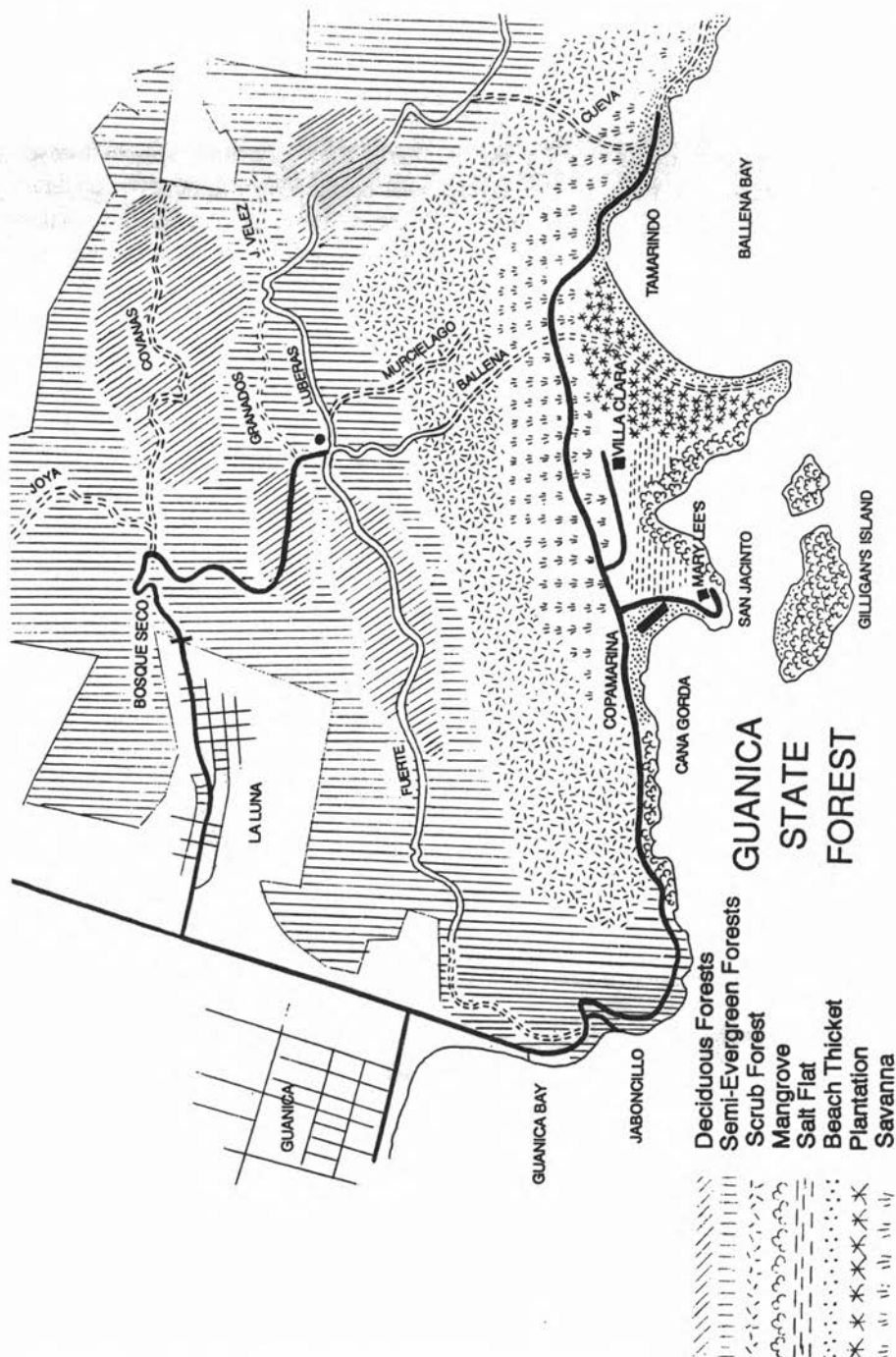
by Howard D. Faria

On the quiet southwestern coast of Puerto Rico is a little known forest preserve full of surprises for the adventurous birder. Designated a Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program, the Guanica State Forest, twenty miles west of Ponce, offers the best opportunity for viewing the island's endemic wildlife. Its 10,000 acres of undulating hills and lowlands is perhaps one of the best examples of a subtropical dry forest in the world, harboring an impressive seven hundred species of plants, of which forty-eight are rare and endangered and sixteen are found only within its boundaries. Two rare and endemic ground lizards, the endangered Crested Toad, and two cave-adapted aquatic invertebrates also find refuge here. Brilliant butterflies abound, land snails litter the forest, and a thriving marine sanctuary at Ballena Bay teems with fish, corals, and marine invertebrates.

Everywhere you go, the air is filled with birdsong. The diversity and density of avifauna is greater here than anywhere else on the island. Many of Puerto Rico's 239 native species and fifty or so vagrants and introduced species are



Puerto Rico's endemics (left to right): Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Puerto Rican Tody, Puerto Rican Lizard Cuckoo, Green Mango, Puerto Rican Bullfinch.



seen in the area, and all but two of its fourteen endemic species can be found in the forest.

Well-maintained trails take you through eight distinct natural communities supporting different concentrations of birds. Early morning hikes along the scenic ridge, through alternating deciduous and semi-evergreen forests, reveal Antillean (Blue-hooded) Euphonia and Stripe-headed Tanager. Ruddy Quail Dove and Key West Quail Dove are flushed from the trails, and olive-brown Puerto Rican Tanagers move in the trees overhead. Lesser Antillean Peewee can be anticipated by the roadside, snapping tiny morsels out of the air.

The dense growth in the narrow valley leading to the main entrance at Bosque Seco is a favorite haunt of Puerto Rican Vireo. Its loud, clear, and melodious call is captivating, and it is easily spotted, appearing much like a washed-out Solitary Vireo, but with a grayish throat, light yellow belly, and a broken white eye ring.

The steep slopes on the eastern side of the entrance to Guanica Bay are especially rich with life. The incessant phrasing of Black-whiskered Vireos joyfully announces the new day, as warblers flit, todies snap, and hummingbirds whirl in a menagerie of sound. Puerto Rican Lizard Cuckoos love these dense stands. More often heard than seen, these large rufous cuckoos with a grayish breast, cinnamon belly, and long black-and-white tail feathers, are quite tame and will sit a long time for viewing once you find them. Its cousin, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, prefers the densely flowering trees of the lower slopes, which are full of butterflies, bees, and other insectivorous birds.

Playa Jaboncillo, a public picnic area at the bottom of the cliff, may be the last place in this forest where you can find the endemic Yellow-shouldered Blackbird. Once common here, nest parasitism by Shiny Cowbirds and increased competition by the sweet-voiced Greater Antillean Grackle have all but eliminated them. You must now go farther west to Parguera or to Mona Island to see them in any numbers. But you may be lucky here in the early morning.

Scrub forests on the parched southern slopes and dry coastal plain are surprisingly active. Adelaide's Warblers are abundant here. Troupials call from thorny acacias. Bananaquits race noisily through the brush. A series of sharp clear whistles followed by a buzz reveals a large black finch with a rich rufous crown, throat, and undertail coverts. It is a Puerto Rican Bullfinch, the largest and most beautiful of the region's endemic bullfinches. Pearly-eyed Thrashers and the silent Puerto Rican Flycatcher observe you from the shadows. Chattering Gray Kingbirds everywhere loudly settle their territorial disputes, while White-winged Doves quietly watch from the wires overhead.

The main attraction here is the Puerto Rican Tody. A relict from the mid-Oligocene thirty million years ago, it is one of five species found only in the Greater Antilles. This amusing little imp is a thrill to watch. Bright green with a

Selected Bird Species in Guanica State Forest

	W	Sp	Sr	F		W	Sp	Sr	F
White-tailed Tropicbird	R	R	R	R	Belted Kingfisher	C	C		C
Masked Booby	A	A	A	A	Puerto Rican Woodpecker*	U	U	U	U
Brown Booby	U	U	U	U	Puerto Rican Flycatcher*	U	U	U	U
Red-footed Booby	A	A	A	A	Lesser Antillean Pewee	U	U	U	U
Brown Pelican	C	C	C	C	Gray Kingbird	C	C	C	C
Magnificent Frigatebird	U	U	U	U	Caribbean Elaenia	U	U	U	U
Least Bittern	R	R	R	R	Caribbean Martin	U	U	U	U
Black-crowned Night-Heron	U	U	U	U	Bank Swallow	R	R		R
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	U	U	U	U	Red-legged Thrush	R	R	R	R
Turkey Vulture	C	C	C	C	Pearly-eyed Thrasher	C	C	C	C
Osprey	C	C			Puerto Rican Vireo*	C	C	C	C
Merlin	U	U		U	Black-whiskered Vireo	C	C	C	U
Peregrine Falcon	U	U		U	Golden-winged Warbler	R	R		R
Clapper Rail	C	C	C	C	Northern Parula	C	C		C
Sora	U	U		U	Yellow Warbler	C	C		C
Black-bellied Plover	C	C	U	C	Chestnut-sided Warbler	R	R		R
Lesser Golden-Plover	R	R		R	Magnolia Warbler	R	R		R
Semipalmated Plover	C	C	C	C	Cape May Warbler	C	C		C
Wilson's Plover	U	U	U	U	Black-throated Blue Warbler	R	R		R
Snowy Plover	A	A	A	A	Yellow-rumped Warbler	R	R		R
American Oystercatcher	R	R	R	R	Black-throated Green Warbler	R	R		R
Greater Yellowlegs	U	U		U	Blackburnian Warbler	R	R		R
Black-necked Stilt	U	U	U	U	Yellow-throated Warbler	U	U		U
Lesser Yellowlegs	C	C	C	C	Prairie Warbler	C	C		C
Solitary Sandpiper	R	R		R	Palm Warbler	C	C		C
Willet	R	R		R	Blackpoll Warbler	R		R	
Spotted Sandpiper	C	C	C	C	Adelaide's Warbler	C	C	C	C
Ruddy Turnstone	C	C		C	Black-and-white Warbler	U	U		U
Red Knot		R		R	Prothonotary Warbler	R	R		R
Sanderling	U	U		U	Worm-eating Warbler	R	R		R
Semipalmated Sandpiper	C	C	U	C	Swainson's Warbler	R	R		R
Western Sandpiper	C	C	U	C	Ovenbird	U	U		U
Least Sandpiper	C	C		C	Northern Waterthrush	C	C		C
White-rumped Sandpiper	R		R		Louisiana Waterthrush	U	U		U
Pectoral Sandpiper	R		R		Kentucky Warbler	A	A		A
Stilt Sandpiper	U	U		U	Connecticut Warbler	A	A		A
Ruff	A	A		A	Hooded Warbler	R	R		R
Short-billed Dowitcher	U	U		U	Wilson's Warbler	R	R		R
Common Snipe	U	U		U	Canada Warbler	A	A		A
Pomarine Jaeger	R	R		R	Bananquit	C	C	C	C
Laughing Gull	U	U	U		Antillean Euphonia	U	U	U	U
Royal Tern	U	U	U	U	Stripe-headed Tanager	U	U	U	U
Sandwich Tern	R	R	R	R	Puerto Rican Tanager*	U	U	U	U
Common Tern	R		R		Blue Grosbeak	R	R		R
Bridled Tern	R	R	R	R	Indigo Bunting	R	R		R
Sooty Tern	R	R	R	R	Yellow-faced Grassquit	C	C	C	C
Black Tern	R		R		Black-faced Grassquit	C	C	C	C
Brown Noddy	R	R	R	R	Puerto Rican Bullfinch*	C	C	C	C
White-crowned Pigeon	U	U	U	U	Yellow-shouldered Blackbird*	U	U	U	U
White-winged Dove	C	C	C	C	Greater Antillean Grackle	C	C	C	C
Zenaida Dove	U	U	U	U	Shiny Cowbird	U	U	U	U
Common Ground Dove	C	C	C	C	Black-cowled Oriole	R	R	R	R
Ruddy Quail Dove	U	U	U	U	Troupial	U	U	U	U
Key West Quail Dove	U	U	U	U	Warbling Silverbill	U	U	U	U
Mangrove Cuckoo	C	C	C	C					
Puerto Rican Lizard Cuckoo*	C	C	C	C					
Smooth-billed Ani	C	C	C	C					
Puerto Rican Screech Owl*	U	U	U	U					
Short-eared Owl	R	R	R	R					
Antillean Nighthawk	R	R	R	R					
Puerto Rican Nightjar*	C	C	C	C					
Black Swift	R	R	R	R					
Puerto Rican Emerald*	C	C	C	C					
Antillean Mango	C	C	C	C					
Green Mango*	U	U	U	U					
Puerto Rican Tody*	C	C	C	C					

C = common; U = uncommon; R = rare; A = accidental;
* Endemic

Compiled from observations by author and by park manager, Miguel Canals. Other references include *Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*, *Birds of the West Indies*, and *American Birds Christmas Bird Counts* for the last ten years. Accidentals are included because of suitable habitat and favorable conditions for their occurrence and because many breed nearby.



Puerto Rican Lizard Cuckoo

Illustration, © Howard Faria

crimson throat patch, long bill, and a lemon-yellow vest, it sounds more like a frog than a bird, and rattles in flight like a startled locust. It is easily mistaken or overlooked, but fortunately is very common.

In the open savanna near the coast, Puerto Rican Emerald hummingbirds jealously guard flowering crowns of turks cap cacti. The endemic Green Mango, and its darker cousin, the Antillean Mango, shimmer among flowering creepers. Yellow-faced Grassquits and Black-faced Grassquits play hide-and-seek in the grass. Smooth-billed Anis calling to each other glide in from the hills.

Nearby mangroves are popular with wintering warblers: Yellow, Palm, Prairie, and Cape May warblers, Northern Parula, American Redstart, and Northern Waterthrush. Thirty species of wood warblers occur in the region, and many stop here. This is prime Mangrove Cuckoo and White-crowned Pigeon habitat. Herons and egrets prowl the edge of the lagoon. Brown Pelicans glide low over open waters, and Magnificent Frigatebird and Osprey pivot in the wind. Search the horizon for boobies, tropicbirds, jaegers, and other pelagic species.

Tidal saltflats fill with waders and shorebirds in the late afternoon. Turnstones, plovers, sandpipers, and a few Clapper Rails are always present. Herons and egrets also congregate here at night.

Stay to witness the curious evening migration of warblers following the shoreline through the mangroves to some unknown roost in the bush. Stay to listen in the gathering twilight for the abbreviated call of the Puerto Rican Nightjar, easily seen in the moonlight. If you are lucky, you might also hear the

trill of the earless Puerto Rican Screech Owl. The lagoon is restless with the chatter of night-herons, moorhens, and rails. Birding by ear at night is a whole new dimension in sound.

In the morning, if you are staying at Villa Clara, you will be awakened by a nesting pair of Puerto Rican Woodpeckers high in a palm tree outside your door. This striking black woodpecker, with a white forehead and a red throat and breast, prefers coconut plantations along the coast, but is regularly seen throughout the forest.

The islands of the Caribbean, with their unique populations evolved in isolation, vividly illustrate Darwin's *Origin of Species*, but on a greater scale than the celebrated Galápagos Islands, and in a more accessible way. Although not as many or as exotic as some species on other islands, Puerto Rico's endemic species occur nowhere else in the world. Such a remarkable concentration of native wildlife in one little area is itself unique.

Miguel Canals, the forest service management officer credited with stopping a major Club Med development here at Playa Tamarindo, is friendly and informative, and can be found at his office, overlooking the forest. Detailed maps and fact sheets are available at the park office, which is open weekdays from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. We can support his efforts by visiting this remarkable place and by demonstrating to the locally depressed economy the benefits of preserving their natural heritage with our tourist dollars. The pressure for development is a constant threat, and there is no guarantee that this forest will always be here.

For field guides, Herbert Raffaelli's *Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands* is the authoritative guide to Puerto Rico. James Bond's *Birds of the West Indies* is also an excellent guide with a broader view of the region's unique species. Both books are invaluable.

If you go, take a half-hour connecting flight from San Juan on American Eagle to Ponce. Major car rental companies are represented at the airport. It is an easy hour's drive from the airport to the forest. Continue past Guanica for four miles east along the coast to Cana Gorda. The Motel Copamarina on the beach at Cana Gorda offers modest accommodations (\$128 per night for a double room) and dining (809-821-0505). Mary Lee's by the Sea, in the little enclave of San Jacinto overlooking Gilligan's Island, offers private cottages ranging from \$90 for two to \$160 per night for up to six people (809-821-3600). I recommend Villa Clara, a private home with private apartments, which accommodate four to six people for \$500 per week (809-821-6043). English is spoken at all three places, each of which are within walking distance of the forest and beaches. It is best to reserve well in advance because the area is popular on weekends and holidays.

HOWARD D. FARIA is an artist and naturalist living on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts. He frequently visits the Caribbean in search of birds or wildlife.