

Birding Aruba: sea(birds), sand(pipers), wind(-driven vagrants) and a few endemic subspecies

Thomas Donegan & Blanca Huertas

Aruba may not be the first destination you think of when eyeing up a Neotropical birding trip, but there are some intriguing reasons why it deserves a place on your radar.

Aruba is a small Caribbean island, just 32 km in length, lying 24 km north of the Paraguaná peninsula in Falcón state, Venezuela. It is considered part of the South American continent and the Neotropical region (Remsen *et al.* 2022). From west to east, Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire are together colloquially referred to as the 'ABC islands'. They used to comprise the Netherlands Antilles, prior to various changes towards greater independence. Aruba remains a constituent part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, but has its own Parliament and currency, gaining substantial autonomy in 1986. These islands are sometimes considered part of a broader archipelago stretching further east, including Gran Roque, Orchila, Tortuga, Blanquilla and (sometimes) Margarita, which are mostly smaller islands off Venezuela.

Few, if any, international bird-tour companies include the ABC islands on their itineraries. Aruba holds no endemic bird species. However, it supports endemic species in other faunal groups – such as Aruba Whiptail *Cnemidophorus arubensis*, a lizard. Prins *et al.* (2009) produced a well-researched and annotated bird checklist, noting that the “bird faunas of Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire... form an impoverished representation of what is found in mainland South America”. These three small islands support no resident tinamous, guans, vultures, barbets, puffbirds, trogons, jacamars, motmots, antbirds, antpittas, tapaculos, woodcreepers, ovenbirds, wrens, manakins, cotingas or thrushes; not even a kiskadee!

Aruba is hot and arid, with a strong and constant east-to-west trade winds (averaging c.30 km/h). These winds correspond to the North Equatorial Current of the south Caribbean, which turns, further to the west, to form the Gulf Stream. There was just one brief and light shower during our two-week stay in July to August, with

temperatures over 30°C every day and a searing, often unclouded sun.

Aruba's remaining natural habitats, which are most extensive in Nationaal Park Arikok in the east of the island, are dominated by cactus and leguminous or thorny shrubs and smaller trees. Taller and lush growth is found in the single extensive mangrove (Spaans Lagoen, the Spanish Lagoon) and around the wetlands of Bubali reserve and various dry *salinas* (salt lakes) in the west of the island. Aruba is best known for its picture-perfect white-sand beaches, sun, breeze, coral reefs, multicoloured seas, and diving or snorkelling opportunities. A considerable tourism industry and infrastructure has developed, including several high-rise hotels and upmarket shopping districts. This industry has drawn more and more people to work on the islands, with significant recent immigration, urbanisation and habitat modification reported over recent decades.

Why (not) Aruba?

Despite its small size, and low habitat and bird diversity, Aruba is of ornithological interest and can be a good birding location. It supports populations of two recognised endemic bird subspecies, several ABC-island endemic subspecies and some interesting dry habitat or Caribbean specialists. The strong trade winds and the island's geographical position also provide excellent prospects for seawatching, migrants and vagrants. Birding on this self-styled 'One Happy Island' benefits from several well-established bird checklists (Prins *et al.* 2009, Peterson 2018, Mlodinow 2022) and two modern field guides (De Boer *et al.* 2012, Wells *et al.* 2017). However, our trusty Colombia field guide (McMullan & Donegan 2014) sufficed to identify all bird species that we saw, as would have the