

# Audubon International Alliances Program



Bahama Woodstar. Photo by Bruce Hallett.

## The Bahamas

### Suggested Itinerary

#### *Birding The Bahamas' Bird Islands*

The Bahamas is a country of over 700 islands, cays and islets, covering over 180,000 square miles of ocean with each major island full of avian surprises. Only a few islands are inhabited and all are flat with the highest elevation at 206 ft. This tour focuses on three islands, and a tour extension to another island, that are very different and collectively provide an excellent representation of the country's birdlife, including all of the endemics and West Indian specialties in The Bahamas. We will have time to enjoy each island's unique features and the local hospitality of this tropical paradise including opportunities for photography, swimming and perhaps snorkeling and fishing, especially during afternoons when birding is quiet.

Many of the great birds we will be seeking are restricted to a few islands in the West Indies, including one restricted to a single island. The **local endemics include Bahama Yellowthroat, Bahama Swallow, Bahama Woodstar, the endangered**



Andros Island. Photo by Kerri Dikun.

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Cuban Pewee. Photo by John Sterling.

**Grassquit.** The extension to Abaco Island will offer a chance to see the **Bahama Warbler**—a very distinctive species split from Yellow-throated Warbler—restricted to Abaco and Grand Bahamas islands, as well as **West Indian Woodpecker and Olive-capped Warbler**. Coppice (local name for hardwood woodland), pine forests, mangroves and coastal beaches and wetlands provide a diversity of habitats for **woodland land birds and many coastal waterbirds** including shorebirds during migration and winter.

The islands are home to **many wintering migratory birds** and are vital stopover areas for longer distance migrants. For much of the year (except summer), the woods are **full of warblers and other migratory species**. The wetlands and beaches have many **migratory shorebirds** including the **Snowy and**

**Bahama Oriole** restricted to Andros Island, and the **Inagua Woodstar**—a recently split species from the **Bahama Woodstar**—restricted to Great Inagua and Little Inagua islands. We will also witness the great spectacle of the **world's largest American Flamingo colony** in the wetlands on Great Inagua. Other special birds include the **Bahama Parrot (the local subspecies of the Cuban Parrot)**, **Zenaida Dove**, **Key West Quail-Dove**, **Great Lizard Cuckoo**, **Cuban Emerald**, **LaSagra's Flycatcher**, **Loggerhead Kingbird**, **Cuban Pewee**, **Thick-billed Vireo**, **Red-legged Thrush**, **Bahama Mockingbird**, **Bananaquit**, **Western Spindalis**, **Greater Antillean Bullfinch**, and **Black-faced**



Thick-billed Vireo. Photo by John Sterling.

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**Piping plovers** that are the focus of conservation efforts. Here we will watch them in their wintering habitats and see how different their ecology is compared to their mainland breeding grounds in the United States and/or Canada. If you are lucky, you may find a **Kirtland's Warbler** as they only winter on a few Bahamian islands and Cuba!

This itinerary incorporates something special, and that is the opportunity to make you a partner in helping international conservation. **The National Audubon Society and their local partner, Bahamas National Trust**, have teamed up to train Bahamians on Andros and Inagua islands to become birding and nature guides.

### Bahamas National Trust

The Bahamas National Trust is a non-profit organization founded in 1959 by an Act of Parliament. It is mandated to provide the conservation and protection of The Bahamas' natural and historic resources, including its **32 national parks and additional protected areas**. It has a thriving environmental education program and has worked on important projects such as creating marine reserves, reviving the American Flamingo population, managing the White-crowned Pigeon population, protecting the Piping Plover and its habitats, and restoring wetlands.



Piping Plover. Photo by Matthew Jeffery.

Along with our primary tour leader, we will have their local guiding help throughout this trip, and in turn are helping them make a living while protecting a healthy and diverse ecosystem. Birders who choose to take these tours in order to see and enjoy the natural riches will have a direct economic impact on the local people resulting in preservation of local habitats that maintain a healthy, viable eco-tourism industry.

### *The Birding Sites We Visit*

#### **Nassau and New Providence Island**

The tour begins in this transportation hub and the capital of the country. In the city of Nassau, gardens and woodlands abound but none are as good as "The Retreat", the headquarters of the Bahamas National Trust and one of the largest private collections of palm trees in the world. This location provides a good introduction to common species such as **Red-legged Thrush**, **White-crowned Pigeon**,

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Great Lizard-Cuckoo. Photo by John Sterling.

be seen. It is also **famous for its blue holes**—collapsed sinkholes that can be extremely deep and connected to the ocean. Because freshwater is less dense than seawater, a lens of freshwater (from rain) floats on the surface of the blue holes. Many blue holes have endemic fish that have evolved to adapt to the freshwater and are confined to a single blue hole.

The island is comprised of coppice in the south and a mixture of coppice and pine forests to the north. There are a few small towns on the island, but the general countryside is rural or uninhabited. It is a **great getaway from the standard tourist destinations** and one can find a true feeling of the relaxed Bahamian way of life.

**Thick-billed Vireo, summering Gray Kingbird and Black-whiskered Vireo, the introduced Caribbean Dove, and others.**

Nassau, The Bahama's capital city since the colonial era, has a historical charm with excellent tourism facilities and attractions. Our hotel will be the Orange Hill Beach Inn, a relaxed family style local hotel near the airport with swimming pool, air conditioning and family style restaurant.

### Andros Island

It is the largest island, but with a small population and low density of about four people per square mile. This island is the only location in the world for the **endangered Bahama Oriole**, so it is an essential destination for birders visiting the region. It has good forest where the **Key West Quail Dove, Great Lizard Cuckoo, Bahama Yellow-throat** and many other Bahamian specialties can



Bahama Oriole. Photo by Carolyn Ward.

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Our suggested hotel is the 20-room Lighthouse Marina and Hotel on the harbor in the town of Fresh Creek. This comfortable local hotel with air conditioning, TV and restaurant is located near the beach and coppice. The endangered **Bahama Oriole** has nested in palm trees on the hotel grounds.

### Great Inagua Island

Inagua is the third largest island of The Bahamas and the southernmost, located within sixty miles of Haiti and Cuba. Lacking the forests found on the other main islands, its wetlands are recognized as internationally important by the Ramsar Convention. They are home to **the world's largest colony of American Flamingos** that was protected and brought back from near extirpation through the National Audubon Society's efforts



American Flamingo. Photo by Janice Sveda.

### Physical Requirements & Pace

We have scheduled ample time to explore each of these islands at a relaxing pace. The islands are basically flat with almost no elevation gain, so **walking is easy**. All sites have roads for walking with a few good trails to get into the forest interior. **Bring comfortable hiking/walking shoes; you may wish to bring an additional pair for walking through shallow water. Weather can be warm, especially from the late spring to early fall and mosquitoes can be present** depending upon the time of day, location and season. **Bring a lightweight hat, and insect repellent and long-sleeved shirts and pants for comfort from sun and bugs.** Because the islands are relatively small, there is little time spent in vehicles traveling between hotels and birding locations. However, **we will take short flights between islands** on medium-sized commercial aircraft so there will be some time spent at airports. We plan for multiple overnight stays at hotels on two islands. Early morning birding is always best, but afternoons can be slow, so we will have time to relax knowing that we will likely see all of the target birds without too much difficulty. Much of the terrain is limestone, so hiking shoes with good support and **a walking stick is advised for those who are not sure-footed**. The coppice is fairly dense, so we will take our time in that habitat, slowly walking and searching for birds. You may wish to bring your own scope for better viewing of the abundant shorebirds and flamingo colony on Inagua.

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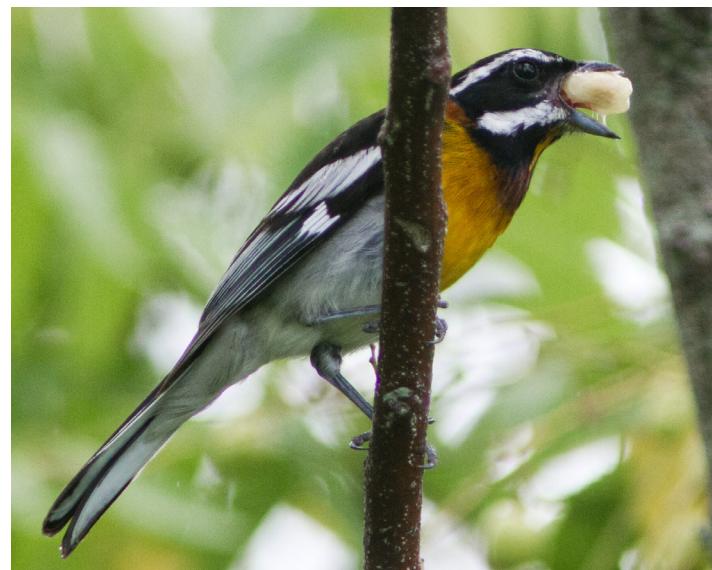


Red-legged Thrush. Photo by John Sterling.

to hire the first wardens, kickstarting the environmental movement. Depending upon the season, **huge numbers of shorebirds** inhabit the wetlands and beaches including **the threatened Snowy Plover**. It is also home to the **hummingbird**, **Inagua Woodstar**, **found only on this island** and its sister Little Inagua, as well as the **Bahama Parrot**. The island's economy is based on the Morton salt works that harvests over a million tons of salt annually in a way that creates foraging habitat for flamingos. We will stay at the Morton Main House, a charming, six-room hotel with air conditioning, TV and other amenities including a restaurant open for breakfast and lunch.

### Abaco Island

The second largest and northernmost main island of The Bahamas stretches over 100 miles and will be visited on the optional extension. Also considered a great island for birding, it has a national park at the southern end established to protect its **Bahama Parrot** population. Marsh Harbour has nice local hotels and restaurants and the island as a whole has an infrastructure for tourism. Aside from the parrot, the **Bahama Warbler** (restricted to Grand Bahama and Abaco) and the **West Indian Woodpecker** (restricted to Cuba and Abaco, now rare on San Salvador) are the key target birds, but **many other specialty birds** are found in the large pine forest, patches of coppice, mangroves, ponds and sandy beaches. We will stay at the very nice air-conditioned



Western Spindalis. Photo by John Sterling.

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Conch Inn situated on the picturesque harbor in the town of Marsh Harbour. This hotel features an excellent restaurant and bar.

### *Itinerary for The Bahamas*

#### **Day 1 – ARRIVAL IN NASSAU.**

Please book flights to arrive into Nassau by afternoon. Staff will be waiting for you at the airport. From there we will transfer you to beautiful and historic Nassau just a few minutes away. Time permitting, we will look for birds at “The Retreat” or other locations to get a taste of the local birdlife. Overnight at Orange Hill Resort in Nassau.



Loggerhead Kingbird. Photo by John Sterling.



West Indian Woodpecker. Photo by John Sterling.

**Day 2 – ANDROS ISLAND.** We begin the morning with an early flight to Andros Town/Fresh Creek on central Andros Island. We will look for the **endangered Bahama Oriole** around town and should see the **two hummingbirds: Cuban Emerald and Bahama Woodstar**. During the breeding season, the orioles nest in the palm trees on the hotel grounds. There is good hardwood forest in the immediate area that can harbor many species such as the **Thick-billed Vireo, La-Sagra's Flycatcher, Red-legged Thrush and Black-whiskered Vireo** (summer only). The beach is close by with chances for **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Reddish Egret, Green Heron, gulls, terns, and shorebirds including Piping Plovers**. From here we will explore other sites with coppice and pine forest, and

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Bahama Warbler. Photo by John Sterling.

check for **West Indian Whistling-Ducks (rare)**, **Least Grebes**, **Clapper Rails** and other wetland birds in nearby ponds. Overnight at Lighthouse Marina and Hotel in Fresh Creek.

**Day 3 – ANDROS ISLAND.** We will spend most of the morning birding in the coppice and pine forest to the north of Andros Town in the Blue Holes National Park. **Key West Quail-Doves** are common in the coppice but it will take a bit of luck to see them on the road in the early morning. Most of the resident

land birds can be found along the road including the amazing **Great Lizard Cuckoo**, **Bahama Yellowthroat**, **Cuban Pewee**, **Western Spindalis** (formerly known as Stripe-headed Tanager) and **Greater Antillean Bullfinch**. The blue holes are special sites in their own right—not particularly for birds but for the **rare freshwater aquatic life** bound by land around them and by saltwater below their narrow lens of freshwater. Overnight at Lighthouse Marina and Hotel in Fresh Creek.

**Day 4 – ANDROS ISLAND.** We will spend the morning birding the pine forests at the north end of the island, focusing on birds such as the **Bahama Swallow**, **Bahama Mockingbird**, and **Loggerhead Kingbird** and other species that we have missed thus far and for better looks of all birds including **shorebirds** at a few locations. In the evening we will fly back to Nassau. Overnight at Orange Hill Resort in Nassau.

**Day 5 – \*GREAT INAGUA.** In the morning we will catch our flight to Great Inagua. Upon arrival, we will search for the island endemic, **Inagua Woodstar**. This southern island has many avian



Olive-capped Warbler. Photo by John Sterling.

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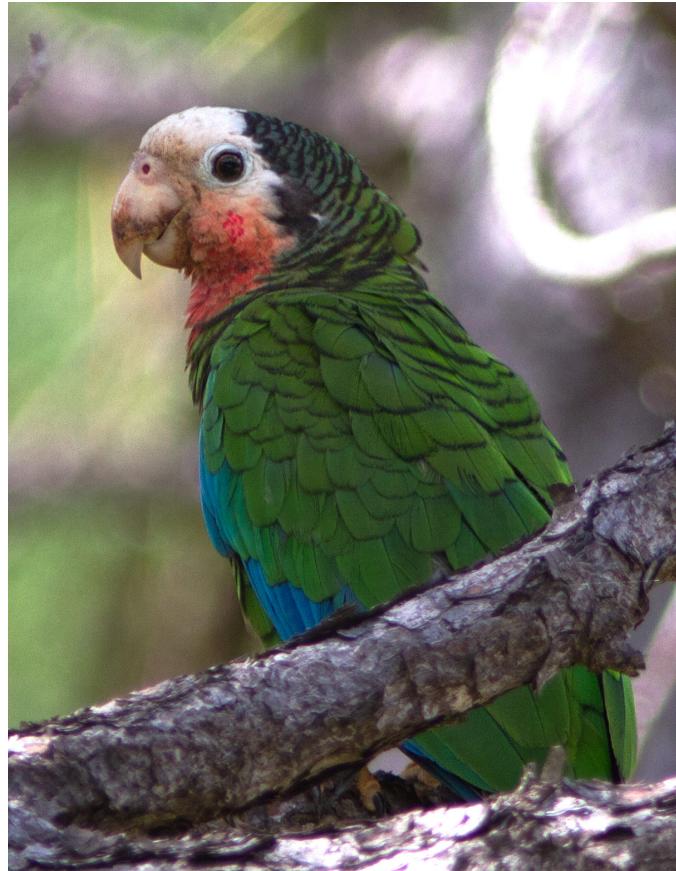
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delights and we will spend time looking at the **thousands of American Flamingos**, along with numerous **shorebirds**, **Roseate Spoonbills**, **Reddish Egrets**, **White-cheeked Pintails**, **Bahama Parrots** and **Burrowing Owls**. Overnight in Matthew Town at Morton Main House.

**Day 6 – GREAT INAGUA.** We will spend more time in the Inagua National Park that comprises most of the island. During the afternoon, we will have an optional tour of the Morton Salt Works operation. Overnight in Matthew Town at Morton Main House.

**Day 7 – GREAT INAGUA.** We will take last looks at our favorite birds on the island, and search for those that had eluded us, if any. In the late morning, we will fly to Nassau. Overnight at Orange Hill Resort in Nassau.

**Day 8 – NASSAU.** Day for international flights home.



Bahama Parrot. Photo by John Sterling.



White-cheeked Pintail. Photo by John Sterling.

### *Optional Extension*

**Day 8 – ABACO.** We catch our flight to Abaco in the morning. Upon arrival we will check into the Conch Inn in Marsh Harbour, then proceed to the pine forest a short drive to the south. Here we will look for **Olive-capped** and **Bahama warblers** along with many of the **other**

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**Caribbean specialties** seen previously. We will make a special attempt to get good views of the **West Indian Woodpecker**, confined to this island and Cuba. Overnight at Conch Inn in Marsh Harbour.

**Day 9 – ABACO.** In the morning we will drive to the southern part of the island to look for the **Bahama Parrot**. These parrots uniquely nest in limestone holes in the ground (instead of tree cavities as they do elsewhere). We will make a special effort to get good looks at other birds including **Kirtland's Warblers** if any are known to be around. In the afternoon we will fly to Nassau. Overnight at Orange Hill Resort in Nassau.

**Day 10 – NASSAU.** Day for international flights home.

\*Flights to/from Great Inagua are currently scheduled only for Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Check Bahamasair to confirm schedule.

