

Cuban solenodon/Isla de Juventud blitz, March 13-15, 2020

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Cuban solenodon (*Atopogale cubana*) digging through leaf litter, Alejandro de Humboldt National Park, La Melba sector.

I've been to Cuba twice and tried to find Cuban solenodons (*almiqui* in Spanish) both times. During the 2019 trip with Daniel Hoops and Michael Patrick Marklevitz we managed to find a way into good habitat, but didn't score. So I decided to give it another try. The airfare was just US\$139.

Comrade Trump has banned flights from the US to all Cuban cities except Havana, so you can't fly directly to the east of the island. I flew to Havana with a one-day delay due to a flight cancellation, and was very lucky to catch a plane to Moa. That 2-hr flight has erratic schedule and is often cancelled, so to avoid surprises, better plan to take one of many daily flights to Holguin (3-4 hrs extra driving time each way). Moa flight is supposed to be on Thursday and Monday mornings but I caught it on Friday at 16:00. I didn't have a ticket but asked nicely and was allowed to fly for free; the other 7 seats were all empty.

In Moa I rented a motorcycle (Russian-made Ural Solo; it often wouldn't start until I walked it for a while, but otherwise was OK). You need a motorcycle license to do it. I don't have one, but fortunately the stamp marking vehicle type in my international driving license was a bit misplaced, so it worked. The company said they were planning to sell the bike (their only), but there were jeeps available for rent in Holguin and forest roads should be in better shape in June. The fuel tank was $\frac{1}{4}$ full and I was told that only diesel was available within 100 km of Moa. The economic situation on the island is dire: for the first time since (reportedly) the early 1990s there are kids begging for food in the street; the roads are no longer being repaired; most restaurants and stores are closed; electricity in Moa is off 22:00-6:00. And there will be no tourist season this year.

I rode straight to the area of Alejandro de Humboldt National Park that we had explored in 2019. Directions: take the main highway towards Baracoa, turn right at 20.609519N 74.837173W, then left at 20.604167N 74.844895W (towards La Melba). For about a mile after that the road was in abysmal condition and I had to walk the bike half the time (someone with more experience could probably do better, but I hadn't ridden a motorcycle for 30 years). After that it was a slow, muddy, but relatively smooth ride all the way to the beginning of good habitat around 20.493426N 74.81769W. It was very dark by the time I got there, and raining hard. That area is the wettest part of Cuba, with up to 4000 mm of rain annually, although it's a bit drier in early summer.

I spent the night looking for solenodons by walking the road for ~500 m and back, driving to the next good stretch, and repeating. There were **Jamaican fruit-eating bats** and **Cuban fig-eating bats** flying along the road. After midnight the rain almost stopped, but, luckily, the sky was still cloudy (the moon was third quarter). When the road descended into lowlands I spotted a midsize hutia in a tree (20.461353W 74.814670 N). It was too shy to photograph, but I'm pretty sure it was a **black-tailed hutia** (prehensile-tailed hutia doesn't occur in the park according to a recent survey). I didn't see any of the mysterious small hutias reported from the area (we probably saw one in 2019). When the road approached the first village I turned back and went up the side track that starts at 20.483249N 74.818197W. It leads to a patch of better forest (starting at 20.488152N 74.805213W) and turns into a muddy trail. Finally at ~5 am I heard some rustling in dense shrubs at 20.487165N 74.803484W, and saw two **Cuban solenodons** with my thermal scope. The larger one never made it into the open, but the smaller one walked into a gap between shrubs and started digging, so I decided it was a good moment to turn the light on,

and managed to snap a photo (the only one I took the entire trip) before the animal pulled its snout out of the leaf litter and disappeared. The undergrowth in these forests is very dense, so the method of running solenodons down and catching them by the tail that is used in the Dominican Republic wouldn't work.

My bike was low on fuel and the night was almost over, so I slowly rode back to Moa through deep mud. When I got the bridge at 20.506213W 74.817623N, a raptor looking suspiciously like a Cuban kite (not seen since 2010) flew across the river, but the dawn was just breaking and I couldn't be sure in such poor light. I returned the bike, hitched a truck ride to Holguin (the road was eerily empty due to lack of gasoline everywhere), flew to Havana, and was lucky (again) to catch the 17:30 flight to Isla de Juventud (not part of the original plan).

The car rental was closed when I got to the island, so I had to take a taxi to Parque Nacional Marino de Punta Francés (US\$10 for 50 km). On the island there was gasoline but no diesel; fields had to be ploughed by oxen. The paved road to the park crosses Lanier Swamp where a flock of very rare Cuban sandhill cranes flew over. I was hoping to check Cuevas del Punto del Este for bats, but the driver said the road there was too bad. At Playa Larga there was a nice beach and a building (21.48134N 82.7249W) with **broad-eared freetail**s flying around after dark; they probably roosted in the building but I couldn't figure out where. I walked back through the forest; there were a few extremely shy **hutias** (**Desmarest's** and **prehensile-tailed**) and many **black rats** in trees. Bats flying along the road were **Jamaican fruit bats** and **Macleay's mustached bats** (the latter around 21.530675N 82.756307W; there were many so there must be a hot cave somewhere nearby). There were also Cuban nightjars of Isla de Juventud subspecies flying around; I heard a Stygian owl calling deep in the forest.

Eventually I walked out of the forest, across Lanier Swamp (lots of introduced spectacled caimans there), and to Julio Antonio Mella village where a **Cuban brown bat** was flying around a light (21.64556N 82.757579W). The taxi was waiting for me as we had agreed. I took it to Nueva Gerona on the northern side of the island, and explored the short trail to the coast that starts at 21.915733N 82.816774W. I was surprised to see a **prehensile-tailed hutia** so close to the town (in the mangroves at 21.919212N 82.818619W). There were also **greater fishing bats** flying along the shore, and a few nice birds at dawn, including Isla de Juventud subspecies of Cuban giant cuckoo and two woodpeckers. There are a few endemic herps on the island but I didn't see any of them. I didn't have much time for birding and herping because I had to catch the 3-hr ferry to the mainland (the flight back that I had ticket for turned out to have been cancelled three years earlier). The guy I was sitting next to on the ferry told me that there are lots of bats in Presidio Modelo, an abandoned prison 2 km from Nueva Gerona (21.877551N 82.766523W), but it was too late to check it out. Nothing interesting seen from the ferry.

In Havana I learned that Cuba had started putting people arriving from abroad into quarantine. Four Italian tourists had been diagnosed with the new coronavirus. Everybody at the airport was wearing self-made masks. I got to the airline counter a bit early and was told that my flight to the US had no other passengers and that the plane could leave as soon as I was ready; I asked if I could fly as the second pilot, but had to settle for first class. I finally ate (the crew let me have as many lunches as I could) and got some sleep. Newark Airport was much quieter now (while in Chicago getting through customs was taking 9 hours), and the food stores everywhere had been completely emptied by panicked mobs in the three days since I had left. I simply moved from one place with empty shelves to another... and it was a crazy trip altogether, like a Monty Python version of *World War Z*. But now I'm possibly the only human ever to have seen both Hispaniolan and Cuban solenodons.

Mammals list (AH = Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt; JAM = Julio Antonio Mella; MPF = Parque Nacional Marino de Punta Francés; NG = Nueva Gerona).

1.	Cuban solenodon	<i>Atopogale cubana</i>	2, AH
2.	Greater fishing bat	<i>Noctilio leporinus mastivus</i>	3-5, NG
3.	Macleay's mustached bat	<i>Pteronotus macleayi macleayi</i>	many, MPF
4.	Jamaican fruit-eating bat	<i>Artibeus jamaicensis parvipes</i>	many, all locations
5.	Cuban fig-eating bat	<i>Phyllops falcatus falcatus</i>	3-10, AH
6.	Cuban brown bat	<i>Eptesicus lynni petersoni</i>	1, JAM
7.	Broad-eared freetail	<i>Nyctinomops laticaudatus yucatanicus</i>	many, MPF
8.	Desmarest's hutia	<i>Capromys pilorides ciprianoi</i>	1-2, MPF
9.	Black-tailed hutia	<i>Mysateles melanurus</i>	1, AH
10.	Prehensile-tailed hutia	<i>M. p. gundalchi</i>	1, NG
		<i>M. p. meridionalis</i>	2-3, MPF
11.	Black rat	<i>Rattus rattus rattus</i>	6, MPF; 1 JAM; 1 NG