

Turks & Caicos, June 5-13, 2021

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Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) are a British overseas territory in the easternmost part of the Lucayan Archipelago (which also includes the Bahamas). All islands are flat (the highest point, Blue Mountain north of the international airport, is just 48 m) and made of limestone. The predominant vegetation is dry, stunted tropical forest or arid shrubland, but there are also lots of mangroves and a few pine woodlands. The only extant native land mammals are bats. More than 2/3 of the population live on Providenciales (locally called Provo), the only island with an international airport. May-early June and November are generally the best times to visit, but January-March are better for cetaceans. I was there on a family vacation, spent most time on Provo, with a day trip to North and Middle Caicos, and saw all five bats plus two species of dolphins and some fully naturalized mice.

Turks Islands

Turks Islands, of which only Grand Turk and Salt Key are inhabited, are accessible by local flights from Provo (to Cockburn Town and Balfour Town, respectively). They do not have native land mammals (although there are a few endemic reptiles). Introduced species include donkeys (on Great Turk), cats and rats. In January-March you can snorkel with **humpback whales** off Salt Cay (<https://saltcaydivers.com/whale-watching/>). I've never been to the Turks but they are close to deep waters and should be good for other cetaceans as well. Possibilities include **Cuvier's** and **Blainville's beaked whales**, **sperm whale**, **dwarf sperm whale**, **short-finned pilot** and **melon-headed whales**, and **Risso's**, **common**, **striped**, and **Pantropical spotted dolphins**.

Caicos Islands

Caicos Islands have five species of native **bats**. (There used to be six but Brazilian freetail has been extirpated. Bahaman hutia and West Indian manatee are also extinct.) Some of these bats might eventually prove to be endemic taxa. Only Middle Caicos has all 5, all of which can be seen in one cave (see below). Introduced mammals include rats, mice, cats and, on some islands, donkeys and horses. The islands are part of a shallow bank, so although they are also visited by **humpbacks** in winter, these are a bit far out. Boat trips run by local companies often encounter **bottlenose** and **Atlantic spotted dolphins**; Wake to Wake (<https://waketowake.tc/>) is said to have the best success rate. Big Blue Collective (<https://bigbluecollective.com/whales/>) runs longer trips that are better for **Atlantic spotted dolphins**; they take people to snorkel with **humpback** and sometimes **short-finned pilot whales** in winter and have also recorded **sperm** and **Blainville's beaked whales** a few times. A good place to look for **Atlantic spotted dolphins** during dives is Sandbore Channel between Provo and West Caicos.

Provo, where you arrive, has a bat cave just 50 m from the airport parking lot (but not accessible directly from it). It is called Airport Cave (21.777667N 72.271333W), is \cap -shaped, and has a small colony of **buffy flower bats** which uses one branch of the cave as day roost and the other as night roost. The cave lake has remipedes, rare crustaceans believed to be living fossils of the ancestors of all insects and milli/centipedes. You have to dive to 5 m to see the remipedes and it's a bit tricky. Provo is the best island to look for **minor red bats** roosting in clumps of dry leaves in isolated large trees; the bats are rare here but there are very few big trees. In densely populated parts of the island, introduced **brown rats**, greenhouse frogs, cane toads, green iguanas, house geckos, Bahama curlytails, knight and brown anoles, and Brahminy blind snakes also occur.

Northwest Point (21.8645N 72.3334W) is good for seawatches: many cetacean species are possible, but the probability is low; there are also nice seabirds at dusk and dawn (I even saw a black-capped petrel), and native skinks in shoreline rocks. The surrounding national park of the same name has flying **minor red** and **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bats** at forest lakes (look also for West Indian whistling-ducks); one of these lakes is accessible at 21.8605N 72.3358W. The park is good for introduced **house mice** and for forest birds including Bahama woodstar, Bahama mockingbird, and the island subspecies of blue-gray gnatcatcher, thick-billed vireo, bananaquit, and common ground-dove, as well as for native bark anoles and TCI curlytails. We stayed nearby at Northwest Point Resort where seabirds and bats often came to drink from the pool; after much searching I found a **minor red bat** roosting in a dry palm frond stuck in the tree at 21.85119N 72.32087W (there's a gate at the entrance but you can walk around it).

Another good place for seawatches is the scenic West Harbor Bluff (21.7482N, 72.3505W), frequented by white-tailed tropicbirds in summer; I saw **bottlenose dolphins** from there. It is a rocky promontory; as you walk the rocky trail to the tip you pass a small cave (accessible by a ladder) sometimes used as night roost by **buffy flower bats**. The somewhat rough access road passes through the best forest on the island, particularly along the side track starting from 21.8014N 72.3126W; look for pretty much all forest birds of the island, introduced Cuban treefrogs, TCI ground boas, and all three species of the island's **bats** flying around. Chalk Sound Drive is a good place to look for **buffy flower bats** feeding on agave flowers (look around 21.7538N 72.2976W); a side trail leads to an abandoned villa (21.7524N 72.2964W) where **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bats** appear to roost at night.

Northeastern Provo and the chain of small islands stretching between Provo and North Caicos are the best area for **bottlenose dolphins**, the most common cetaceans of the area. One particularly friendly dolphin, named Jojo, has been a local celebrity since the 1980; he sometimes plays with people, and is often seen in Grace Bay, around Pine Cay (a private island), and in the channel between Provo and Little Water Cay. The latter island is a nature reserve with lots of TCI rock iguanas; you can rent a kayak to explore it. Iguanas can also be seen on a tiny island at 21.7469N 72.2835W that you can swim or kayak to (rentals available at Las Brisas restaurant nearby).

North Caicos is connected to Provo by ferries (<https://www.visittci.com/north-caicos-middle-caicos/getting-here/north-caicos-ferry>; watch for **bottlenose dolphins**) You can arrange for a rental car company to meet you at the ferry terminal. The island is sparsely populated, and has the best forests in TCI. Look for **minor red bats**, Key West quail doves, pearly-eyed thrashers, and TCI pygmy boas in abandoned Wades Green Plantation (21.9189N 72.0084W, misplaced in Google Maps). Flying **minor red** and **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bats** and many birds can be seen at Cottage Pond sinkhole (21.9343N 71.9994W) which also has remipedes. North shore around Whitby is close to deep water and likely good for watching **humpbacks** in winter; I got very distant views of **Atlantic spotted dolphins** from there.

Middle Caicos, also sparsely populated, is connected to North Caicos by a causeway. It has a huge cave system called Conch Bar Caves (21.8259N 71.7911W) with hundreds of thousands of bats: **Cuban fruit-eating bats** (only in one part called Bat City), **buffy flower bats** (common throughout), **Leach's single-leaf bats** (common in darker parts), and **Waterhouse's big-eared bats** (mostly near the entrance). **Minor red bats** don't roost there but reportedly hunt near the entrance during the day sometimes. The cave is gated and can only be visited with a guide; flash photography is not allowed. If for some reason you can't get in, you can watch all four species emerge at different times in the evening: Leach's at sunset, buffy soon after, Waterhouse's at the end of dusk, and Cuban in complete darkness. See <https://www.visittci.com/conch-bar-caves> for details. The cave area is good for birding and herping (look for Bahama mockingbird, western spindalis, Cuban crow, greater Antillean bullfinch of the Caicos subspecies, Caicos reef gecko, TCI blind snake, and TCI rainbow boa). Right off the main road but difficult to find, Indian Cave (21.8264N 71.8013W; if you don't have GPS, count 15 utility poles from the entrance to Blue Horizon Resort) can be visited independently (bring bug spray) but has bats only occasionally; look for barn owls and very rare Caicos barking geckos.

South Caicos, accessible by daily flights and twice-a-week ferries from Provo to Cockburn Harbour, is the fishing capital of TCI, and might be the best place to arrange pelagic trips to deeper waters. **Atlantic spotted** and **bottlenose dolphins** are often seen from the ferry, and **short-finned pilot whales** have been recorded in winter. Other Caicos Islands are uninhabited, except for private resorts on West Caicos and Big Ambergris Cay. East Caicos has a large population of **feral donkeys**. Little Ambergris Cay, a nature reserve, is said to be particularly pristine, beautiful, and good for birding and herping; **minor red bats** are said to be very common there.

More info: [herps](#), [birds](#), [birding sites](#).

Bats of Caicos Islands

Cuban fruit-eating bat	<i>Brachyphylla nana</i>	Middle Caicos	large, pig-nosed, no noseleaf
Buffy flower bat	<i>Erophylla sezekorni mariguanensis</i>	Provo, Middle Caicos	pale face, long snout, tiny noseleaf
Leach's single-leaf bat	<i>Monophyllus cf. redmanii clinedaphus</i>	Middle and North Caicos	long snout, noseleaf
Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bat	<i>Macrotus waterhousii waterhousii</i>	all Islands, incl. cays	very big ears, noseleaf
Minor red bat	<i>Lasiurus minor</i>	all Islands, incl. cays	reddish, short-eared, no noseleaf