



TRIP REPORT SOUTH FLORIDA & DRY TORTUGAS April 27 - May 5, 2002

By Adrian Binns

Day 1: Saturday, April 27 – Crandon Park/Key Biscayne; Broward County Library Wetlands; Brian Piccolo Park; Loxahatchee NWR

Butch, Don and I flew in together and after meeting Joseph, Kathleen and Ann at the airport rental counter, we made a bee-line for a Caribbean stray - a reported female Western Spindalis, the latest name given to the old Stripe-headed Tanager, at Crandon Park on Key Biscayne. Arriving at 11AM we find ourselves uninvited guests of Miami-Dade employee day, and have to park at the other end of the park! Well at least a steel band entertained us as we walked through a sea of thousands savoring the drifts of tropical cooking and picking up Eurasian Collared Dove, Monk Parakeet and White Ibis.

At the old zoo gardens, a bevy of exotics were running loose including Ruddy Shelducks, Egyptian Goose, Black-necked Swan and unfortunately a non countable Fulvous Whistling Duck. If those were not enough the place seemed to be crawling with Green Iguana's of varying lengths, some lurking amongst the vegetation on the waters edge, others running across the open grass. 4 Gray Kingbirds were flying sorties from bare branches, a Red-shouldered Hawk was being chased by Boat-tailed Grackles, a Tri-colored Heron in breeding plumage with its deep-red legs and blue base to the bill, allowed us to get close as it stalked the edge of the pond and the first of what would be many Double-crested Cormorants and an Anhinga were found standing in a tree overhanging the pond. Common butterflies such as Orange Sulphurs and White Peacocks were about but no Western Spindalis or even a migrant passerine, but then again it was midday! As other birders arrived we headed for lunch, only to receive a phone call as we were pulling into the supermarket that the bird had been located. Spinning around we made it back in 10 minutes to find a group watching the rather dull light green bird as it sat in the tree tops blending in with the leaves. Though the looks were not that great, we were all able to make out the field marks.

After picking up our delayed lunch and a Magnificent Frigatebird and White-crowned Pigeon that raced across Key Biscayne, we headed north to the Broward County library. Here we were greeted by a Loggerhead Shrike, and White-winged Doves streaking overhead. Along the boardwalk we got great looks at Purple Swamp-Hen, an exotic species that has spread in the last 5 years throughout these residential wetlands. It resembles a Purple Gallinule on steroids, with its huge red frontal shield and bill and long red legs. Conveniently there was a Purple Gallinule on hand for comparison. We found a Limpkin nest close to the boardwalk that had been abandoned with 3 eggs in it. Lesser Yellowlegs and a Solitary Sandpiper, two pairs of Mottled Ducks, and a pair of Least Bitterns were seen. We also found Apple Snail eggs, which were laid above the water line on arrowhead stems. These small round white eggs will eventually produce snails that will in turn be a major food source for Limpkin as well as Snail Kites. Red-veined Pennants and Eastern Pond Hawks, two common Florida dragonfly species were flying between pickerel rush and several Red-bellied Turtles basked on logs.

Being the weekend, it was not surprising that Brian Piccolo Park was full of people and sporting events. After searching the roped-off Burrowing Owl nest sites, we found a lone owl hiding behind the trunk of a tree in the shade. Very confiding, it allowed us to approach to within 20' and even moved to protect the entrance to his burrow.

Our final stop was at Loxahatchee NWR, where a walk along the cypress swamp boardwalk only produced some of the more common species, such as Red-bellied Woodpecker, Cardinal, Carolina Wren and Blue Jay but allowed us to see bromeliads, ferns, Spanish Moss and the red Baton Rouge lichen on the cypress tree trunks. The water levels in the impoundments were high and consequently not conducive to shorebirds and even lacked numbers of ducks (only Moorhens and Mottled Ducks), but still we had a pleasant walk along the dikes where we came across Gulf Fritillaries, Queens, Viceroy's, Black Swallowtails, Pearl Crescents, the colorful Lubber Grasshoppers and Common Ground Doves, which were feeding on the path. Anhinga's were still nesting in the Pond Apple's and one was seen spearing a large fish with its pointed bill, and struggling for a while to get it off so that it could swallow it head first. One Wood Stork, several Glossy Ibis and Black-crowned Night-Herons flew over and an Eastern Meadowlark flew into the middle of the impoundment where it proceeded to sing from atop cattails. Reptiles were well represented as Brown Anoles were everywhere and we found a Southeastern Five-lined Skink basking on a limestone rock and Curly-tailed Lizards at the canal observation platform.

Day 2: Sunday, April 28 – Spanish River Park/Boca Raton; Wakodahatchee Wetland; John Prince Park/Lake Worth; Joe Overstreet Road; Three Lakes WMA

The temptation of a male Western Spindalis in Boca Raton at Spanish River Park proved too much. Pulling into the park at 7:45AM we had a Pileated Woodpecker fly across the road and found a local birder who had had the bird a little earlier in the morning. We positioned ourselves in a clearing surrounded by trees. A Yellow-crowned Night-Heron flew by and it was not long before we had great looks at Black-throated Blue, Yellow and Cape May Warblers; Northern Parula and a Black-whiskered Vireo, clearly seeing his whiskers! Then the male Western Spindalis in all his glory came into view on the bare branches of a Gumbo Limbo for all to see. What a difference from the plain female, with his black and white striped head, yellow throat and orange belly. Simply stunning!

Our next stop was the created wastewater treatment wetlands known as Wakodahatchee – Indian for “Created Waters”. The ½ mile boardwalk through the native wetland plantings is truly an outstanding experience as the birds are used to people and one is able to see them up close. At this time of the year, we soon find, Common Moorhens, Great Blue Heron, Green Herons and Pied-billed Grebe caring for their young. Least Terns gathered on the gazebo roofs and dove for killifish, which they presented to their prospective mates, and Purple Martins were busy building nests. It was interesting to see that the only place a starling was allowed to nest was in the very top entrance hole of the house. Black-necked Stilts worked the edge while Purple Gallinules balanced precariously on the stalks of Fireflags as they would bend as the birds worked their way to the buds, a favorite springtime food. Limpkin also nest here, but we only heard it call once. This must surely be the easiest place in North America to see Least Bittern. Eerily silent and elusive during the winter, they seem to be a dime-a-dozen at this time of the year as they raise young. We saw no less than twenty, as they flew from bulrush to bulrush in order to get a prime spot from which to stalk prey.

Though the vast majority of the people using the boardwalk were here for a morning's stroll, there were a handful interested in wildlife, and of course most wanted to see a gator! No problem here. Red-bellied Turtles covered in algae were sunning themselves and there was a Florida Water Snake that was overhanging the water. A Red Admiral butterfly was new for the trip and Marsh Rabbits were abundant along the dikes.

A stop for lunch at John Prince Park on a weekend means loads of people, especially those boating. All the herons were here, Little Blue, Great Blue and Tri-colored Heron and Great Egret, but it was Limpkin we were after. It took a little while, but one was spotted on the far shore. We ate lunch at a pavilion, searched the pond edge with success for apple snails, though Limpkins had obviously got there first and saw another new trip butterfly, the Zebra Longwing. We decided we would drive around the lake to get nearer to the Limpkin, but realized we did not need to as one was spotted close to our picnic pavilion, giving us a far more satisfactory look.

From here we left the residential coastal areas and moved northwestwards and inland into the prairie region of south central Florida, where Elderberry was in bloom in the wetter areas. Our first Swallow-tailed Kite was seen hunting over the treetops, Black Vultures were at an Armadillo road kill and we came across numerous pairs of Sandhill Cranes, several of which had young.

At 3 Lakes WMA we stopped along the main road and heard Bachman Sparrow singing, but couldn't locate one and had 3 Common Nighthawks "peenting" as they flew over the pines. Roadside flowers included Large-flowered Sabatia (large star-like pink blooms with a red-edged yellow star in the center), Candy Weed (bright orange), Common Blue Hearts, and Yellow Batchelor's Button. A Bald Eagle was spotted flying away from us. Being the middle of the afternoon we drove on to Joe Overstreet Road, but the activity was light as we only found an immature Bald Eagle, an Osprey with fish and several Sandhill Cranes.

Returning to 3 Lakes, we walked through the Saw Palmetto and Longleaf Pine habitat in search of a Bachman's Sparrow. Every once in a while one would call, and we would walk closer until we were in a pair's territory, where one showed itself very well about 10' up a pine tree. 2 Zebra Swallowtail butterflies were also seen. Pine Warblers were numerous and provided great looks as did the 'white-eyed' southern race of Eastern Towhee and Eastern Bluebirds. Continuing through the Saw Palmetto undergrowth we looked for the whitewash bands around the pine trunks. These mark the nesting trees that Red-cockaded Woodpeckers use. The very first one we came across had sap oozing from the hole; always a good sign, as that meant that it was being occupied. The sap is used for protection against snakes, in particular Rat Snakes. If that was not enough this species requires mature Slash or Longleaf Pines that are infected with red heart fungus, so that it can excavate its hole, and this habitat is disappearing at an alarming rate. This area is now the furthest south that this species is found. It was not long before a male showed up and began to work the bark in search for insects. Flying back and forth between some favorite sites, it soon flew away and another one took its place, giving us wonderful looks at the small red tufts behind the eye.

Wood Storks, Wild Turkey and White-tailed Deer were seen on the way to dinner. Being out in the middle of nowhere, we inquired about eating at a bar in Yeehaw Junction, only to be told "I would not recommend that place even to my enemies". After a wonderful dinner elsewhere, we reached our motel where Oak Toads hopped amongst the plants and Green Tree Frogs waited for insects along the lighted pillars!

Day 3: Monday, April 29 – Bridge at Avon Park Bombing Range; Tiger Creek; Walk-in-the-Water Road; Rte 70 West; Archbold Biological Station; Old SR8; Big Cypress Preserve; Cypress Bend boardwalk; Shark Valley opposite Tower Inn on Rte 41; 62nd & 72nd Parrot Roost

Walking out the motel room at 6AM I heard a Chucks-wills-Widow and a Common Nighthawk calling. A post breakfast walk around the motel and along the lake produces Black-crowned Night-Herons and a Green Heron in flight, Ospreys nesting on a platform and an Opossum working its way through the cattails. We arrive at the bridge just before the entrance to the Avon Park Bombing Range, which was closed to the public, at 7:20AM. We're here in the hopes of seeing a Short-tailed Hawk, but this is pretty early for this late riser, and we settle for a pair of Limpkins working the mudflats along the creek, and even see one flying across the road. Northern Parula's, Great Crested Flycatchers and Carolina Wrens sing continuously as we catch a brief glimpse of a Swallow-tailed Kite.

An hour later we are at Tiger Creek and about to turn around and check the mileage to a "must" spot for the Short-tailed hawk, when a Bobcat crosses the road a hundred yards in front of the van. I continue to the spot and we see the Bobcat stopped just inside a split rail fence and looking at us over his shoulder for a minute, before continuing into the woods. Absolutely breathtaking! It's hard to top such an unexpected sighting. As unlikely a spot this road is, it is one of the more reliable places to see Short-tailed Hawk. In the winter they tend to be easy to find, in particular in the lower Everglades, but during the breeding season, the whole North American population of about 100 birds spread out along the wooded edges of the lakes in the wet prairies of south central Florida. I'm sure that everyone thought I was crazy when we stood on a sand bank about 6 feet above the road level, looking over the tree tops and into the sun, waiting for any bird to fly by! Passing the time, while Eastern Towhees and White-eyed Vireos sang, we find a Florida Scrub Lizard on a tree trunk and Six-lined Racerunners darting into the scrub oaks. Kathleen explained the stalking skills of Ant Lions and even found one and showed us how they back into the sand to create a trap. Then all of sudden at 9:57AM a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk appeared just above the tree line, close but backlit. Once in a while it would turn enough so that we could see the lighter colored wing linings, dark trailing edge and dark band on the tail. Shortly after it flew out of view it

appeared again, but this time right over our heads in perfect light. What a great start to another wonderful day in Florida!

From here it was onto another target bird found only in the prairie region, the Crested Caracara, another South American species and the national bird of Mexico, with a small isolated population in Florida. Driving the open roads and checking the telegraph pole and palms, we come across an adult Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk and eventually a Caracara perched on a post. We got great looks before it took off and another joined it in the distance. Flying away from us, we were able to clearly see the white patches at the base of the primaries, and light tail with a wide dark terminal band.

On Old SR8, Butch picked up a distant pair of Florida Scrub-Jays, which turned out to be Joe's 500th ABA bird. We walked closer and tossed peanuts, but they really were not interested. We found several more on the wires but they were not impressed with my offerings, so we moved on. Heading south we entered Big Cypress Preserve, with its impressive cypress trees covered in Spanish Moss. Swallow-tailed Kites were seen gliding effortlessly over the treetops. We took a walk through the forest on the Cypress Bend boardwalk coming across a mixed flock of migrants including, Northern Parula, Blackpoll, Cape May, Black & White, Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, American Redstart, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, White-eyed Vireo and Worm-eating Warbler. The water levels were very low and fish lay dying in the oxygen depleted waters as baby Alligators fought for space in the duckweed-covered pool at the end of the boardwalk. We also had 3 new butterflies, Ruddy Daggerwing, Giant Swallowtail and a female Mangrove Skipper on a Buttonbush flower.

YY and Jane joined us on the Tamiami Trail at Shark Valley, where we stopped to look for Snail Kites. On this day we had about 10 birds hunting well out in the sawgrass. Despite the distance we were able to see the upper white tail band as they quartered just above the sawgrass searching for Apple Snails. Several Limpkin were seen and heard in the sawgrass and Least Bitterns and an American Bittern were seen in flight. From here it was onto Miami for our final stop of the day at a parrot roost. Never knowing what to expect, we actually only had 2 species – a single male Rose-ringed Parakeet and some 40 plus White-fronted Parrots, as they came into the Australian Pines in this residential neighborhood, including a pair at a nest hole on a concrete telegraph post.

Day 4: Tuesday, April 30 – Card Sound Road Toll Booth; Upper Key Largo; Long Key MM69; Lake Edna on Grassy Key; Ohio Key; No Name Key; Blue Hole on Big Pine Key; Boca Chica Key; East Rockland Key; Key West – 19th & Flagler; Stock Island – Junior College Road; Key Haven Road

This morning Bill, who was following us down the Keys, joined us. Common Myna, an established (though non-countable) exotic species from Asia is found picking through the trash behind the Denny's! Now that we have that species out the way we head down the Keys. The first stop is at the tollbooth on Card Sound Road. Here in the mangrove, the Cuban Golden Warbler, a sub-species of Yellow Warbler breeds. Alas, no sighting or singing bird, but we did get Prairie Warbler, Willet and Gray Kingbird. On Upper Key Largo we walked into the West Indian hardwoods in search of Mangrove Cuckoo, where Liguus Tree Snails, some nicely patterned were hanging from Gumbo Limbo trees and Giant Swallowtails, Zebra Longwings and Julia were fluttering about in the dappled shade. Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Cape May, Redstart and the ubiquitous White-eyed Vireos were about in small numbers and a Mangrove Cuckoo was calling, and showed itself briefly in the distant branches. Checking another path, one that used to run through a Missile base during the Cuban Missile Crisis, we find several Black-whiskered Vireo's calling and flying back and forth across the path. After some searching we hear Mangrove Cuckoos calling and are able to call them in for outstanding views of at least 3 birds as they moved through the upper branches of the Tamarind trees. We also catch brief glimpses of White-crowned Pigeons as they fly over the canopy.

Continuing down the Overseas Highway, taking in the stunning green and blue shallow waters as we drove over the bridges connecting the various keys, we stopped at the first pond on Long Key. Semi-palmated Plovers, Black-bellied Plovers, Least Sandpipers and Short-billed Dowitchers were feeding at the waters edge. A Black-necked Stilt, Great "White" Heron and a Reddish Egret were also seen. We stopped at Lake Edna on Grassy Key for lunch where we found a Wilson's Plover and watched a Spotted Sandpiper, Least Terns and nesting Black-necked Stilts. The limestone dropped off steeply at the water's edge and here we found the Upside-down Jellyfish, known as Cassiopeia and Mermaid's Wine Glass,

which look like tiny white flat mushrooms caps on skinny stalks. On Ohio Key the large pool contained Royal, Sandwich and Least Terns, Dunlin, Black-bellied Plover, Short-billed Dowitchers, Semi-palmated Plovers and side-by-side comparisons of breeding Eastern and Western Willet. The Eastern being smaller, browner and more heavily marked. The larger bill and heavier appearance of the Western was very noticeable. As exciting as that was Ann was absolutely thrilled to see a Bald Eagle fly straight towards us and land on a telegraph pole besides the road.

On No Name Key we came across several Key Deer, the diminutive sub species of the White-tailed Deer, which lives only on two Keys, in very small numbers. Kathleen, Jane and YY hung around to photograph the deer, while the rest of us went to the end of the road to see if we could locate a Mangrove Cuckoo. While we had to settle for a displaying Green Anole, the others were eye level with a Golden-winged Warbler. We certainly heard about it! By the time we joined them it was gone, but to everyone's surprise we had a juvenile dark morph Short-tailed Hawk with a radio tag circling above us. I later found out that they have been tagging the young of the US population to monitor their movements. A short distance away on Big Pine Key is the aptly named Blue Hole, basically a blue lagoon where we found Green Iguana, Florida Softshells, Monarch and Horace's Duskywing butterflies, but it was the courting Red-bellied Turtles that amused us most. As Kathleen was explaining to us that as part of the mating ritual the smaller male, who is swimming above the female, will wiggle his fingers in front of her eyes, the male stretched out his front feet and began to wiggle his fingers, right on cue!

Walking along the ocean side beach of Boca Chica Key, the rocky shoreline held numerous shorebirds including large numbers of Semi-palmated Sandpipers and the shallow lagoon with the sun beating down upon us held Wilson's Plovers and side by side Caspian and Royal Tern, allowing for great comparisons of the bills and head pattern. A small Cassius Blue was fluttering about the grass and a Reddish Egret was feeding beside a dock. We could not turn a distant immature Little Blue into a white morph Reddish. On a pond on East Rockland we found 9 Lesser Black-backed Gulls in all age plumages. This European species is increasing in numbers along the east coast and double digit numbers in Florida are now not unheard of.

Reaching Key West in the late afternoon, we headed to Flagler Street to look for White-crowned Pigeons feeding in backyards. Spotting several on wires we stopped and proceed to have White-winged, Eurasian Collared, Mourning, Common Ground and Rock Dove join them. 6 dove species in view as they sat either in the treetops feeding or on the wires before descending to the feeders. Outstanding! Following a wonderful but rushed Mexican dinner, we waited at dusk for Antillean Nighthawks. Ron and Terry joined us, having just seen one as they drove up the road. 3 nighthawks flew away from us followed by 5 more, of which at least one was a Common, and then we had a Antillean flying very low around some houses, but even though they were brief looks we were able to see a rounder wing and buffier coloration. None called, so we called it a day after looking at the evening's planet show that included Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Venus, and headed to the "Tiburón", our boat for the next 3 days.

Day 5: Wednesday May 1 – Gulf Stream; Tail End Tower; Dry Tortugas – Garden Key/Fort Jefferson, Hospital Key

The "Tiburón" left the dock around 4AM, and by the time we all awoke for breakfast we were well on our way towards the Gulf Stream. Once in about 330' deep water we came across small flocks of terns that included several Bridleds in with the Sooty's. A juvenile Sooty was also seen. The overall grayer coloration and whiter tail was noticeable making it easier to tell them apart. 2 Audubon Shearwater were found sitting on the water close to the boat, occasionally flying short distances low over the water before we caught up with them. A light morph Pomarine Jaeger came close to the boat and put on a spectacular show as it harassed a shearwater, forcing it to dive and resurface, and dive again, hoping to get a free meal. Bottlenose Dolphins crossed the bow and Green Turtles floated effortless beside the boat, as we continued to have Pomarine Jaegers fly by, clearly showing the two-toned bill and "spoons" on the tail. Pairs of Bridled Terns were found sitting on floating wood, a distinguishing trait between them and Sooty's, which never alight on the water. Magnificent Frigatebirds, Royal Terns and Roseate Terns were perched on Tail End Tower, which we circled several times allowing great looks at the Roseates long tails. By 10:15 the show was over so we headed in to the Tortugas, passing a large 6' Loggerhead Turtle,

Brown Noddies, a sub-adult Brown Booby and 6 immature Roseate Terns on one of the park boundary markers.

After an enjoyable lunch, with the sound of the Sooty Terns constantly calling as we approached Fort Jefferson, we disembarked on Garden Key and immediately headed to the North coaling docks to look for the Black Noddy. It has been at least 4 years since it was last seen here, and was being reported sporadically this year. The pylons were covered in Brown Noddy's and it was not long before the Black Noddy was found at the far end. Once found it was easy enough to see that it was a little smaller, darker, with a thinner bill and a more pronounced white cap than its neighbor. The Tortugas are famous for having the only nesting colonies in North America of Sooty Terns, Brown Noddies, Masked Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds, and other than the Masked Boobies which are on Hospital Key, the other 3 species are very much in evidence wherever one goes. Garden Key is dotted with trees and shrubs and a search of the Sea Grapes soon find several female Indigo Buntings, Common Yellowthroat, Redstarts and Palm Warblers, as well as a dead Yellow-billed Cuckoo that had no doubt succumbed due to exhaustion. Returning along the moat Barn Swallows and Northern Rough-winged Swallows are searching for insects along the forts upper level.

Inside the fort we sit around the water fountain and soon have Redstarts, Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, Prairie and Blackpoll Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Catbird, a female Painted Bunting and Cattle Egrets coming in for a drink. We then walked through the 9 acre fort visiting Dr Mudd's cell; the bakery; the chapel from which we looked down into the moat and saw a large Pufferfish and Barracuda; the magazines and up to the top of the fort which had spectacular views of the adjoining Bush Key and Long Key, as well as the other 4 keys that make up the Dry Tortugas National Park and back down through the lighthouse. A female Merlin was seen in the Cottonwoods with the remains of a bird and a Mockingbird was hiding in the Sea Grape and amongst the grasses in the ruins of the soldiers quarters were Mallow Scrub Hairstreak, American Painted Lady and Phaon Crescents.

Late afternoon we headed out to Hospital Key. This is a small sand bar that hosts the only breeding colony of Masked Boobies. Here we dropped anchor, and over wine and cheese watched Masked Boobies coming and going. We counted 63 birds in all including at least one very young bird being attended to at the nest, as well as numerous older fluffy youngsters. Both male (whistle) and female (honk) could be heard calling as they greeted each other as they flew in.

Day 6: Thursday May 2 – Dry Tortugas – Garden Key, Long Key, Loggerhead Key

Another gorgeous day in the mid 80's though a little more humid, but the winds are still out of the southeast at 5-10 mph - not the best conditions for bringing migrating birds onto the Tortugas! Our morning walk around the fort only managed to produce a Chuck-wills-widow, which Terry found perched on a windowsill on the second level. Cooperating beautifully we all got to see the bulky and very flat head and its long tail. On the first skiff ride out to Long Key to get close looks at the nesting Magnificent Frigatebirds we ran into engine trouble, but were still able to get everyone out to see them. The Mangroves were full of juveniles of various ages, immatures as well as a few males. Since it was towards the end of the nesting season most of the males did not have their red gular throats patches inflated. Brown Pelican were also nesting and a Peregrine was seen well camouflaged amongst the foliage. Returning to shore we skirted Bush Key as Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies flew out over the crystal clear turquoise water, dipping their bills for a drink. Brown Noddies were bringing back nesting materials and other were on nests atop the Sea Lavender and young Sooty Terns that had left their nests were on the beach.

Ann, Kathleen, Ron and Terry went snorkeling around the fort. Kathleen writes, "The pilings were festooned with soft corals - bouquets of long purple Sea Rods, waving Sea Fans in lavender and mocha cream, Sea Plumes like waving Ostrich feathers. Some were so close to the surface I had to stretch out flat and swim only by moving my hands from the wrist. I was so close to the Sea Rods that I could see all their feeding polyps were extended, like little fleshy pale yellow stars on the purple surface. There were also some colorful tubeworms - actually, the worm bodies were hidden in among the sponges and coral, and just their feeding parts were extended. One variety was like a red & white variegated feather duster, another looked like a bright red seedling of Norfolk Island Pine. There were lots of fish cruising around the pilings: Bluehead Wrasse, Schoolmaster, Needlefish, Greater Amberjack, Yellow Snapper, French and

White Grunts, Porkfish, Blue Angelfish, Sergeant Major, Beaugregory, Parrotfish, Blue Tang.... I was enjoying all the fish and coral immensely, until I got to the very end of the row - where I found a LARGE Nurse Shark asleep (or so I hoped) on the bottom. It was at least as big as myself, soft brown, and had a tag in the dorsal fin. I turned as calmly as I could, swam as gently as possible back down the row a little distance, then turned to crossed one row of pilings over to shallower water. Since none of the fish scattered, I hoped that indicated the shark was no threat."

We spent several exciting hours this afternoon on Loggerhead Key. Dropping anchor we took the skiff into the beach, while Ron took the kayak to meet those that were going snorkeling on the other side of the island. Spreading across the island we walked towards the southern end looking for the Caribbean race of Short-eared Owl that was around several days earlier. We kicked up Bobolinks and a couple of yellowthroats, magnolias and a redstart, and about a dozen Yellow-billed Cuckoos. 2 Gray Kingbirds, an adult and juvenile Peregrine as well as a Merlin were about. A Sharp-shinned Hawk and an American Kestrel flew over. Ann came running over the sand dune describing the horror of having seen a Yellow-billed Cuckoo go out to sea and a Peregrine chase after it and pick it off. We later found the bird finishing off its meal! No owl – so we returned to the center of the island for a much needed water break, and worked our way through the shade of the Palms and towards the north end. Before leaving the mowed grass area, a small bird was spotted perched 8' up a dead snag. It had an olive back and as soon as it turned to show the orange-yellow eyeline stripe and throat it became obvious that we had a Yellow-faced Grassquit. It was a gorgeous male that was content sitting in the shade of the branches occasionally calling its high-pitched 'tsit, tsit'. This was the 5th US record for this West Indian species. Meanwhile some of the group was still out in the water and Bill returned to the boat. Everyone was rounded up and got to see this very cooperative bird.

Kathleen writes of her snorkeling adventures, "Just as at Garden Key, there was little to see in the grassy areas - except a huge Horse Conch about 3 feet long, and a strange warty green mottled fish that did an excellent job of imitating waving Turtle Grass - perhaps an Inshore Lizardfish? Once we got out to the coral heads, the undersea life was stunning. There were huge knobs of khaki-green brain coral, some with the centers grazed down to limey skeletons by Parrotfish. Cream-colored Star Coral was pocked with asterisk-like pits, Elliptical Star Coral looked like it was covered with uncooked shell macaroni, open-sides up. Lobed Star Coral had blunt knobs, Golfball Coral was more softball than golfball size, and often grew on the chewed-out areas of the Brain Coral. Pale yellow Staghorn coral grew like wide-crowned and bare-branched African trees. Stubby growths of Finger Coral grew in clumps. Fish life tended to hang out under coral overhangs: Black Grouper; Bar Jack and Greater Amberjack; Mutton Snapper - a really big fish (maybe 2 feet) with red fins. He was hovering under a coral while sleek little horizontally-striped Cleaning Gobies picked over him; Foureye Butterfly fish; Yellowtail Damselfish; Bridled Goby; Stoplight Parrotfish - males were green, turquoise and yellow, with a large yellow spot on the tail base. The females are mottled chocolate-brown and cream, with red bellies; Midnight Parrotfish; Striped Parrotfish and Smooth Trunkfish. Fish that swam fearlessly out in the open away from the coral were the larger predators: Great Barracuda - I swam with my side to him so he could see I was bigger than he was and Tarpon - Jackie took my arm to make me turn and see these huge fish (I estimated these at 5-7 feet) with big bright silvery scales, they cruised by sedately in a school."

The north end of the island produced another predator-prey encounter. Another Yellow-billed Cuckoo headed out to sea, and a Merlin immediately took off after it. A little weaving here and there, a few tail feathers dislodged and then the Merlin caught it. Returning to shore, a Peregrine took off low and once the Merlin saw her coming towards him he dropped the bird into the water, where upon the Peregrine picked it up and came into land with the Merlin putting on a half-hearted effort to chase it. Exhilarating stuff!

Back at Garden Key we pick up a new migrant, an Eastern Kingbird that has just arrived. After dinner we went for a night walk around the moat, seeing Sea Cucumbers, Queen Conchs, Sea and Rock-boring Urchins, a Sea Hare and a Southern Ray.

Day 7: Friday May 3 – Dry Tortugas – Garden Key; Stock Island – College Road, Key Haven Road, 5th & 3rd

A final morning search of the fort and waiting patiently at the water fountain for any new migrants, we find all the regulars we have seen these last 3 days, a Veery (our only thrush of the trip!) and another Chucks. Ann fancied the flying boats and got herself a ride back to Key West to spend the afternoon at Margaretville! We took the conventional way back and hit some rough seas making the journey a little unpleasant, but we all managed to rest during the tougher times. 3 Brown Boobies were on the boundary marker at Iowa Rock, Flying Fish, Green Turtles and Bottle-nosed Dolphins joined us along the way. Nearing Key West it was calmer and we spotted juvenile Brown Bobbies and a couple of 1st year Gannets. After being feed dinner we said goodbye to the outstanding crew, Tim, Jackie and Brett and went in search of a calling Antillean Nighthawk!

A 7:55 I heard one calling, but it was flying away from us, so we went to 5th & 3rd and found a pair calling and displaying above some apartment buildings. Between the buffy underneath and the distinctive call everyone was happy!

Day 8: Saturday May 4 – Upper Key Largo – Valois Road, Gulf Stream & Ocean Road; Card Sound Road Toll Booth; Everglades – Paurotis Pond, Snake Bight Trail, Eco Pond, Anhinga Trail, Road to the Research Center; Homestead

The lure of another Caribbean species proved too much, especially one that has been rarely recorded in the US! My friend Larry had found a Zenaida Dove (only the 4th record and first one that was remotely twitchable in decades), the previous day on Upper Key Largo, so we made a beeline for the spot first thing in the morning. Morning and Collared Dove were all over the place, White-crowned Pigeons were flying over the hardwoods, several Common Ground Doves were feeding on the seed Larry had left behind in the hopes that the Zenaida Dove would stick around and Yellow-billed Cuckoos were calling all around us. More birders showed up and as the numbers swelled we patrolled the parallel streets, keeping an eye out for any short tailed dove. A Mangrove Cuckoo began calling from the mangroves, a red-shafted Northern Flicker perched briefly on the wires but we were not having any luck with the dove. A 10AM we decided to leave the neighborhood and check out the next development to the south. A Red-shouldered Hawk was observed drinking from a pedestal birdbath and we found a male Shiny Cowbird at a feeder. Before heading back to the original spot we decided to go get our lunch supplies. No sooner than we had pulled into the Winn-Dixie, the phone rang. It was Larry, telling me in no uncertain terms “Get over there, the bird is being seen”. We quickly backtracked, completely forgetting Bill was following us and then realizing he probably had no idea why we bolted from the car park so quickly, and pulled in behind a large group of birders focused on a bird on the wire. A chunky bird, resembling a Mourning Dove in coloration, but with a short tail and obvious white patch on the secondaries. Needless to say there were an awful lot of very happy people as it perched for about half an hour before flying across the canal to the wires on the next street. Returning to the cowbird feeder, we found it empty but found a female Shiny feeding behind another feeder.

Heading back we stopped at the tollbooth on Card Sound Road, and heard Cuban Golden Warbler in between all the traffic and the boatman blaring his “boom box”. Approaching the Everglades National Park a Common Nighthawk was perched on the telegraph wires, and we were able to get underneath and clearly see the differences between this species and Antillean. The agricultural fields had White-winged Dove, bringing our daily total of dove species to 7. Very impressive, if I may say so!

After a short visit to the Everglades visitors center and an introductory program, we stopped at Paurotis Pond, where Wood Storks, Roseate Spoonbills and egrets nest. Blue-winged Teal, and an assortment of common waders were on the water, and a Great-crested Flycatcher was having a dust bath, besides the road. Next stop was the infamous Snake Bight trail, or otherwise known as Mosquito Bite Trail. Preparing everyone for the worst, we found the mile and three-quarter walk through the hardwood and mangroves to the bay to be quite pleasant; actually I had never been on the trail when there seem to only be a handful of mosquitoes. Quite a relief! Even more enjoyable when we are finally able to make out that the two pink objects that were feeding and walking further away as they follow

the outgoing tide are not spoonbills and that they definitely are Greater Flamingos. American White Pelicans, both Great "White" and "Wurdlemanns" Heron, the white morph Reddish Egret, Caspian Tern, Gull-billed Tern, Dunlin, Bald Eagles and everyone favorite the Swallow-tailed Kite were also seen. The walk back produces White-eyed Vireos, redstarts, Prairie and Black and White Warbler, Black-crowned Night Herons, huge Golden Orb Spiders, Great Southern Whites, Giant Swallowtails, Zebra Longwings and Don found a beautiful Coral-bean vine, with its cluster of tubular red flowers.

At the marina at Flamingo we found two rare American Crocodiles, one of which made a rather loud splash at some poor fish. These saltwater reptiles are only found around the east and southern mangroves of the everglades. On a sand bar in the bay numerous Osprey were joined by small numbers of peeps and terns. At Eco Pond, the reclaimed wastewater pond, we had great views of Gull-billed Terns; Red shouldered Hawk, a male Indigo Bunting and an assortment of waders, the most numerous being the White Ibis that were coming in to roost. Our final stop was at Royal Palm where we took a stroll along the Anhinga Trail. The water levels were low, and the numbers of birds even lower! Anhingas were still with well grown young, and the major find was a very confiding 4-foot Yellow Rat Snake catching the day's last rays on a railing.

Dinner was at another Mexican restaurant, much to Don's liking, and included a Mariachi Band with a limited repertoire of songs. This was followed by an outing for Eastern Screech Owl, which responded to a tape and came in for all to see, and a drive along the research road in the everglades in the hopes of seeing nightjars, owls or mammals. We did not see any birds, but did hear several Chucks-will-widows calling and as we were leaving the park a cat bounded out of the underbrush and attempted to cross the road, before seeing us and turning around. More than likely it was a Bobcat.

Day 9: Sunday May 5 – Homestead- SW 216St; Kendall- 97th & 120st, Baptist Hospital; South Miami- Matheson Hammock Nature Trail; Miami Springs

For a decade or more a small population of the West Indian race of Cave Swallows has been nesting under one of the turnpike bridges in Homestead. We saw several birds peering out of their mud nests and many more flying around, under and through the bridge, chattering all the time.

In Kendall we began in earnest to look for all the Miami 'exotics" that make this part of North America so colorful. First stop was for the countable White-winged Parakeet, a recent split from Yellow-chevroned Parakeet, but by far the rarer of the two. No luck despite checking all the palm trees in a mall! Smooth-billed Ani's had recently raised their young in a residential area and after a little searching we came across 3 birds, that showed themselves very well. And as luck would have it a pair of White-winged Parakeets, flew over our heads and away calling all the time. Driving the neighborhood around Baptist Hospital, we found a pair of Red-whiskered Bulbuls and also had a Spot-breasted Oriole come in and land on top of the bulbul tree and pose. At the hospital Monk Parakeets were all over and a Cockatiel was quite happy being fed by those out for a Sunday stroll around the pond. In a yard behind the Royal Palm Tennis Club we found 9 Yellow-chevroned Parakeets at a feeder and then quite happily feeding on the yellow blossoms of a tree in the front yard.

In Matheson Hammock, a large tropical hardwood park, Don came across a Knight Anole, a large 14" green lizard with a striking yellow stripe on the shoulder, in the canopy branches. Joe had Crested and Brown Anoles in a face off with each other. Walking through the heavily vegetated hardwoods, consisting of Jamaican Dogwood (not related to our dogwoods), West Indian Cherry, Strangler Fig and Stoppers, Ruddy Daggerwings were seen flying about. Once through the woods we entered an open area that had numerous Royal Palms trees. It was in these Palms that we found a roosting rufous morph Eastern Screech Owl and a male Pileated Woodpecker that was obviously guarding his nest hole from the Hill Mynas that were patiently waiting in the open canopy of a Gumbo Limbo tree, to possibly take over the nest sight.

After lunch we stopped to see nesting Swallow-tailed Kites and had 3 flying very close over our heads. Our final stop before heading to the airport was in Miami Springs to look for any additional parrots, in particular Mitred, but only came across a great number of Monk Parakeets.

I never expected to see 3 Caribbean strays during the course of a trip. One or two is what I would hope for at this time of the year. The migration throughout Florida this year seemed to be affected by the weather patterns, primarily winds out of the south or east, and consequently most of the birds were able to keep going. But despite the lack of large numbers of birds or more species of warblers, we had an absolutely fantastic trip made all the more enjoyable with such a wonderful group of people.

~ Adrian Binns

TOP 8 SPECIES AS VOTED UPON BY THE PARTICIPANTS

Yellow-faced Grassquit
Western Spindalis (male)
Golden-winged Warbler
Zenaida Dove
Red-whiskered Bulbul
Bald Eagle
Swallow-tailed Kite
Cape May Warbler

TOP 8 MOMENTS/INTERACTIONS

Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Merlin and Peregrine
Bobcat
Pomarine Jaeger attacking Audubon's Shearwater
3 Mangrove Cuckoos together
Western and Eastern Willet side-by-side
Golden-winged Warbler
Caspian and Royal Tern side-by-side
Bridled Terns resting on the floating log