



**DRY TORTUGAS April 20-23, 2004 TRIP REPORT**  
**by Adrian Binns**

**Day 1 / Tuesday April 20 : Key Largo State Botanical Gardens; Wild Bird Center; MM58 Wreck Grille; Lake Edna; Key Colony Golf Course; Ohio Key; No Name Key; Blue Hole; Boca Chica Lagoon; Flagler & 17<sup>th</sup> ; Key Haven Road; 3<sup>rd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup>**

Eight of us began the trip down the Keys on a high note by hearing a Mangrove Cuckoo before we were all out of our vehicles at the Key Largo Botanical Gardens. It soon was spotted moving about the hardwoods and then flew across the road where it perched at the top of a tree in plain view for 15 minutes. Our second bird was a calling Black-whiskered Vireo 50 yards from the entrance! It also moved about but eventually gave everyone a decent look. Further down the trail we came across a Northern Parula, Prairie Warbler and another Mangrove Cuckoo, which was just as cooperative as the first one. It was great to get these two target birds out of the way early in the day. The Wild Bird Center was our next stop, which gave us good comparisons of 'Great White' Heron and Great Egret as well as close up looks at Brown Pelican and Black-necked Stilt.

A few days ago a Red-legged Honeycreeper was reported feeding on Bottlebrush bushes at MM 58. A stop here did not produce the bird, but we got great looks at numerous Cape May and Blackpoll Warblers. Lake Edna produced our first Reddish Egrets and two spiraling Copper's Hawks. At the golf course on Key Colony we visited a Burrowing Owl, between pairs of golfers, standing guard at her burrow. She made a rattling sound as we approached and minutes later Mister appeared to also let us know we were not welcome. No doubt young were inside and still not ready to fend for themselves. Low tide at Ohio Key was a bust, with only 4 birds, but one was a goodie – an adult white morph Reddish Egret.

On No Name Key we came across 2 Key Deer, as well as another Black-whiskered Vireo that was feeding on Gumbo Limbo berries on both sides of the road and came within 10 feet of us at head height! Blue Hole produced an 8 foot Alligator lazing in the shallows below the platform; a Green Heron and a Gray Kingbird that was drying itself after taking a splash bath. A walk out along the ocean side of Boca Chica produced Willets and an Osprey that made several attempts to catch what must have been an imaginary fish, as it missed on two occasions. The lagoon held Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, a sleeping Caspian Tern with a Least Tern beside it (what a size difference) and 5 Wilson's Plovers.

We checked the feeders on Flager for cowbirds and doves, only coming up with numerous Eurasian Collared Doves, several Common Ground Doves and 5 White-crowned Pigeons. Our

final birding was a watch for the Antillean Nighthawk. The first stop had a calling Common and two unidentified nighthawks, so we moved onto our final stop. As we pulled in an Antillean was calling. We all baled out the vehicles and waited for it to call again, which it did, but not all got to hear it over the racket that was coming from the neighborhood, and it never called again.

## **Day 2 / Wednesday April 21: Into the Gulf Stream; Tail's End; Garden Key; Long Key**

By daylight we were out into 400' of water in the Gulf Stream, positioned on the upper deck of the boat under the awning, but it was a while before we got our first sightings. A group of 6 immature Brown Boobies was spotted followed by the first of what would become many, many Sooty Terns. An adult light phase Pomarine Jaeger put on a good show flying beside the boat and then circling around before heading away. Flocks of terns failed to produce good views of any Bridled Tern that may have been mixed in, so we headed into deeper water and came across 2 Audubon's Shearwaters coming off the water and flying away from us, but not before most of the group got to see them. Returning back on track and heading towards Tail's End, the marker some 30 miles east of the Dry Tortugas, we came across a large Loggerhead Turtle, 2 Bottle-nosed Dolphin and a sargasso weed line which gave us very good looks at 2 Bridled Terns. Soon after, a white bird was spotted well out in front of us, which we all began to zero in on. It soon became apparent that it had black wing bars and a deep orange bill. I shouted "tropicbird" as it approached the boat head on and soon we were able to see the wonderful tail streamers and everyone was excited to witness this totally unexpected magical bird so close as it passed us by. Brilliant! It's hard to top that. The finally leg of the journey into the National Park gave us more great looks a good numbers of Brown Boobies and our first Magnificent Frigatebirds before coming into Fort Jefferson.

On Garden Key our first stop was to the campground where a Swainson's Warbler was rummaging around the leaf litter totally oblivious that 11 people were only feet away staring at her. Northern Parula, Cape May, Blackpoll and Worm-eating Warbler as well as Catbird and both Orchard and Baltimore Oriole were seen well in the camp ground. Tearing us away from there was tough, but we made our way into the fort where most of the group was sitting by the water fountain waiting for birds to come in. They were not disappointed as Gray-cheeked Thrush, a pair of Summer Tanagers, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue Grosbeak, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Black-throated Blue, Yellow, and Black-and-White Warblers. What a wonderful start. Turkey Vultures (a first on the island for me) and a Peregrine were spotted above the fort and a Merlin inside the fort rounded out the raptors. Our skiff ride was to Long Key to look for the Red-footed Bobby amongst the nesting Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds. On the way we had an Eagle Ray and a Nurse Shark. Once at the colony we had a Brown Bobby preening but no Red-footed. By the time the second group was checking out the mangroves, my good friend Larry radioed me to tell me that he thought it was near the very top of the mangroves. We had to maneuver the boat well to one side, but sure enough there was a mottled, lighter colored booby with dull pinkish legs preening. Our second spectacular bird of the day! Back on Garden Key both yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitcher, Spotted Sandpiper, Ruddy

Turnstones and a Northern Waterthrush we seen working their way along the wreck line on the beach.

### **Day 3 / Thursday April 22: Garden Key; Loggerhead Key; Hospital Key; Garden Key; Bush Key**

After breakfast we took our zodiac into Garden Key to see what the new day had in store for us. A search of the North coaling docks failed to produce a Black Noddy, though for a couple of hours David had about 50 Brown Noddies rotating through. It seems as though the horrendous storm some 10 days earlier and constant harassment for two days by a Peregrine convinced the noddies to change their roost site. Despite searching bush key by scope and by zodiac we could still not locate their roosting site. We checked the west coaling docks where Sandwich Terns and a Whimbrel were roosting amongst Royal Terns and several Willets. Inside the fort a Chuck-will's-widow was located perched atop a cactus and three Yellow-billed Cuckoo were found in a Buttonwood tree. A female Black-throated Green was spotted near the fountain and Bobolinks were heard flying over the fort, before coming to land in the open at the top of a Buttonwood. A male Shiny Cowbird soon followed and by now though it was obvious that the southeasterly winds had been favorable for yesterday's birds to move on, we could actually see new species arriving including several Green Heron's. The steady parade at the fountain continued including a Yellow-rumped Warbler and highlighted with an Orange-crowned Warbler (a 6<sup>th</sup> Dry Tortugas record) being recorded.

We sailed over to Loggerhead Key and worked our way through an obstacle course of railroad vine, prickly pear cactus and agave picking up Common Yellowthroat, Black-and-white Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, White-winged Dove amongst hundreds of Palm Warblers at the northern end, while the center of the island held 3 Merlin's, a Peregrine, which eventually was seen feeding on a Sooty Tern, American Kestrel, Yellow-billed Cuckoo's, Belted Kingfisher, Ovenbird and an Eastern Kingbird. Working our way round the southern end we came across an immature male Purple Martin flying around our heads having some fun as it kept flying up the dunes and into the wind where it would hang up for a second before dropping back and sideways to start all over again. Birds were few at this end but we did get good looks at a Mallow Scrub Hairstreak and a Halloween Pennant dragonfly.

A short run over to Hospital Key produced 43 Masked Bobbies loafing about the sand island including an astounding 7 juveniles and one youngest still in soft downy feather. Back on Garden Key a search for Black Noddy along Bush Key in the zodiac was fruitless but we did witness 6 Magnificent Frigatebirds descend upon a Brown Noddy sitting on a nesting and pluck it from the nest in order to get at any chicks she may have had, but nothing else was pulled from the nest. On dry land the Chucks was relocated and gave us stunning looks less than 10 feet away. A Purple Gallinule was found sitting near the top of a tree in the fort and a male Summer Tanager gave us superb show as it moved about several close trees, while the fountain continued to be the place if you wanted to see most of today's birds without having to move!

Our moat walk was held under a starry sky in very calm conditions and highlights included a Cushion Sea Star and 2 huge Spiny Lobsters amongst the many upside-down jellyfish known as Cassiopeia, Sea Urchins, Long-spined Urchins and Sea Cucumbers.

**Day 4 / Friday April 23: Garden Key; Journey back to Key West via Rebecca Shoals**

An early morning search of the fort only produced a Black-and-white Warbler and a stunning male Magnolia that was a new addition for the trip as well as a few lingering passerines from the previous day. It was obvious that a number of birds had moved on during the course of the night but we did manage to relocate the Swainson's Warbler, which Jean had missed on the first day, foraging about on the ground behind the bathrooms.

The return journey was relatively calm, pausing briefly at Hospital Key for the Masked Bobbies and picking up a dozen or so Brown Bobbies at Rebecca Shoals.

~ Adrian Binns