



The DRY TORTUGAS April 22 - 25, 2003

Trip Report and Photos by Adrian Binns

Tuesday April 22

Rebecca, James, Connie and I began the day at the 216th Street Bridge in Homestead where the West Indian race of Cave Swallows have been nesting for the last decade. Though there were several half built nests, one was happily perched at the entrance to its mud nest giving us a good look at the dark chestnut colored forehead and lighter throat. With numerous birds flying around the overpass it was easy enough to see the rump patch as well as get looks at the light chestnut coloration below the wing on the body. From here we headed west where we got great looks at Smooth-billed Ani. With only a handful still hanging on in South Florida we were lucky to see one perched so close.

After picking up Common Myna in Florida City we began our journey down the Keys. The West Indian hardwood hammocks of Upper Key Largo produced White-crowned Pigeon, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, several Cape May Warblers, numerous White-eyed Vireo's, a singing Black-whiskered Vireo and stunning looks at Mangrove Cuckoo perched on a telephone wire! In a residential area we came across a small flock of migrant wood warblers including Cape May, Black and White, Blackpoll, Parula and Blackburnian. The tidal ponds at the Wild Bird Center had a young Roseate Spoonbill, Black-necked Stilt, Northern Waterthrush and numerous egrets as well as the Great White morph of the Great Blue Heron.



In Marathon we stopped to see Burrowing Owls that were raising 3 young on a golf course. Lake Edna had an assortment of shorebirds including Black-bellied Plovers, Short-billed Dowitchers and Least Sandpipers, while a Gray Kingbird was signing nearby and a pair of Common Ground Doves flew by. We searched Key West for the on again – off again Slaty-backed Gull without any luck, though we did pick up Ruddy Turnstones, Royal and Sandwich Terns at Higgs Beach. After joining Claude, Sally and Clint for dinner we went in search of Antillean Nighthawk. Though one was heard, a sighting eluded us.

Wednesday April 23

The morning was spent out in the Gulf Stream south of Key West searching for pelagic species. It was one of those days when there were a few birds around but they all seemed to be in the wrong light, making it tough to get positive id's as was the case with the 3 or 4 terns that were no doubt Bridled. Our best looks came when 2 dark morph Pomarine Jaegers crossed the stern of the boat. One of the boundary marker's produced good looks at 9 Brown Boobies, most being juveniles with a few sub-adults. The Iowa Rock marker had an adult Masked Booby as well as 2 more Browns.



Arriving at Fort Jefferson and Garden Key after lunch we kept a vigil at the north coaling docks for Black Noddy, but despite 2 days of searching it never appeared amongst the hundreds of Brown Noddies. Numerous swallows were in the lee of the fort including Cave, Barn and Rough-wing. The beaches held Black Skimmer, Spotted Sandpiper, turnstones, Black-bellied Plover and two uncommon species for the Tortugas, Herring and Ring-billed Gull. The buttonwoods and sea grapes held a wide assortment of warblers including Palm, Prairie, Blackpoll, Black and White, Black throated Blue, Yellow-rumped, Redstart and Yellowthroat. Those that waited patiently at the water fountain were rewarded with great looks at all of the above as well as Black-whiskered Vireo and a male Painted Bunting. Other species seen included Merlin, Kestrel and Peregrine who were all vying for warblers, Indigo Bunting, Northern Mockingbird, Red-eyed Vireo, numerous Catbirds, an adult and juvenile Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and four Common Nighthawks. We ran skiff rides to the frigatebird colony, where we passed beside the thousands of Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies nesting on Bush Key and saw some young Sooty Terns on the beach in their black-spangled plumage. On Long Key about 100 pairs of Magnificent Frigatebirds nest along side several pairs of Brown Pelican. This year it seemed as those most had nested early and only a few young all-white juveniles were seen. While searching the edge of the mangroves for a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron we were entertained by a small squadron of Brown Pelicans diving in formation for their dinner.

After dinner, and once it was dark enough, we walked around the perimeter of the fort. The calm evenings waters proved ideal for the moat walk. Amongst the turtle grass a number of Cassiopeia's or up-side down jelly fish, sea cucumbers, numerous hard and soft corals and both spiny and sea urchins clinged to the sea wall. A large bright orange-red Starfish and a True Tulip lay on the sand as a Sea Hare worked its way through the water. Mangrove Snappers were the most common fish and several Blue Wrasse were seen, but the real excitement was when a small Nurse Shark was spotted followed by a 6' Green Moray Eel.

Thursday April 24

After breakfast we arrived at Loggerhead Key having been accompanied by Atlantic Bottled-nosed Dolphins for some of the journey. Loggerhead has traditionally held more raptors, no doubt because of its open landscape and low shrub cover and four Merlin's and a Peregrine were perched waiting for any unsuspecting passerine to make a move. A group of Orchard Orioles was amongst the Algaves and Indigo's seemed everywhere. Sorting through the ubiquitous Palm's we only managed to



come across Redstarts and Yellowthroats. Both Gray and Eastern Kingbird were perched atop snags and 3 Eurasian Collared and a White-winged Dove (an uncommon species for the Tortugas) were also located. Along the beach we had an Osprey and a female Belted Kingfisher.



Back on Garden Key we located the White-tipped Dove, which was a 2nd Dry Tortugas and Florida record, which had been found several days earlier. It seemed to favor the fresh water dripping from the stalactites that accumulated on the second floor of the fort. The male painted Bunting was seen again briefly and an Ovenbird, a female Hooded Warbler and several Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were recent arrivals. We spent the late afternoon anchored near Hospital Key watching the Masked Boobies take off and return to their small sand island where a few pairs nest each year. About 30 were present, most being adults.

Friday April 25

The early hours were spent searching the fort for any new migrants that had dropped in overnight. Unfortunately, there was nothing new, just a few additional birds of species already seen such as Black-whiskered Vireo and Ovenbird. The White-tipped Dove was also seen again.

The return journey to Key West was very calm taking us passed the Masked Boobies on Hospital Key; several Brown Boobies on markers; Gannets and Least, Royal and Roseate Terns as we came across the markers around Key West.



DRY TORTUGAS April 22-25, 2003 - trip species list

italic = seen in the gulf stream on the pelagic part

() = seen on journey down the keys

Masked Booby	Laughing Gull	House Wren
<i>Brown Booby</i>	<i>Ring-billed Gull</i>	<i>Blue-gray Gnatcatcher</i>
<i>Northern Gannet</i>	<i>Herring Gull</i>	<i>Gray Catbird</i>
Brown Pelican	Royal Tern	Northern Mockingbird
Double-crested Cormorant	Sandwich Tern	Northern Parula
Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Roseate Tern</i>	Yellow Warbler
Great Blue Heron	<i>Least Tern</i>	Magnolia Warbler
- (Great White morph)	<i>Bridled Tern</i>	Cape May Warbler
Great Egret	Sooty Tern	Black-throated Blue Warbler
Snowy Egret	Brown Noddy	Yellow-rumped Warbler
(Little Blue Heron)	Black Skimmer	Black-throated Green Warbler
(Tri-colored Heron)	(Rock Dove)	(Blackburian Warbler)
(Reddish Egret)	(White-crowned Pigeon)	Prairie Warbler
Cattle Egret	Eurasian Collared-Dove	Palm Warbler
Green Heron	White-winged Dove	Blackpoll Warbler
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	Mourning Dove	Black-and-white Warbler
Osprey	White-tipped Dove	American Redstart
American Kestrel	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Prothonotary Warbler
Merlin	(Mangrove Cuckoo)	Ovenbird
Peregrine Falcon	Common Nighthawk	Northern Waterthrush
Sora	(Antillean Nighthawk)	Common Yellowthroat
Black-bellied Plover	Chimney Swift	Hooded Warbler
Semipalmated Plover	Belted Kingfisher	Rose-breasted Grosbeak
(Black-necked Stilt)	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	Blue Grosbeak
(Greater Yellowlegs)	Eastern Kingbird	Indigo Bunting
(Lesser Yellowlegs)	Gray Kingbird	Painted Bunting
(Solitary Sandpiper)	White-eyed Vireo	Bobolink
Willet	Red-eyed Vireo	Shiny Cowbird
Spotted Sandpiper	Black-whiskered Vireo	Orchard Oriole
Ruddy Turnstone	Purple Martin	(House Sparrow)
Sanderling	(Tree Swallow)	
(Semipalmated Sandpiper)	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	
(Least Sandpiper)	Cliff Swallow	
(Short-billed Dowitcher)	Cave Swallow 'west indian race'	
<i>Pomarine Jaeger</i>	Barn Swallow	82 (99)

Green Turtle
Bottle-nosed Dolphin