



SOUTH FLORIDA & DRY TORTUGAS May 3-11, 2004

TRIP REPORT by Adrian Binns

Day 1 / Monday May 3: Dagy Johnson Key Largo State Botanical Gardens; Old SR 905; Wild Bird Center; MM58 Wreck Grille; Lake Edna; Key Colony Golf Course; Missouri Key; No Name Key; Sugarloaf Key; Boca Chica Lagoon; Key West Botanical Gardens; 3rd & 2nd on Stock Island

Our first order of business was to look for the cuckoo and the vireo, two of the most sought after south Florida species. Just as we were about to pull into the Key Largo Botanical Gardens we spotted Al and Bryan who had just had the Mangrove Cuckoo fly across the road and sit for a short while for them. This was not to be our day, with only one bird heard calling only once during the whole course of the day. The Black-whiskered Vireo on the other hand was very cooperative, singing and putting on a great show, with about 5 birds seen very well. A Veery was found deep in the hardwoods before slipping into oblivion while White-crowned Pigeons flew swiftly over the treetops as many White-eyed Vireos, Cardinals, a few Cape May Warblers, redstart and a male Black-throated Green were observed. Several Gray Kingbirds we seen sitting on wires along the Old SR905 while 2 male Shiny Cowbirds were amongst a few Brown-headed Cowbirds and Common Crackles giving us wonderful comparisons of these three species. The neighbor across the street asked us what we were doing, we replied "Watching a Shiny Cowbird", to which he seemed very pleased for us, saying "That's great.....would you please do that elsewhere"!

A stop at the Wild Bird Center gave us good comparisons of Great Egret and the Great White morph of the Great Blue Heron as well as a few Black-necked Stilts and a singing Prairie Warbler. A Reddish Egret was on Lake Edna as were numerous courting Least Terns and an immature Little Blue Heron. The golf course at Key Colony held a pair of Burrowing Owls, one of which was sitting on the lower branches of the tree that shaded her burrow. On No Name Key a few Key Deer were browsing on the edge of the road and Black-whiskered Vireos were heard calling amongst the mangroves.

Our search for the Mangrove Cuckoo continued on Sugarloaf, with only two very brief sightings of a bird quickly crossing the path. Our first looks at shorebirds at the bridge produced Black-bellied Plovers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Dunlins and Willets. Our next stop along the shoreline at Boca Chica gave us excellent looks at Semi-palmated Plover, Wilson's Plover, Least Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone and Semipalmated Sandpipers while the lagoon held a white morph Reddish Egret and 2 Yellow-crowned Night Herons. Devich called to say he had a possible LaSagra's Flycatcher at the Key West Botanical Gardens, but all we could find was White-crowned Pigeon's catching the last rays of the day. At 7:37PM we pulled into what is now a known breeding area for the Antillean Nighthawk and one was calling as we got out of our van. We witnessed an amazing display as it rose and dropped in an arc numerous times around us, calling all the time. The rich buffy coloration of its underbelly very evident on this bright early evening. It was joined by a second bird and then together they flew a few blocks away where a third bird was seen with them. This was a great way to end a wonderful day.

Day 2 / Tuesday May 4: Into the Gulf Stream; Tail's End Tower; Dry Tortugas NP, Garden Key and Long Key

Shortly after daybreak we reached 450 foot of depth in the Gulf Stream and by 8AM we had found a thin weed line that Sooty Terns were working. The first of what would be many Brown Boobies were spotted in small family groups consisting mainly of an adult and some juveniles. As the seas got rougher we came across our first Bridled Terns, but it was a while before we really had good looks and were satisfied that we had the correct identification marks. By the time we had reached East Key just inside the park boundary, we had 2 groups seen perched on jetsam and excellent views of many birds as they flew besides and in front of the boat. On two occasions two Audubon's Shearwaters were spotted flying low and fast over the water, but neither of these sightings were terribly rewarding. Reaching Tail's End several Brown Boobies sat on the marker and most of the lower platform was taken up with Roseate Terns. At one stage a nice sized group of Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphins accompanied us for a short period of time moving back and forth across the bow and a pair of Loggerhead Turtles very close to the boat was a nice sighting.

Reaching a new destination and the thought of which species we would find is always very exciting. Fort Jefferson encompasses most of Garden Key and for the remainder of the day we were to explore every section to see what was around. Cape May's, Black-throated Blues, Magnolias, American Redstarts and Palm Warblers were the most abundant species while an assortment of thrushes including a half dozen Gray-cheeked, almost as many Veery's and a Swainson's were spending most of their time hopping about the grassy areas around the fountain. As several people found out, every bird makes it at one time or another to the fountain, the only source of fresh water on the island. A female painted Bunting, Indigo Buntings, immature Blue Grosbeaks, a female Summer Tanager....they all put in a appearance, much to the delight of the photographers. While looking at a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak which had just flown from the campground to the helicopter pad, a totally out of place White-crowned Sparrow (a 2nd Dry Tortugas record) of the *gambel* race came into view. A Black-and-White was seen in the campground while the female Painted Bunting played hide and seek for what seemed like ages before everyone got on it. Inside the fort on the Gumbo Limbo tree a nighthawk was perched on a horizontal branch. This had all the markings of an Antillean, being very buffy below and having its primaries fall short of the tip of the tail, but with the identification of Common and Antillean hard to tell in the field, I can only hazard a guess as to its identity. A lone White-rumped Sandpiper in breeding plumage was found working the beach and wrack near the north coaling docks while both Eastern and Gray Kingbirds perched nearby on branches and at least a dozen Barn Swallows were sitting, exhausted, on the sand. Looking at Bush Key, amongst the thousands of Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns we got great views of nesting Noddies, perched Sooties including several young birds that were learning to hang in the wind next to the colony. Royal and Sandwich Terns were loafing on the beach along with a smaller tern, which after some discussion was determined to be a 1st year Roseate Tern.

Several Red-footed Bobbies were being seen this spring amongst the frigatebird colonies, so we made a zodiac run to get closer views late in the day. It was now late in the nesting season and of the colony had fledged a great many young, with white headed immatures being a common sight and a few bright white fluffy juveniles still sitting on the nest. We waited patiently as the anticipated time of arrival of the Red-footed Booby at its normal roosting spot had passed. A Tri-colored Heron and several Peregrine Falcons made passes along the mangroves and eventually a Red-footed was spotted flying in amongst the frigatebirds. It made several attempts to land on its roost but a peregrine was perched just below it, well hidden from our view, so it decided to keep on flying north towards a marker near Hospital Key. As we returned with the first zodiac, Devich who was on booby watch duty at the fort notified us that a second bird had just perched on the mangroves. Dropping the first group off, the second group got to see another juvenile bird, this one with worn coverts, sitting high atop the mangroves.

Day 3 / Wednesday May 5: Garden Key; Loggerhead Key; Hospital Key; Garden Key; Moat Walk

The winds had changed direction over night, coming in from the east, and consequently our walk around the fort after breakfast to see if anything new had arrived did not produce any new warblers, though everyone did get to see the *albilora* subspecies of Yellow-throated Warbler very well as it flittered about the buttonwoods near the fountain. Several of the weak Cattle Egrets and Barn Swallows that we noticed yesterday evening succumbed during the night as did a Veery, which at one point was observed being taken away for a meal by a Cattle Egret. In the taller grass of the ruins of the officers quarters a Short-eared Owl of the Caribbean race "Arawak" was found. Sitting in the open it gave us terrific views before working its way back into the base of a bush. By mid morning we were on Loggerhead, and much to the disappointment of those that wanted to go snorkeling the winds picked up and the excursion was cancelled due to the poor visibility that the seas offered. The walk from one to the other began slow with only a bird here and there popping up, but by the time we reached the last 50 yards before the grassy area in the center, we had a small group consisting of 3 Yellow Warblers, a Blackpoll, 3 Magnolia and 2 female Indigo Buntings. By the lighthouse a 1st year male Baltimore Oriole was spotted feeding just above a coconut on a Palm while a 1st year Summer Tanager as well as a female kept moving just in front of us. A flock of 9 Indigo Buntings including 2 males were perched on open branches, a male Blue Grosbeak was seen briefly and we got excellent views at a female Merlin perched only a short distance from us. Three-quarters of the way along the north eastern side Bryan located his life Bay-breasted Warbler moving about in the sand and called us over, but alas despite a great deal of searching the bushes we were unable to relocate it. However, a Chestnut-sided Warbler was located, but soon disappeared. Working a small area where it was last seen and where a bird was chipping I almost stepped on it as it flew on an open branch where most of the group managed to see it, before it disappeared it flew to the other side of the key.

The Masked Boobies, all 26 of them today, put on a good show. Several 1st year birds made 4 or 5 passes around the boat while a few adults chose to make short flights on the sand split as opposed to walking! 2 juveniles were seen besides their parents, one being able to stand upright and almost the same size as its mother, the other a little smaller and for most of the time shielded by its parent.

A return to Garden Key was most productive, as Al found a small group of warblers that must have come in sometime during our absence. A Tennessee, Worm-eating, male Black-throated Green, Common Yellowthroat and several Magnolias brought a lot of excitement while inside the fort, an Eastern Pewee along with good looks at a Yellow-throated Warbler and a sighting of three vireos together, a Red-eye and 2 Black-whiskered kept a number of us busy. In the campground a Chuck's-will's-widow was found sitting in the open, well camouflaged, amongst the dead buttonwood leaves with its right wing outstretched, which I presume was for anting purposes. Ovenbirds, Northern Waterthrushes and an assortment of thrushes were also there. A nighthawk, which was very grey and almost certainly a male Common, was found in a buttonwood near the fountain. We all agreed that this was a very different bird to the one we saw the day before.

The moat walk was held in windy conditions, which made viewing rather difficult. Cassiopeia's, the upside-down jellyfish, were a common sight as were Sea Cucumbers and Queen Conchs. We located several Sea Urchins amongst the Fan Coral and Dead Man's Fingers and a few Needlefish, but the most excitement came when we came across an 18 inch Fireworm which looked like a giant reddish centipede. Actually 3 were eventually seen, pretty good considering I had never seen one! 2 Spiny Brittle Stars and a Comet Star rounded out the walk.

Over half the group spent the late evening hours going over the digital images that several of us had taken during our stay on the islands. The pictures made for a wonderful and often hilarious several hours of entertainment.

Day 4 / Thursday May 6: Garden Key; Head back to Key West via Iowa Rock, Rebecca and Tail's End

We had barely begun our walk inside the fort when there was a lot of excitement as a very pale Barn Owl (possibly northern Caribbean race) was sighted flying along and just above the fort roof. With a number of people running to get views of what turns out to be the 5th spring record for the Dry Tortugas, we watched it fly into the large door openings on the roof, a place that unfortunately we could not access. There was a steady stream of the same species visiting the fountain with the only new birds to the island being a group of Black-bellied Plovers and a male Blue Grosbeak. Just prior to boarding the boat the immature Roseate Tern made a few passes by the coaling docks before alighting on a piling.

The journey back was at times "rocking and rolling" but as they say it could have been a great deal worse. Despite the uncomfortable conditions everyone was in good spirits and we managed a few adult Masked Boobies, several Bridled Terns and good numbers of Brown Boobies before reaching Key West where Least Terns and several flocks of Sandwich's as well as 2 Roseate's were seen.

Day 5 / Friday May 7: Dagy Johnson Key Largo State Botanical Gardens; Miami Shores; Green Belt Park, Ft. Lauderdale; Broward County Southwest Regional Library; Loxahatchee NWR; Wakodathatchee Wetlands

It's always a good day when one finally gets to see a Mangrove Cuckoo. This was our third crack at it, not our last chance by any means, but we had to work for it. One was calling, flying back and forth across the path at the Botanical Gardens and perching nicely for everyone to see on several occasions. By mid morning we had seen 2 White-winged Parakeets at a feeder in Miami Shores, which also had a half dozen very noisy Monk Parakeets. Along the back alley Blue Jays and White-winged Doves were a common sight, while the chattering of parakeets caught my attention in a tree. Well camouflaged amongst the leaves were 2 parakeets, one a White-wing and the other a Yellow-chevroned. They flew out and down the alley into an open overhanging tree over the road, where we go to see that one had white in the wings while the other did not. Though White-wings often do not show the white when perched, this was confirmed when they flew down the road. A Spot-breasted Oriole's rich song was heard in the neighborhood and soon one was spotted at the top of a tree where it was joined by its mate. They proceeded to fly back and forth between several houses picking up berries and finally settling near our van to preen. South Florida has had a recent increase in the number of Purple Swamphens (purple gallinules on steroids) that were original escapees from a private collect. We got to see one in Pembroke Pines preening on the edge of the marsh, its size and coloration very different from the Purple Gallinule that we had had just seen.

At Loxahatchee it was nice to see 4 Pileated Woodpeckers working the cypress trees, and while the rest of the boardwalk seemed relatively quite we enjoyed the serene setting with the occasional calling Carolina Wren. A Ruddy Daggerwing butterfly kept pace with our walk, occasionally posing for pictures and Pam spotted a Brown Water Snake. Walking around the impoundment, a young Red-shouldered Hawk was heard constantly begging for food, while several Glossy Ibis were feeding and an Osprey was seen make a successful catch. A section of mudflats had a pair of Black-necked Stilts, 3 Solitary Sandpipers and 2 Least Sandpipers and a Limpkin was found in the ditch along the trail. The wastewater treatment plant known as

Wakadohatchee, meaning Created Waters in Indian is a little gem surrounded by residential properties. Here Moorhens were feeding their young; Anhinga were still raising their young and Black-necked Stilts were sitting on the nest, while Least Terns were diving for minnows and Purple Gallinules did their balancing acts on fireflag stalks, but the best was left to last when a female Least Bittern, besides the boardwalk, held a small audience captive for 20 minutes as she patiently stalked a minnow from the edge of a rush clump.

Day 6 / Saturday May 8: Wetlands on 68; Kissimmee Prairie State Park; Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area; Walk-in-Water Road

Our first Caracara of the day was spotted from the back seat of the van, and was perched on a fence post where a second bird flew by for a brief second. The wetlands on 68 had numerous Glossy Ibis as well as a pair of Sandhill Cranes across the road, while a little further down the road a Swallow-tailed Kite was gracefully maneuvering over the cypress domes. We searched the prairie at Kissimmee State Park unsuccessfully for Grasshopper Sparrow, it surely could not have been the conditions as they were good, but possibly the time of day, but did get good looks a several Bachman's Sparrows. Blue Gray Gnatcatchers and Parula's were signing near our picnic area and Zebra Swallowtails and Pearl Crescents were also seen in the park. Driving towards Three Lakes, 3 juvenile Bald Eagles sat in the shaded parts of pine trees near what must surely have been their nest.

Three Lakes could not have been any better for us today. An Eastern Bluebird greeted us as soon as we got out the van and a Red-cockaded Woodpecker was quickly located and her mate soon joined her flying all around us and entering a nest site that had a small amount of sap around the area below the hole. A Great Crested Flycatcher was calling and along with a very dull Pine Warbler were seen near the top of a Slash Pine. The trilling of a Pine Warbler led us to a brighter male. Common Nighthawks were *peenting* all around us, and occasionally we would hear their *booming* – there had to have been almost ten of them. The southern race of Eastern Towhee with their white eyes were seen moving about the understory bringing nesting material to a nest site and we got our final target bird in this pine-saw palmetto habitat as we made our way back to the van – a pair of Brown-headed Nuthatches that were flying about with a worm in one of their beaks, which it duly left behind when it enter a cavity on a snag. Heading east, a Red-tailed Hawk was perched on a telegraph pole, several more Swallow-tailed Kites graced the landscape and Barb relaxed by trying out a new position in the middle of the van....birding with her legs firmly anchored to the inside of the van roof! Anyway, I'll never understand how she managed to find half a dozen Wild Turkey's at the far end of a field from that position, but as the old saying goes, "If it ain't broken, don't fix it".

Day 7 / Sunday May 9: Walk-in-Water Road; Old SR8, south of Archbold Biological Station; near Venus Flatwoods; Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk; opposite Shark Valley; South Miami Parrot Roost

The big wait for the Short-tailed Hawk this morning failed to produce the headliner, leaving us with a supporting cast of vultures, Pileated and Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Towhee, Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireo, Carolina Wren, Tufted Titmouse, Northern Parula and many Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. Zebra Swallowtails and a Great Purple Hairstreak were seen well sunning themselves on the sand. The Florida Scrub Jay and its mate were sitting on the telegraph wires along Old SR8 and though not that tame in comparison to others of the same species they did allow us to get within 10 yards for some excellent views. Not to far away, a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers were seen on a dead tree in a pasture going in and out of their nest site some 15 feet up the trunk of the tree. The boardwalk at Big Cypress Bend was a big success with Northern Waterthrush, Blackpoll, Northern Parula, Black-throated Blue, Common Yellowthroat,

Cape May, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, both vireos, Great Crested Flycatcher, Red-bellied and Pileated Woodpecker, but the highlight came when a Raccoon stopped us in our tracks on the boardwalk as it foraged about a few feet in front of us. Observing and patiently waiting for it to move on Barbara quietly said, "There it is", and there it was, a juvenile Barred Owl sitting on a Cypress Branch some 15 feet above us. A second bird, slightly younger was only 10 feet away lower in the same tree. The receding pool at the end of the boardwalk had almost twenty baby alligators, White Ibis, a Great Egret and 5 snakes including Florida Water Snake.

It took a while, but we all eventually got to see a male Snail Kite at a reasonable distance in the scope. The first one or two we spotted were basically dots on the horizon and moving to a different location paid off with several birds sighted quartering the sawgrass. We finished the day at a parrot roost where the noise got greater as the sky got darker. White-fronted Parrots were already there when we showed up and a few Red-crowned soon followed, followed by good numbers of Lilac-fronted with at least 2 Blue-fronted also in the crowd. All of them kept moving about, flying off, returning and alighting on the Australian Pines or telegraph wires for us to view.

Day 8 / Monday May 10: The Everglades: Anhinga and Gumbo Limbo Trail; Paurotis Pond; Flamingo; Eco Pond; Snake Bight; West Lake; Pay-ha-okee

With very low water levels throughout the everglades, the activity had greatly diminished on the Anhinga Trail though good numbers of Anhinga's were still around, some of which were still attending to well grown chicks and one which was observed catching and swallowing a Bluegill. A few Double-crested Cormorants, a very vocal Pileated Woodpecker and a Spotted Sandpiper rounded out the avian species. Walking through the hardwoods on the Gumbo Limbo trail, an Ovenbird near the entrance gave us hope that the rest of the trail would be just as good, but with the exception of a female Black-throated Blue and a male Redstart along with small numbers of females, and a calling Yellow-billed Cuckoo it was relatively slow. We turned up empty searching for the Cape Sable race of Seaside Sparrow, no doubt due to the dryness of the habitat. It certainly was not for lack of trying. Paurotis Pond was alive with numerous Wood Storks being kept busy flying back and forth to the rookery to feed what must surely be a good number of young. Roseate Spoonbills gave the colony some much-needed color as White Ibis, Great Egrets and a few Snowy's made up the balance, though several Tri-colored Herons were also seen tending to their duties. While having our picnic lunch at Flamingo, a young Osprey was heard continuously begging for food before her mother finally showed up, just as we were leaving. While being subjected to that racket, we got great looks at 4 American Crocodiles and Brown-headed Cowbirds around the marina, as well as Black-bellied Plovers, Dunlin and Royal Terns on the sand spit. Eco Pond was alive with breeding plumaged Tri-colored Herons, Little Blue Heron and White Ibis and a well-concealed Black-crowned Night Heron was spotted amongst the island vegetation. A juvenile was later found, this time out in the open for us see!

It is always interesting to see how people take the Snake Bight trail. On this occasion two decided to stay in the air-conditioned van (though they did have legitimate excuses); one went as far as 100 meters before deciding the mosquito's were getting the better of the deal, and the rest of us braved on, though they really were not that bad going down. We were well rewarded at the end of the half hour walk, with views of a large group of Black Skimmers, at least 4 Caspian Terns, two large gatherings of American White Pelicans and a Wurdman's Great Blue Heron along with an assortment of other waders and shorebirds.

Day 9 / Tuesday May 11: 216th Street, Cutler Ridge; Baptist Hospital, Kendal; Royal Palm & 96th St, Kendal; Matheson Hammock County Park, Coral Gables

Under the turnpike bridge in Cutler Ridge we got wonderful views at the Caribbean race of Cave Swallow that is nesting here - these being darker than the nominate southwestern race. In the neighborhood behind Baptist Hospital Red-whiskered Bulbuls proved elusive on the first go round, possibly because of today's high winds but on our second try we got very brief looks at one that perched on a guide wire and a short while later one was spotted on a wire, staying long enough for us to view in the scope, before flying into a bare tree canopy and then onto what seemed like a new zip code. Around the Royal Palm Tennis Club, nearly twenty Mitred Parakeets visited a feeder while a Spot-breasted Oriole shot across the road only to disappear in a dense tree, but still no Bulbul! Our final species was pair of Hill Mynah's that were seen preening atop a bare Palm Tree and then flying into one of many old Pileated Woodpecker holes. We finished with a very respectable total of 173 ABA species plus a number of exotics.