



## **SOUTH FLORIDA & DRY TORTUGAS April 24 - May 2, 2004**

### **TRIP REPORT by Adrian Binns**

**Day 1 / Saturday April 24 : Dagy Johnson Key Largo State Botanical Gardens; Wild Bird Center; MM58 Wreck Grille; Lake Edna; Key Colony Golf Course; Missouri Key; No Name Key; Blue Hole; Boca Chica Lagoon; East Rockland; Flagler & 17<sup>th</sup> in Key West; Key Haven Road; 3<sup>rd</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> on Stock Island**

We began birding at the crack of dawn, as a pair of Spot-breasted Oriole's were seen on the telegraph wires while loading our bags into our van. Eurasian Collared Doves, Boat-tailed Grackles soon followed as did several Common Myna's. Our first destination was on Upper Key Largo at the Dagy Johnson Key Largo State Botanical Gardens where the West Indian hardwoods are home to two South Florida specialties, the Mangrove Cuckoo and Black-whiskered Vireo. No sooner were we out the vehicle, White-eyed Vireos, Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Cardinals were heard calling and shortly thereafter a Mangrove Cuckoo. It did not take long before we had good looks at him as he slowly moved about the top of a Gumbo Limbo tree. A Black-whiskered Vireo began calling a short distance away and despite the fact that he was relentless we could not locate him in the canopy. A Western Spindalis was reported in the same area the previous afternoon but despite searching for an hour and a half we failed to even find a trace of him. A second Black-whiskered put in a brief appearance and a little further down one actually called a few times before providing a little longer look, but still not to our satisfaction. A visit to the Wild Bird Center produced wonderful comparisons of Great Egret and the white morph of Great Blue Heron, the later with breeding plumage hot pink legs! Not only was the noise coming from the rehabilitation cages deafening but also from the bay side shoreline as Laughing Gulls were engulfed in some racket with egrets, juvenile White Ibis and Black-necked Stilts. A short stop at a spot further down the keys where a Red-legged Honeycreeper was reported feeding on Bottlebrush trees, failed to produce the said species, but did hold numerous Blackpolls and Cape Mays. At Lake Edna, Gray Kingbirds, Least Terns, Reddish Egrets and both an adult and immature Little Blue Heron were new. Our lunch was taken at the golf course on Key Colony right after we had made a mad dash between foursomes to look at a Burrowing Owl standing guard over her burrow were she no doubt had several young babies. Minutes later her mate appeared and began hissing at us, so we took his warning to heart and retreated to lunch.

Shorebirds were well represented on Missouri Key as high tide had pushed the birds into the lagoon. Short-billed Dowitchers, Willets, Ruddy Turnstones, Semipalmated Plovers and Least Sandpipers as well as few Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers were seen. Our visit to No Name was rewarded with a very cooperative Key Deer browsing on the roadside vegetation as well as our best looks at a Black-whiskered Vireo. The lagoon at Boca Chica was a great success with numerous Wilson's Plovers, two Whimbrels, a Spotted Sandpiper a breeding plumaged *hendersonii* Short-billed Dowitcher and a dozen or so nudies! The man made ponds on East Rockland Key held 2 pairs of Blue-winged Teal and a family group of Common Moorhens. On Key West we peered into the well-vegetated yard of a friend's house and saw numerous doves including 5 White-crowned Pigeons perched atop the tallest tree in his yard as

well as 3 Common Ground Doves. After a quickie dinner and an alcohol run we waited for any nighthawk to appear on Stock Island. There really was not much activity, so we moved a few blocks away and waited for an Antillean Nighthawk to call. It did, at 7:55PM, and we were treated to an excellent display as it called non-stop while displaying, feeding and chasing another one out of its territory. One hates to leave such a good bird, but we did, having to get settled into our boat that would be our home for the next three nights.

## **Day 2 / Sunday April 25 : Into the Gulf Stream 25 miles south of Key West (max. 1200'); Tail's End marker; Garden Key; Long Key**

A few Northern Gannets greeted us early in the morning before we made it into the Gulf Stream where a steady trickle of Sooty Terns flew by the boat. By the time we were into at least 1000 feet of depth and the boat was swaying from side to side Bridled Terns became a common sight, sometimes in groups of a dozen or so. At least 3 pairs of Bridled were sitting on jetsam and numerous birds flew close to the boat, where the greyer tones and lighter tail field marks were seen very well. Brown Bobbies in good numbers we spotted at Tail's End tower as well as at various points along the way. We also had excellent looks at an adult light morph Pomarine Jaeger that flew across the bow and down the starboard side as well as a pair of Roseate Terns that followed a similar path near Rebecca Shoals. As we closed in on the Dry Tortugas, Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies were becoming a common sight while Magnificent Frigatebirds rode the wind.

Due to the rough ride in, as well as the success of our sightings, we did not drop anchor at Garden Key until early afternoon. The Black Noddies that were being seen just before a tornado blew through 2 weeks ago still were not to be found, so we moved into the fort, sat down at the fountain and watched as a steady stream of warblers came into to drink and bathe, including male Black-throated Blue, Hooded, Yellow, Cape May's, Parula's, Blackpolls, Prairie's, a Black and White, Indigo Buntings, Blue Grosbeaks and a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak. An American Kestrel was seen sitting on the fronds of a Palm tree and a Peregrine or two were patrolling the fort forcing the passerines to lay low. A (pleasant) surprise were the 5 Turkey Vultures that were alternating between roosting on the radio tower and flying with the frigatebirds - I'm still not sure what they are feeding on here! A small group of Eurasian Collared-Doves that seemed to feel as if this was their home were seen courting. To my knowledge only House Sparrows (no longer) and Mourning Doves have been the only passerines to nest on the island.

Over the last few weeks at least one juvenile Red-footed Booby was seen roosting amongst the frigatebird colony on Long Key. With a good late afternoon light behind us, we ventured out in the zodiac along side Bush Key watching the noddies and terns leave the colony and head out to sea, sometimes in large masses and even saw a 6' nurse shark and sting ray in the shallows before reaching Long Key. A thorough scan through the colony failed to locate the bird, so we dropped off the first group and picked up the second group. The second group timed the trip just right, as at 6:40PM a booby with pink legs was spotted making an awkward landing into the top branch of the mangroves. The obvious paler coloration along with the contrasting head and rest of body color made for a great comparison with the Brown Booby that was perched some 50 feet to its left. After deciding the discretion was the better part of valor it moved down a few feet giving its perch to a male Magnificent Frigatebird. A return trip to Garden Key was in order to pick up the original group, who not only good looks at it but also picked up an immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, a Little Blue and Great Blue Heron and a Cooper's Hawk. A great start to the Dry Tortugas portion of our trip!

### **Day 3 / Monday April 26: Garden Key; Loggerhead Key; Hospital Key, Garden Key and Moat Walk**

As we got off the zodiac, we were greeted by a beautiful Calico Crab that seemed to have beached itself, but most of the warblers that had so enthralled us the afternoon before had taken the south easterly overnight winds and moved on. A Chuck's-will-widow was a nice find along the buttonwood-sea grape hedgerow on the east side of the island. It was happily roosting on the sand in the shade of the trees only 10 feet from the path. By mid morning we had dropped anchor off the north side of Loggerhead Key and taken the zodiacs in. Margaret, Diane and Barbara chose to go snorkel and were treated to a wide variety of corals and tropical fish, and all agreed that Little Africa was a superb reef. The rest of the group worked our way through the Railroad Vines, Agave and Pricky Pear cactus, kicking up Palm's (what a surprise) and finding several good bushes that held Cape May's, Hooded and Prairie's. Merlin's and Peregrines were about. As when they made their sorties most of the birds would take cover or freeze including the cuckoo's who make up a good portion of the raptors diets along this migration route. We had a nice showing of a male Bobolink that was perched on a snag some 50 feet in front of us. The center of the island, by the lighthouse held a pair of Gray Kingbirds and an Eastern Kingbird. Our target here was the Caribbean race of the Short-eared Owl, hopefully to one day be named the Arawak Owl once the powers be get their act together, and to give us our best chance we needed to walk through the tall grasses and Sea Oats on the South-western end. Once we reached the area, Barrett began walking through the grasses, some 20 yards from the beach and flushed an owl, which only flew 20 feet further away to the base of a shrub and near a brush pile. Its head was visible and we got scope views from only 15 yards. It certainly looked far darker and bulkier than any of the mainland Short-ears that I have seen and seemed to be very healthy, no doubt feeding off of the islands rodent population. Those that were snorkeling were duly called to the sight and everyone was happy that we had the potential to have a future bankable bird!

After the excitement of the owl and a late lunch we motored over to Hospital Key to see North America's only nesting colony of Masked Bobbies. The small narrow sand spit which changes shape on a continuous basis had 2 newly born youngsters as well as a half dozen 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year birds and some 30 adults. Occasionally a juvenile, with their white collars very evident, would take off flying out to sea to fish. Though it was hard to hear, a few females (Masked Bobbies that is) were grunting as a male would land (Males whistle!). The 2 youngsters still in downy plumage, one older than the other, looked very much like fluff balls with droopy heads as they lay sleeping.

The afternoon's jaunt on Garden Key produced a couple of male Shiny Cowbirds that only Dennis saw and great looks at a Black-whiskered Vireo that was feeding in the corner Gumbo Limbo tree next to Dr. Mudd's cell, while the evening's walk around the moat produced a number of Cassiopeia's, the upside-down jellyfish, Sea Cucumbers, Long-spined Urchins, Sea Urchins, Neddlefish, a Green Moray Eel and a Spiny Lobster on what turned out to be a calm and very pleasant evening.

### **Day 4 / Tuesday April 27: Garden Key; Return journey to Key West via Rebecca, Half Moon and Tail's End markers.**

As the sky darkened and thunder and lightning got stronger, we sought shelter in the Fort and watched the short National Park's video on the history of the fort. We had not been on Garden Key very long before the wind picked up and the skies opened for about a 30-minute period. Once it had blown over, there were considerably more birds than when we first showed up this morning, with large numbers of Common Yellowthroats, American Redstarts and Palm Warblers as well as Gray Catbirds, a Gray-cheeked Thrush, 2 Northern Waterthrushes, several

Ovenbirds, a Black-throated Green and Worm-eating Warbler, a female Shiny Cowbird that was calling, 5 Yellow-billed Cuckoo's and a Red-eyed Vireo.

By the time we had to back to the mainland the sea was a mill pond and all the markers along our route had good numbers of Brown Boobies with most being younger birds that were quite happy allowing the boat to get in close enough for very good looks at their yellow feet and the demarcation on their breasts. Tail's End produced the highest numbers with over 70 Brown's, some 50 plus Roseate Terns and a Royal Tern for size comparison. A few Bottle-nosed Dolphins swam in front of the bow and there was a good showing for numerous fish breaking the waters surface.

**Day 5 / Wednesday April 28: Green Belt Park, Fort Lauderdale; Miami Shores NE 94<sup>th</sup> St; Pembroke Pines, Broward County Southwest Regional Library, Silver Lakes; Loxahatchee NWR; Wakodahatchee Wetland**

The delightful Green Belt Park adjacent to the Fort Lauderdale airport had several Smooth-billed Ani's, which Jeff located with minutes of arriving. Despite a light drizzle we got excellent looks as they moved about the well-manicured gardens. A species which seems to be getting harder and harder to find is the White-winged Parakeet, but on this day in Miami Shores a bird was easily found calling in an open tree while a pair of Yellow-chevroned Parakeets whisked by. After walking the roads we found a Monk Parakeet on a feeder and later a pair mating. A pair of Spot-breasted Oriole's few by and one returned several times while we were there to feed in a Gumbo Limbo tree only feet from us. White-winged Doves and Blue Jays were also seen. At the South Broward County Regional Library wetlands we could not locate a Purple Swampphen, actually there was very little there on this overcast day, but Michael was overjoyed to see his most sort after bird, the Swallow-tail Kite, which gracefully flew along the tree tops. Purple Swampphens, an introduced species from Asia, basically a Purple Gallinule on steroids, were found in a nearby wetland along with Mottled Ducks, an adult Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Osprey and our first American Coot.

After lunch we visited Loxahatchee National Wildlife Reserve where we were treated to excellent looks at Limpkin, Glossy Ibis, Red-shouldered Hawk as well as being able to watch three well-grown young Great Blue Herons vie for their parents food on the nest atop a cypress tree. A Pileated Woodpecker was also seen peering out a recently excavated hole on a telegraph pole. A walk along the boardwalk at Wakodahatchee Wetlands is always full of excitement and we were not disappointed today. Least Terns were busy catching minnows and presenting them to their mates; Common Moorhens were busy tending to their fluffy young while Purple Gallinules balance precariously on the stalks of fireflags feeding off the flower heads; we watched a male Least Bittern, one of many seen, work his way through many rush stems to get into a good stalking position before patiently waiting for the right moment before striking; Tri-colored Herons worked the areas around and under the boardwalk; Anhinga chicks lay lifeless in various odd positions on their nest while Black-necked Stilts were seen sitting on their eggs on scrapes.

**Day 6 / Thursday April 29: East of Belle Glade; Wetland east of Rte 68 & 441; Three Lakes WMA; Walk-in-the-Water Road, Frostproof**

Driving through the vast expanse of the sugar cane fields north of Loxahatchee and east of Belle Glade, several large wet areas held large numbers of Lesser Yellowlegs and Black-necked Stilts along with a few other shorebirds and Mottled Ducks. We check a couple of abandoned farm buildings along the way and managed to see a Barn Owl fly along the dike and disappear into the castor vegetation. Working our way along the east side of Lake Okeechobee we came

across what was the first of many Bald Eagles that were seen today, this one being a second year bird that was cruising along the canal besides the dike. Further north we moved into more open cattle ranches with pinelands and palm trees dotting the landscape and soon our first Crested Caracara was spotted flying over the road. Just east of 441 along 68 we checked out a wetland that had about 50 feeding Glossy Ibis. A pair of Sandhill Cranes along with a well grown youngest were across the road and called several times, while several Wood Storks were spotted flying high in the sky along with vast numbers of vultures, in particular Blacks. In amongst one distant group, a light morph Short-tailed Hawk was happily kiting for some time before being joined briefly by another one and then vanishing behind the woods on the horizon. It re-appeared shortly after and continued to move north along the treetops where some of the group was able to get some of the field marks, though it was not very satisfying at this distance. The first of several Swallow-tailed Kites were also seen much to Michael's delight – again!

No sooner had we got out of the van at Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area, a Red-cockaded Woodpecker was heard calling and soon came in very close for excellent views. The white-eyed race of Eastern Towhee was calling and several Eastern Bluebirds flittered about and a group of three juvenile Loggerhead Shrikes sat in a row of a broken of pine branch waiting for their parents to feed them. After a bite to eat we went in search of a Bachman's Sparrow. Winding our way through the Saw Palmetto, things were eerily quite until we got a fair distance into the pines, then a Downy Woodpecker alighted on a pine and a Pine Warbler began singing and flying from one perch to another while half a dozen Brown-headed Nuthatches chattered away noisily while moving from tree to tree. A Bachman's was then heard a hundred yards away so we walked in that direction, kicking one up as we walked through the palmetto, but in dropped out of sight. It did tease us a few times and by the time we reached the signing bird, he had given up! Patience paid off, and half an hour later he started up again and was found on a burnt pine stump 3 feet off the ground, partially hidden behind a bush. It was very cooperative allowing us to approach with 10 yards. Nearby a Red-cockaded Woodpecker flew into a cavity in a pine and was replaced by its mate while both Polydamus and Zebra Swallowtails fluttered by.

Heading west we came across several more pairs of Sandhill Cranes and a family group of 5 Caracara's that were perched on a stump in a grass field with a Wild Turkey a short distance away. We finished the day on a watch for Short-tailed Hawk, which in the hour and a half we patiently waited failed to show!! However, Red-eyed and White-eyed Vireo, Pileated Woodpecker, Great Crested Flycatcher and Carolina Wren were heard calling and a Red-shouldered Hawk and Swallow-tailed Kite, again much to Michael's delight, put in an appearance.

### **Day 7 / Friday April 30: Walk-in-the-Water Road; Old SR8, Archbold Biological Station; Venus Flatwoods; Shark Valley; South Miami Parrot Roost**

We began the day were we left off last night, and with the exception of a brief flyby by a dark morph Short-tailed Hawk, which only those in elevated positions got to see, it was unfortunately pretty much the same results as yesterday. A dark-morph Red-tailed Hawk (a surprise) got our hopes up for a few seconds, but.....a pair of Tufted Titmouse put in an appearance and the dawn chorus consisted of the same characters as yesterday. Leaving the site, a Gopher Tortoise was a nice find besides the road. We approached for photos and it shot straight for its sand burrow, faster than any of us could move. So much for the tortoise being slow! A slow drive down Old SR8 produced a pair of Florida Scrub Jays on the wires. We had great looks but they were on the shy side when we tried to coax them in with peanuts, preferring to fly, hide and hesitate before making some feeble attempts at picking the nuts the up. The Venus Flatwoods at midday were rather quite with the exception of a Pine Warbler and Great Crested Flycatcher calling. Dennis and Alice managed to spot a distant Red-headed Woodpecker. A local lady

driving by, told us about a bird adjacent to her property just around the corner, so we paid a visit. Good numbers of Loggerhead Shrikes were flitting about and a Red-headed Woodpecker was spotted on the back of a post next to an Eastern Kingbird. She then flew straight to a dead pine tree and to her nest hole, where her mate shot out of the hole. It was great to see this beautiful bird flying about and calling.

The long drive south to Shark Valley was punctuated with a few sightings of Swallow-tailed Kites and numerous vultures. Once we reached the northern entrance to the Everglades we located a single female Snail Kite quartering the sawgrass some distance away. It was a while before several more were spotted but again all where at a considerable distance.

After a bite of Cuban food we headed for a parrot roost in South Miami where White-fronted Parrots were perched on the wires and soon about 2 dozen Red-crowned and a Blue-fronted Parrot came squawking in. They could never settle down, continuously moving about from tree to tree and flying away and returning.

### **Day 8 / Saturday May 1: Everglades National Park, Anhinga Trail, Gumbo Limbo Trail, Mahogany Hammock, Paurotis Pond, West Lake, Flamingo, Eco Pond, Snake Bight**

The Anhinga trail was awfully quite this morning. The water level was drastically low and only a few Aningas remained on the nest, one of which had 3 almost fully grown chicks. Seeing large numbers of gators moved about in the shallow water and mud was something that I was not use to, even at this time of year. It really must have been a very dry winter. A few Green Herons were about and a Boat-tailed Grackle called non-stop from a snag that cormorants usually use – only one cormorant was present today. The Gumbo Limbo trail produced a singing Blue-headed Vireo and a Gray Kingbird. A female Black-throated Blue and a male Black-and-White were seen very well at Mahogany Hammock.

Paurotis Pond was alive with all kinds of activity. It looked as though it had been a very good year for the Wood Storks with many birds just about to fledge. There were even several birds still bringing nesting materials into the rookery. Roseate Spoonbills, as always, lit up the rookery whenever they flew in or out and Great and Snowy Egrets and a few Tri-colored Herons rounded out the group. An Eastern Kingbird hung around the car park while an American Redstart worked its way through the trees. Our first American Pelicans were seen flying high over West Lake and we all got good looks at a male Shiny Cowbird that was amongst several dozen Brown-headed Cowbirds, feeding on the grass seed heads at Flamingo. Also seen at the marina was a large American Crocodile, with just the upper eighth of its body exposed above the water floating lazily up the canal. From the observation platform at Eco Pond an adult and an immature Black-crowned Night Heron were amongst a mixture of egrets, herons and ibis at the roost, but by the time we left they had retreated into the mangrove. Several of the White Ibis present had shocking 'hot lips' pink legs and deep red bills. The walk down the Snake Bight trail is always an adventure. Everyone covered up with whatever they could to give the mosquitoes as little a body surface to penetrate; yet we all seemed to have received our fair share of bites. Great Crested Flycatchers, a few warblers and cardinals were on the trail, but we had to keep moving in order to keep the biting insects at bay. Reaching the newly finished boardwalk at the end of trail, we had a number of Least Sandpipers, 2 Dunlins, 3 Caspian Terns an assortment of egrets and herons and a rather large flock of White Pelicans.

After dinner our owl prowl resulted in mixed success, with an Eastern Screech Owl responding but choosing to stay hidden and the search for Barred Owl ended once to seem to hit the mother lode of mosquitoes, but not before hearing a few Chuck's-will-widow's and Common Nighthawks calling.

**Day 9 / Sunday May 2: 216<sup>th</sup> Street; Royal Palm; Baptist Hospital; Matheson Hammock Park; Miami Shores; Miami Springs**

Before we began our final morning looking for the Miami exotics, we stopped to look at the Caribbean race of Cave Swallow that nest under the turnpike bridge. Several we seen peering out of their mud nests and good numbers were seen flying under the bridge very close, given us a look at the dark headlight and rump, buffy throat and flanks.

Near the tennis courts at Royal Palm a feeder held a dozen Mitred Parakeets and several Red Masked while 2 Yellow-chevroned Parakeets were heard in a nearby tree before flying away at amazing speed, as they usually do. Most of us got the see the yellow in the wings. Two migrants were besides the van, an American Redstart that was seen singing and a female Black-throated Blue. At Baptist Hospital the Monk Parakeets were making a lot of noise, but we could not located any other parakeets. Two Hill Myna's flew in a semi-circle but never really gave us the looks we had hoped for. Across the road a Red-whiskered Bulbul showed itself in a matter of minutes and was joined by two others. From here we visited Matheson Hammock Park and had great looks at Pileated Woodpecker, White-fronted Parrot and 4 Hill Myna's whose very rich calls were heard from a great distance. From then on we tried several locations to see if we could get better views of the Yellow-chevroned, but despite a few Monk's there was little else about on the warm and humid mid day. However we did manage to finish up with a new trip bird, a Solitary Sandpiper.