



SOUTH FLORIDA & DRY TORTUGAS April 26 - May 4, 2003

Trip Report and Photos by Adrian Binns

We began our South Florida tour in a heavy tropical storm! The Miami area produced a wide assortment of parrots including White-winged and Yellow Chevroned Parakeet, Purple Swamphen, Spot-breasted Oriole, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Smooth-billed Ani and two Mynahs all of which gave us great looks.

As if we were not wet enough we headed for the wetlands – at Loxahatchee NWR, the impoundments produced Mottled Duck, Green Herons and Anhingas with young, Least and Solitary Sandpipers, and Little Blue Herons, one adult with a bright blue bill and several immatures with varying amount of blue.



Wakodahatchee Wetlands continues to be the Least Bittern capital, as numerous birds were seen stalking prey and flying from one rush stand to another. At least 3 Limpkins were seen and Purple Gallinules were within touching distance as they balanced precariously on the bending Fire Flag stalks as they reached for the flowers but it was the red morph Eastern Screech Owl that was perched at the entrance to a Wood Duck box that drew everyone's attention. It got better when a baby joined its mother to peer out. She then flew off and another baby took her place – quite a show!

Heading north west through the prairies we came across Crested Caracaras at a road kill and in a wet meadow with a pond, a large group of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Glossy Ibis and several pairs of Sandhill Cranes with young. Looking for the Florida race of Grasshopper Sparrow, we were surprised to find one sitting on top of a saw palmetto in the middle of the day as we opened the van door in Kissimmee Prairie State Preserve. Talk about luck!



In the Pinewoods, we came across Zebra and Giant Swallowtails, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Eastern Bluebirds, Eastern Towhee, Pine Warblers and a Bachman's Sparrow that was signing its heart out on a dead branch. After a little patience we were rewarded with our target species - actually not one, but a family group of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers that were very obliging, flying from one tree to another. The day ended with stunning looks at a radio tagged dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk circling over our heads.



Working our way south through ever-diminishing scrub oak habitat, we came across several families of Florida Scrub-Jays which seemed happy to accept our peanut handouts, and gliding effortlessly over the orange groves, stunning Swallow-tailed Kites. In the northern section of the Everglades Snail Kites quartered the sawgrass in search of apple snails. 2 males and 6 females were seen in all, one coming relatively close.

After dipping on a reported LaSagra's Flycatcher in Miami, we worked our way down the Keys, first stopping in the West Indian Hardwoods for Black-whiskered Vireo and Mangrove Cuckoo. While it was easy to hear them, both these secretive species took a while before showing very well. The lagoons and beaches were full of waders and shorebirds, with Reddish Egret, White-rumped Sandpiper, Great White Heron and Wilson's Plover being the highlights. Reaching Key West, White-crowned Pigeons were common and the first real inkling of passerine migration was noticed with Bobolinks, Dickcissels, Redstarts, Cape Mays, Black-throated Blues and Black & Whites at Fort Zachary. We only managed a brief glimpse of a nighthawk at dusk. Was it an Antillean? There was certainly one calling late at night near the dock, once we were on the boat.

Our journey into the gulf stream was short on quantity but high on quality, as a juvenile Red-footed Booby was spotted side by side with a juvenile Brown Booby for comparison on a marker; two individual Audubon's Shearwaters came in front of the bow; 3 Pomarine Jaegers flew behind the boat and several Bridled Terns were spotted. 3 Bottle-nosed Dolphins and a Loggerhead Turtle were also seen. Nearing the Dry Tortugas, Sooty Terns, Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Noddies became more evident and Masked Boobies were seen on Hospital Key.



Excitement was high on the Dry Tortugas as a Red-legged Honeycreeper was found a day earlier (a second North American record). It didn't take long before this brightly colored Caribbean bird was found in the sea grapes. Soon after, the long staying White-tipped Dove (a second Florida record), which kept returning to the pools of water that seeped through the bricks on the second floor of the fort, was located. Passerines were all over the place, Palms, Magnolias, Blackpolls, Hooded, Canada, Bay-breasted, the list goes on... Indigo's, Painted Bunting, Gray Kingbird, Cliff Swallow, vireos, Veery, Gray-cheeked, Wood and Swainson's

Thrush and about 50 very restless Yellow-billed Cuckoo's. A male Scarlet Tanager was a nice find on Loggerhead Key as was a dozen Roseate Terns sitting with Royal Terns on the dock. As usual raptors were perched in plain view, at least 3 Merlins and several Peregrines, all-waiting for a passerine to head out to sea!



Back on Garden Key Harold found an Orange-crowned Warbler, which turned out to be a 6th Dry Tortugas record. A female Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was seen well as it was drilling holes 8' up a Palm tree. Bert staked out the north coaling docks over the course of the first two days for a Black Noddy to show up amongst the hundreds of Brown Noddies. Finally, after some 8 hours we were rewarded when it flew into what was supposed to be it's favorite perch!

Our evening moat walk around the fort was successful, having great looks at Atlantic Black Seahare, Green Moray Eel, Cassiopeia the Upside-down Jelly Fish and Cushion Sea Star as well as Long-spined Urchin, Sea Urchin, Spiny Lobster, Southern Skate, Sea Anemone, Barracuda, Queen Conch's, Sea Cucumbers and an assortment of corals. On our finally morning we were rewarded with Bobolinks, Cliff Swallow, American Avocet and a White-crowned Pigeon, a 5th Dry Tortugas record. An exhausted Shiny Cowbird joined us for a short time on the return journey to Key West.



With water levels high in the Everglades, egrets and herons and Wood Storks were dotted throughout the sawgrass. A 'Cape Sable' Seaside Sparrow was seen very well and heard signing besides the road as we heading to Flamingo and butterflies were numerous, including Viceroy's, Queens, White Peacocks and Ruddy Daggerwings. Once we reached Flamingo, we got a brief look at an American Crocodile swimming away from us; several Shiny Cowbirds amongst their more common cousins and on an incoming tide, the sand bar in Florida Bay held Marbled Godwit, Caspian and Sandwich Tern, Black Skimmer and Dunlin. We returned after dinner and finished with Chuck-wills-widows calling and a Barred Owl in the spotlight.



In all 188 species of birds, 7 mammals, 10 reptiles, 2 amphibians and 19 butterfly species were seen – excellent.

Itinerary:

- Day 1 ~ Baptist Hospital/Kendall; Southwest Regional Library/Silver Lakes; Brian Piccolo Park; Loxahatchee NWR
- Day 2 ~ Wakodahatchee Wetlands; Kissimmee Prairie SP; Joe Overstreet Rd; 3 Lakes WMA; Walk-in-the-Water Rd
- Day 3 ~ Old SR 8; Fakahatchee Strand Boardwalk; Shark Valley; Royal Palm
- Day 4 ~ AD Barnes Park; Upper Key Largo; Key Colony; Big Coppitt Key; Fort Zachary SP
- Day 5 ~ Gulf Stream; Tail End Marker; Garden Key
- Day 6 ~ Garden Key; Loggerhead Key; Hospital Key
- Day 7 ~ Garden Key/Iowa Rock/Marathon Airport
- Day 8 ~ Homestead; Everglades NP/ Mahogany Hammock, West Lake, Paurotis Pond, Flamingo, Eco Pond, Anhinga Trail
- Day 9 ~ Miami/ 216 St., Baptist Hospital, Royal Palm, Matteson Hammock Park, Bill Baggs SP, Kenwood Elementary School