



KEY WEST and The DRY TORTUGAS - April 24-27, 2012

TRIP REPORT and PHOTOS by Adrian Binns



South Florida and the Dry Tortugas (*above*) in late April rank among my favorite birding destinations; they never grow dull even after having led almost two dozen birding trips there. This time I was delighted for the company of my good friend James Currie, of Birding Adventures TV, for whom it was his first time visiting the must-see Tortugas.



Our adventure began on the 100 mile drive down the Keys, where large concentrations of songbirds reflected a wonderful fall-out underway, as westerly winds had grounded a mass of northbound migrants. James noted it was the best birding he's had in Florida in 4 years – this, from a state-resident who can be damn hard to please! Arriving in Key West, we headed to Fort Zachary Taylor State Park, meeting up with my co-led Wes Biggs and some of our early arriving participants.

Here we found plenty to hold our interest, including Prothonotary, American Redstart (*above*), Kentucky and Worm-eating Warbler as well as Black-whiskered Vireo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Bobolinks and Dickcissels (*right*). We even had a Swainson's Hawk fly over!



At our next stop, Indigenous Park, Eastern Pewee, Ovenbird, Blue-winged, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia and Prairie Warbler were all seen very well but the highlight may have been a mixed group of Scarlet (*right*) and Summer Tanagers that we had a hard time tearing ourselves away from. We birded there until sunset, yielding a total of 22 warbler species in our afternoon on the Keys.



Birders can visit the Dry Tortugas via a 2 ½ hour ride on a day boat, which docks only at Garden Key for several hours each day. But the best experience is a 3 day trip, with overnights anchored in the lee of Fort Jefferson, where we can watch terns swirling above their nesting colony at sunrise, and catch early-morning migrants on land. I've done it both ways, and was glad to be on the slow boat this trip, savoring the 70-mile long mini pelagic.



As the *Florida Fishfinder* churned steadily through crystal turquoise waters, we saw the first of a number of Brown Boobies, along with Royal Terns and Magnificent Frigatebirds (*above*), and an occasional Northern Gannet. We found a feeding frenzy of Bridled Terns at a weed line, along with Audubon's Shearwaters. We saw our first Masked Booby near Hospital Key, the only US nesting site for this species.



We disembarked at Loggerhead Key (*above*), the largest of the 7 islands that comprise Dry Tortugas National Park. The mainland fall-out was also evident here, as we found many birds to occupy our afternoon. Yellow-billed Cuckoos were in abundance. We noticed an Upland Sandpiper strolling around the lighthouse, and an exhausted Roseate Spoonbill sifting beach sand in a desperate attempt to eat. A Merlin and several Peregrine Falcons joined us in hunting for passerines.



The next days we focused on birding Garden Key, the centerpiece of the National Park. The island is rimmed by Fort Jefferson (*above*), a 19th century brick fort who's claim to fame was Dr. Samuel Mudd. Imprisoned after setting the leg of John Wilkes Booth, President Lincoln's assassin, Dr. Mudd was released 4 years later after saving many prisoners' lives from a disease outbreak. As a hot, tropical sun beat on our heads, it was easy to imagine the harsh conditions of this remote prison in the 1800's – few trees, no fresh water, and no escape. The conditions are not much different now, save for high-power boats that can whisk one back to civilization. Now the Tortugas attracts snorkelers exploring submerged shipwrecks, and birders ogling migrants that pause here on their way northwards.



We enjoyed close-up views of wonderful birds, including a bizarre, partially leucistic male Hooded Warbler, female Painted Buntings, along with Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Cerulean and a Wilson's Warbler. Surprisingly we only came across one Black-whiskered Vireo. White-rumped and Pectoral Sandpipers joined a Sora in feeding amongst the wrack along the sandy shoreline and crumbling pylons. A solitary Lincoln's Sparrow, a rare Tortugas visitor, made an appearance. We had several nighthawk sightings, of which at least one was an Antillean Nighthawk. Veery, Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes roamed the short grasses under the

buttonwoods and a Hermit Thrush was only the second record for these islands.

A major highlight of the Dry Tortugas is the massive seabird colonies that utilize these remote ocean islands for courtship and nesting. Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns clustered their nests together on Bush Key (*right*), while the Magnificent Frigatebirds colonized Long Key, keeping close watch on their fluffy white chicks perched helplessly in stick nests. It is amazing to watch thousands of birds swirling overhead and delicately swooping down to slim a drink from the waters surface, in a brilliant show of aerial skill amid a cacophony of ceaseless calling.





On our last evening we watched the film *The Big Year*, and were fortunate enough to have Greg Miller (his character was played by Jack Black) entertained us with antidotes about the film. Motoring back to Key West, we marveled at our good luck in seeing a great number of bird species, 77 on the Keys and 94 on the Dry Tortugas, and enjoying another wonderful trip to these magical islands.

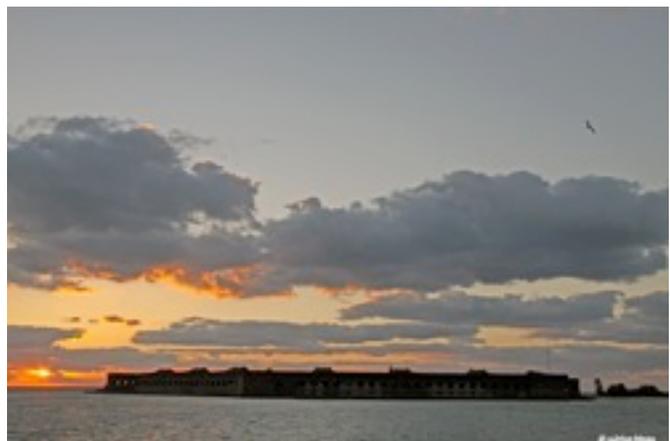
(l) Adrian Binns, James Currie and Greg Miller



Birding the water fountain (the only freshwater on the Dry Tortugas) within Fort Jefferson



Brown Noddy



Sunrise over Fort Jefferson, Garden Key