



## **SOUTH FLORIDA & DRY TORTUGAS April 24 - May 3, 2009**

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

#### **Day 1 / Exotics and Wetlands**

It was a packed first day as we began in Miami with an assortment of psittacids. Red-masked and Mitred Parakeet proved to be an ID challenge, and both countable birds, Monk and White-winged Parakeet were found at their nest sites. Another target exotic, the Spot-breasted Oriole performed nicely for the group perching in the same tree as I had it in last year.

The West Palm Beach water treatment wetlands are terrific places to view many species up close. A walk along the busy boardwalk at Wakodahatchee produced Green and Tricolored Heron's on the nest, Anhinga and Great Blue Herons babies aggressively begged for food, Least Bittern's flying across open stretches of water only to disappear into the bulrush, and courting male Least Tern's offered fish to potential mates. Breeding season was well underway! Birds weren't the only fauna, as anoles, turtles, alligators and green iguanas basked in the sun and marsh rabbits munched on the short grass. Flying over the impoundment was a Red-shouldered Hawk with a snake dangling from its talons.

Green Cay is a larger wetland and consequently the birds are spread out. Moorhens were very evident feeding their fuzzy chicks and young Mottled Ducks trailed their parents through the duckweed. A lone Wood Stork elevated one wing to create shade over the water making it easier to hunt and a Glossy Ibis hunted in a more traditional manner. On the hammocks a feeding station attracted Blue Jays, Boat-tailed Grackles, White-winged Doves and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks!

Soon after seeing a Limpkin walking along one of the canals that radiate from Loxahatchee we watched a male Snail Kite successfully catch an apple snail and take it to a branch where it could feed. A second bird, a female, was located on the opposite side of the field. To complete our day we watched four Burrowing Owls continuously on the lookout for any passing insects that they could turn into a meal.

#### **Day 2 / Pinewoods of Central Florida**

Open prairies, pinelands and lakes make up a large portion of southeastern central Florida. Bald Eagles thrive in this region and seeing ten at once is not uncommon. Their nest can be seen in stately pines, whereas Ospreys, which are just as numerous, prefer dead pines to nest in. Families of Sandhill Cranes roamed the short grasses and Eastern Meadowlark sang from fence posts. Wild Turkeys strolled out of the woods and we watched four majestic Swallow-tailed Kites, one with a snake and another with a frog, glide just over the tops of hedgerows.

The pinelands at 3 Lakes WMA with an understory of saw palmetto was very productive. Bachman's Sparrows were commonly heard as we drove in search of Red-cockaded Woodpecker, and several were seen singing close to the road. Many species were in song. The single noted calls of Great Crested Flycatchers, the chattering of Eastern Bluebirds and Brown-headed Nuthatches, and the Eastern Towhee's "drink-your-tea", were very evident. In the pine canopy Pine Warblers showed well and three Red-cockaded Woodpeckers worked their way passed us from one pine trunk to another. A pair of Bobwhite scurried out onto the dirt road before vanishing into the understory and Common Ground Dove and Brown Thrasher posed for us at the main entrance gate.

While having our lunch at Joe Overstreet a Crested Caracara flew on the grass in front of us in search of food before being chased by Fish Crows. We noticed three young Loggerhead Shrikes over our picnic table in a Live Oak, when they began to beg as soon as their parent showed up with food. At Lake Marian American White Pelicans were on the water, Wood Storks and Bald Eagles were overhead and a Savannah Sparrow sat in the lake side bush. Butterflies here included Palamedes Swallowtail, White Peacock, Queen and Cloudless Sulphur.

The woods surrounding the lakes and the creeks of this part of Florida support breeding Short-tailed Hawks. Picking a vantage point it is a stake out in the hopes of having one fly over. The strategy normally works but today there was a steady stiff breeze out of the east. Immature Bald Eagles were enjoying hanging in the wind and both Turkey and Black Vultures patrolled the skies. Occasionally a Swallow-tailed Kite or Red-shouldered Hawk would appear but no short-tail today

### **Day 3 / South Central Florida**

Since we arrived on the early side to look for Short-tailed Hawk, we had a chance to bird the adjacent woods. We parked the vehicle and as we asked a homeowner if they had seen a Barred Owl, one flew out of the tree above us and landed 60 feet away! The area was relatively birdy with resident Red-eyed Vireo, White-eyed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Carolina Wren, Tufted Titmouse, Northern Parula and beautiful Pileated Woodpeckers. We did eventually get a couple of unsatisfactory sightings of a Short-tailed Hawk at a great distance.

Far more cooperative was a family of inquisitive Florida Scrub Jays that were obviously use to being around humans. It is also always a great day when one sees the uncommon Red-headed Woodpecker. In the last 24 hours we had seen 5 woodpecker species Downy, Red-bellied, Red-cockaded, Pileated and Red-headed.

By the late afternoon we were in the Fort Lauderdale area, making an unsuccessful second attempt to look for a Smooth-billed Ani. We also stopped by Evergreen Cemetery which can be an excellent migrant trap. Chimney Swifts swirled about overhead and Cedar Waxwings landed in the taller trees. This was our first chance at migrant warblers and we found a small flock that included Magnolia, Black-and-White, Palm and Prairie Warbler, working their way through a couple of buttonwoods.

### **Day 4 / Miami and the Everglades**

With the tour designed to give us a little leeway should a Caribbean vagrant show up, we had the opportunity to head to Bill Baggs State Park, at the tip of Key Biscayne, for a LaSagra's Flycatcher that was banded the previous afternoon. Other birders had also come to look which always helps, but the birding was slow. Where was migration this spring? All we come find was a Northern Parula, Black-and-white and Worm-eating Warbler along with a summer resident Gray Kingbird.

It is always a wonderful feeling when we go after a target species and it obliges. Driving a neighborhood block a pair of Red-whiskered Bulbuls were spotted, and it was soon obvious that they were courting - following each other into bushes and trees, onto wires and finally away to another location. It has taken many years for Common Myna to officially make it onto the North America list. I'm not sure what took so long as they are commonly encountered in Homestead, especially around fast food and convenience stores! The ones we saw were hanging around the McDonalds, Denny's and Hess station that line "the gateway to the Keys".

There is little in the way of noticeable avian activity at this time of year, along the 38 miles stretch of endless sawgrass, cypress, hardwood hammocks, pinelands and mangroves that makes the Everglades unique. One has to stop at designation sites such as Paurotis Pond to view the raucous nesting colony of Great Egrets, Wood Storks and Roseate Spoonbills. As we watched them fly back and forth from the colony our attention was diverted to Eastern Kingbirds making sorties and a White-eyed Vireo foraging amongst the buttonwoods.

At the southern tip of the Everglades is the Flamingo marina which happens to be the best place to see basking American Crocodiles. The Florida Bay is shallow as it is, but at low tide a sand bar is viewable from the visitor's center breezeway. As Ospreys dove for fish, two Caspian Terns were amongst a dozen smaller Royal Tern, 50 Black Skimmers and Laughing Gulls on the sandbar. Brown Pelicans stood out and waders included Semipalmated Plover, Black-bellied Plover, Red Knot, Willet and Whimbrel.

Along the edge of the mangrove islands, Great Egrets and Great Blue Herons were patiently hunting as a Reddish Egret danced about. We also found our first Great White Heron.

### **Day 5 / The Keys**

We began the day in the hardwood hammocks and mangroves of the Upper Keys. Our search for a Mangrove Cuckoo seems to become tougher with each passing year. It has been another dry year and the canopy is mostly bare. This at least makes it easier to see singing Black-whiskered Vireo, who never seem to sit in one place. The migrant warbler count was especially low with only Cape May, Black-throated Blue and Ovenbird.

Black-necked Stilts and Least Terns were busy courting in a limestone tidal pond half way down the Keys where we also saw Reddish Egret and closer view of a Great White Heron. We took our picnic lunch along the bayshore in Marathon with a pair of Roseate Terns sitting on a wooden piling and a Spotted Sandpiper working its way through the wrack. Brown Pelicans loafed on boats and docks and the first of many Magnificent Frigatebirds soared overhead.

On an early afternoon drive along No Name Key we found a Key West Deer in the shade of a fruiting tree that was filled with a couple of Blackpolls, Redstarts, Indigo Bunting and Baltimore Oriole.

The well vegetated Indigenous Park shows how a tiny urban oasis can be a magnet for birds. On this day we had a sprinkling of warblers, Redstart, Black-throated Blue, Black-and-white, Common Yellowthroat, Worm-eating and Mangolia, Gray Kingbird, Bobolink, and the fruiting figs attracted White-crowned Pigeon. The gorgeous male Western Spindalis put in a brief appearance but unfortunately not all of us were in the right place at the right time.

The other spot that the spindalis had been reported at was Fort Zachary. A search around the bathrooms and along the berm only yielded new sightings of Wood Thrush, female Painted Bunting and Blackpoll.

## Day 6 / The Dry Tortugas

It was a smooth ride out aboard the Yankee Freedom II, aka the Yankee Cat, to the Dry Tortugas 70 miles west of Key West. A couple of quick moving rain showers dampened the start but there were a few Northern Gannets to keep us happy. With the winds continuing to whip out of the east at 20 plus knots the number of birds were few and far between. A jaeger species, likely Pomarine, flew across the bow a good distance away, circled a fishing boat and kept moving. It was not until we were well beyond Rebecca Shoals that we had our first Sooty Terns and Brown Noddy's, the two ubiquitous species nesting on Bush Key. There is small population of Masked Boobies that nest on the Tortugas, and it was nice to have our initial sighting fly across the bow.

The 2 1/4 hr journey was soon over and there was anticipation as to what birds would greet us on Garden Key. Since we only had 4 1/2 hrs on the island I thought it best to begin by concentrating on searching for that needle in a haystack, the Black Noddy. Yes, that Black Noddy, the only known one within North America! Positioning ourselves at the top of the fort by the lighthouse, a cloudy morning (as opposed to normally looking into the sun) made it far easier to see the birds. Brown Noddy's and Sooty Terns were on their nesting territories with young of the later more prevalent than the former. Working our way left to right, right to left and back again we looked for a smaller darker bird than the Brown Noddy, with a clean white cap, amongst the hundreds of Browns. Individual birds would come and go, others were busy preening, a group of the them would take off, others would replace them, it was a constant shuffle. Barb and I simultaneously got onto one bird that looked good, but with it facing away we wanted to be sure, then just like that it took off never to return to that spot. More scanning trying to make sure we could id every bird before moving on ensued. Then some half an hour later I locate a darker individual that looked like a good candidate. Its back was turned, but one could see how it was certainly far more slender than the Brown Noddy next to it. It moved its head and the white cap always seemed to stay 'on', never fading away. The thinner bill was noticeable. It then turned sideways as it preened and that clinched it for those that wanted further proof of its size and contrasting molting coverts. From the top of the fort we picked out a Brown Booby on the closest buoy marker.

We looked into the historical aspect of this nineteenth century Fort Jefferson as we weaved our way through the campground, the vicinity of the north coaling docks and parade grounds. There was a splash of color in the form of a few warblers, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Northern Parula, Blackpoll, a female Hooded, a handful of Palms and American Redstarts, the later giving us looks at the various plumages the sexes have. Indigo Buntings, Orchard Oriole and a couple of roving Sharp-shinned Hawks made up the remainder of the birds. In reality it was a rather small number of birds, and one of the poorest showings I have ever seen on the island. It was shame really, but our limited time was more than enough.

The return journey would be far different. The winds had picked up and we were now heading right into a 25 knot wind. We paused long enough to see the 50 or so Masked Boobies that were now nesting on Middle Key ( the first time in all the years that I have been coming to these islands) and then continued on our way. The hatches were buttoned down and most people opted to stay inside the cabin. It was a rough ride slamming into the waves many times. It took a lot longer to reach Rebecca Shoals but we definitely knew when we were there, as people began to head outside for fresh air! The ride took at least an additional half an hour and we glad to reach terra firma.

Back in Key West, luck stayed on our side as just after sunset an Antillean Nighthawk called and lifted off about a hundred yards from where we were positioned. It called three more times and headed deep over Key West.

### **Day 7 / Vagrants**

Late April is often a good time for Caribbean species to stray into Florida. In the preceding week Loggerhead Kingbird, Yellow-faced Grassquit and Western Spindalis had been found at Zachary Taylor State Park in Key West. The kingbird hadn't been sighted since; we had a better chance for another spindalis at Indigenous Park; and the grassquit would mean waiting patiently at the fountain for it to show up.

Before settling into a 'fountain watch' we checked the surrounding habitat and worked our way methodically through the vegetated berm. There had not been a front passing through the Keys in over a week, and by now we were getting used to the same warblers, Ovenbird, Palm, Common Yellowthroat, Redstart and Blackpoll.

After feeling confident that we had a good idea which birds were and weren't around we pick a vantage point at the fountain and sat. The good news was that we were sheltered from the searing sun. The buttonwoods swayed from side to side and the sea grape leaves quivered in the pleasant tropical breeze. Mockingbirds, Least Terns and Grackles provided the surrounding soundtrack as warblers including Black-throated blues and Black-and-whites trickling in for a drink. A Yellow-throated Warbler and Northern Waterthrush, though briefly seen were new for the trip, and of all things a House Finch an exceeding rare sight this far south.

For a couple of hours during the late morning, Carl and Jim opted to try for the Western Spindalis at Indigenous Park, and that paid off for them as it returned to the fig tree. Sadly after hours of waiting the grassquit failed to show at the time it was being seen daily at the fountain. Maybe it had moved on?

From the tip of the Florida Keys we headed back up the Overseas Highway. A lagoon on Boca Chica is a reliable spot to find Wilson's Plover and after a short walk we found a couple of them. Side by side comparison with Semipalmated Plover as well as White-rumped and Least Sandpiper was a good lesson in separating similar species. Short-billed Dowitchers, Dunlin and Reddish Egret were also seen here.

In the Upper Keys we did get to hear a couple of Mangrove Cuckoos late in the day - we are getting closer!

### **Day 8 & 9 / Elusive Specialties**

A stop along the mangrove lined road to the Upper Keys produced a very cooperative Cuban Yellow Warbler, the resident race of Yellow Warbler that resides in these mangrove islands. Our search for Mangrove Cuckoo continued to prove fruitless.

My good friend Larry Manfredi invited us to his house for a trio of cowbirds, Brown-headed, Bronzed and Shiny that were frequenting his feeders. There are not many locations where one could see all North American cowbirds in one location at the same time. Of note was the Bronzed Cowbirds doing their amazing helicopter hovering display. As an added bonus, our only Yellow-chevroned Parakeets of the trip flew over the neighborhood and showed up to feed.

As we returned to Miami we paused briefly to watch the Caribbean race of Cave Swallows flying under the turnpike overpass where they nest. In the well vegetated Matheson Hammock Park it was not long before we located a pair of Hill Mynahs as well as very noisy Chestnut-fronted Macaws. Both of these species favor nesting in abandoned Pileated Woodpecker holes.

The daunting task of finding one of Florida's last remaining Smooth-billed Anis was next. We had made numerous attempts anytime we were nearby Fort Lauderdale. So today it was back to the usual strategy. Drive the neighborhood blocks slowly, checking every possible tree, potential perch and open area, then park and walk. As I pulled in to park, Lee shouted "there it is". Indeed, sitting on a fence. Finally!

The following day was our last of the trip. We had to give the Mangrove Cuckoo one more crack on the last morning. As luck would have it, we picked the right spot! One flew across the road and perched for us. A second followed and chased it away, then two returned! After so many hours looking for it, we were finally rewarded with excellent views. It was a great way to end a wonderful trip and I look forward to the challenge of finding Florida's specialties when I return to this sub-tropical destination April 24 - May 3, 2010!