



## **SOUTH FLORIDA & DRY TORTUGAS - April 24 - May 3, 2010** **TRIP REPORT and photos by Adrian Binns**

### **2010 TRIP SUMMARY**

The long staying Red-footed Booby in Miami was one of many highlights of South Florida spring tour. A female Snail Kite quartering the sawgrass and finding two apple snails to feed on in quick succession is certainly a lasting memory. There are no shortages of exotics in this part of the country and while we encountered a good number of countable and non-countable ones, the displaying and mating Spot-breasted Orioles was a favorite of the group. Some species are becoming harder to find at this time of year but we could not have asked for better co-operation, or views for that matter, of Smooth-billed Ani, Short-tailed Hawk and Mangrove Cuckoo.

We encountered a pocket of 13 warbler species on Key Largo including Cape May and Magnolia that was very exciting. Upon our arrival in the Dry Tortugas we caught the tail end of a fall out that included Worm-eating, Chestnut-sided, Tennessee, 4 species of thrush and vireos, orioles and cuckoos. On our return journey back up the Keys the 3 Antillean Nighthawks at dusk, diving and calling over our heads, was a perfect ending to our trip.

Along with 8 mammals, 30 butterflies, 12 dragonflies, and 23 reptiles and amphibians, our nine day tour tallied a wonderful variety of 184 bird species, including 5 US endemics and 6 non-ABA countable exotics.

### **Day 1 / April 25 - Miami 'urban birding' and man-made Wetlands**

This may well be the first trip that I have lead that is an all male group! Jim, Dave and the boys from Canada, Art, Bill and Rick were all set to go at first light for a day of urban birding - Miami style!

With the exception of Hawaii, Florida ranks as the state with the highest number of introduced avian species. Between the Central American culture of keeping caged birds and hurricanes destroying everything from airport quarantine areas to pet stores and Parrot Jungle, caged birds escape, and in this sub-tropical climate most of them find a way to survive, some even thrive.

None are more evident than the parrots. While the United States only ever had one native parrot, the Carolina Parakeet, that is now long extinct, over 50 species of *psittacidae* now breed in Florida.

While the purists undoubtedly are rolling their eyes, birders tend to be divided into two camps - one happy to see anything that is free flying, and others that feel that exotic species belong in a different category to those birds that find their way to this continent on their own. Either way the

American Birding Association (ABA) allows us to count certain species, yet in this part of the country we still ask ourselves, "If we can count this species, why can't we count that species, when they are far more numerous?"

A good example of this is Yellow-chevroned Parakeet, originating from northern South America. There used to be a species called Canary-winged Parakeet, these being the small fast flying parrots that continuously chatter as they zip around Miami's residential neighborhoods. A decade or more ago they were split into White-winged and Yellow-chevroned. Though neither of these species can be found in the numbers that they were seen in the 1970's, on each trip I lead to South Florida, we inevitably come across far more Yellow-chevron's than White-wings. Today we had excellent looks at both birds, and could easily separate the identification features - eye ring, bill, wing and overall color.

From southern South America comes the Monk Parakeet which favors utility structures as a perfect place to place their large stick nests. Possibly just as common though not ABA countable is the Mitred Parakeet, which we encountered in a flock of about twenty.

House Sparrows, Starlings and Rock Pigeons aside, the British Empire is well represented in South Florida. Eurasian Collared Doves are ubiquitous. From Asia, in particular India, comes the Red-whiskered Bulbul and Common Mynah. As luck would have it a bulbul cooperated nicely, found where one would expect it to be in an urban setting - on a wire!

Another exotic passerine is the beautiful Spot-breasted Oriole which hails from Mexico. We did not have to go that far to see it, settling for a pair copulating on the campus of the University of Miami. While the numbers of bulbuls and orioles remain low, the mynah is flourishing around gas stations, fast food outlets and shopping strips, and has finally been added to the ABA list.

We spend an exorbitant amount of time looking for (wild) Muscovy Duck along the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, yet here in Florida, the Florida Records Committee, allows us to count these tame table ducks that waddle along at painfully slow speed at the first sight of a human approaching. For the record the ABA does not allow us to count this domestic variety seen in Florida or elsewhere for that matter.

Continuing up the eastern coast we stopped in at the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station, a small rehabilitation center that successfully released a Red-footed Booby several months back. It had been returning in the hopes of being fed but on this day it was undoubtedly feeding elsewhere. There was excellent close up looks at Brown Pelicans and Black-crowned Night-herons.

West Palm Beach has created two extraordinary waste water treatment facilities - a perfect model for all such facilities in the States. The older and smaller of the two is Wakodahatchee Wetlands with a half mile boardwalk that twists through stands of fireflag, pickerel rush, bulrush and islands of pond apples. This popular site is utilized by many people, and for most of them this is there introduce to nature - and what an introduction it is. It does not get any better than this. An Alligator eating a Red-bellied Turtle; Great Blue Herons mating; courting Least Terns with the male feeding a fish to the female; nesting Black-necked Stilts, Green Heron and Least Bittern; fluffy cream-colored Anhinga babies; Mottled Duck and chicks; Purple Gallinules within arms reach. Everyone was in awe of this magnificent wetland.

It's sister facility is the Green Cay Nature Center less than a mile away as the White Ibis flies. This has a boardwalk over a mile in length taking us over more open bodies of water and through several well vegetated hammock. Though there are many similar species between the two facilities, such as those mentioned above, along with Glossy Ibis, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Common Moorhen and Tri-colored Heron we also found many others that delighted us. Wood Storks slowly flapped over the center; Blue-winged Teal were busy upending themselves to feed on the wetland bottom while American Coot were happy to dip their heads in to pick up aquatic vegetation. Shorebirds were represented in small numbers with Lesser Yellowlegs, Least and Common Sandpipers. These spots are such a pleasure for wildlife enthusiasts as everything is so close, such as the Florida Soft-shelled Turtle that swam below us and the Sora feeding in the open mudflats.

Art spotted a waterthrush walking along the muddy edge of an island hammock which gave us a chance to work out difference between Louisiana and Northern. It was the latter. Several shrieking Limpkins alerted us to their presence and by the end of the walk we had seen our first of the day.

Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge on the other hand is a well established wetlands of thousands of acres adjoining the northeastern section of the Everglades National Park. We added a Solitary Sandpiper and a couple of singing Marsh Wrens. Of great interest was seeing a Glossy Ibis and Roseate Spoonbill feeding side by side each with their own distinctive feeding technique. The ibis probing its bill and spoonbill swinging its bill from side to side. We also had a distinctive lizard species the Northern Curlytail that was found around the small platform by the canal.

Owls are everyone favorite, and we ended a wonderful first day with a very cooperative pair of Burrowing Owls along the main road to Lantana.

## **Day 2 / April 26 - South Central Pinelands**

Dark skies and two hours of heavy rain accompanied us on our drive northwest into the South Central Florida Pinelands. As the rain let up four Swallow-tailed Kites flew across a short grass field and in front of us, heading off together for the morning hunt.

This region of central Florida is dotted with a multitude of lakes of all sizes and this have proved to be a haven for Osprey and Bald Eagles. The surrounding countryside is made up primarily of pastoral grazing fields with clusters of Cabbage Palms; Pinelands of Slash and Long-leaf with an understory of Saw Palmetto; Cypress swamps and Pine-Oak scrub. All very different habitat from what we had experienced in the Southern part of the State. *Buteo's* were represented with a single Red-tail and many Red-shouldered Hawks. Crested Caracara's which favor the one dry prairie were often encountered oddly enough not in the presence of the vultures. Though they do scavenge they are more closely related to falcons!

The Pinelands produced the most species as we worked endless stands of pines in search of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. Our first stop was very productive with the white-eyed race of Eastern Towhee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Pine Warbler, Brown-headed Nuthatch. There were many Bachman's Sparrow's calling, with most well concealed from our view until we were able to track one as it drop down to the palmetto then back up onto a pine branch. Eastern Bluebird

and the Osceola race of Wild Turkey were also added.

After several hours and now with the cloudless skies bright blue, we walked what we hoped would be the prime area and sure enough we got woodpeckers. A few Red-bellied, a pair of Downies and a Pileated, but no Red-cockaded! We split up, with Art and Rick heading off into uncharted territory while the rest of us backtracked towards the van. As luck would have it a courting pair made their way towards us and before we knew it Rick and Art came huffing and puffing to see their life bird!

There was a humorous incident when Dave cut short his visit to the outhouse upon finding a small three-and-a-half foot long Yellow Rat Snake curled up in the corner. We did well on reptiles today with Florida Box Turtle, Six-lined Racerunner, Florida Scrub Lizard added to the list. Other fauna included Zebra and Palamedes Swallowtail, Buckeye, Eastern Pondhawks, Red Saddlebags, Oak Toad and a handful of White-tailed Deer.

We took our picnic lunch along the picturesque Lake Kissimmee, though the one airboat temporarily made the serene setting anything but. A pair of Sandhill Cranes could not have been more obliging as they foraging amongst the Pickerel Rush. At Lake Jackson a Limpkin posed for the avian paparazzi while at Lake Marian, American White Pelican bounced up and down and were more obvious than the white caps the southerly winds were whipping up. Apple Snails form a great percentage of the diet of both Limpkins and Snail Kites. On the landing wall just above the water line hung many clustered of pink snail eggs while on the lakeside grasses a handful of eaten snail shells lay discarded.

I never expected Snail Kite to be so hard to find today, but the overnight and early morning rains may well have contributed to a slight temporary shift in their hunting grounds as the water levels were noticeably well above normal. But this is the joy of birding - one just never knows what to expect, other than to expect the uncertain. During the mid afternoon hours we positioned ourselves on the slightest of elevated sandy ridges to give us that extra advantage to scan what really amounts to a small window of opportunity, in the hopes of seeing a Short-tailed Hawk. Within a few minutes a dark morph was spotted hanging in the air, head facing down looking for any unsuspecting passerine. It then proceeded to put on one of the best shows I have ever witnessed here as it circled over head a few times for gliding off out of view.

Today's amorous adventures came curiosity of an Armadillo whose partner was willing, but in all honesty was more interested in foraging than fornication. The poor fellow made numerous attempts but somehow I do not think he was successful.

### **Day 3 / April 27 - Quality not Quantity**

Anyone that has ever done a 'Big Day' of birding will tell you the importance of getting your birds as quickly as possible and moving on to the next one. Not only do you have to know where to go one also has to have a great deal of luck along the way. Our luck began yesterday when we got the Short-tailed Hawk, which freed up this morning....to move onto the next one.

In no time at all Bill spotted a Florida Scrub Jay perched along a roadside fence post. Reversing the van we positioned ourselves opposite it and soon had a second bird join us. This was

obviously not the first time that these US endemics had had an audience. A few unsalted peanuts-in-a-shell as treats and we were on our way.

There were many miles to cover as well left the pinewoods and prairies of Central Florida and worked our way south to the Tamiami Trail, then eastwards into Miami, and finally well south into the Everglades.

Any bird with a plumage of black, white and red is stunning, but is there a smarter one than the Red-headed Woodpecker? While that may be debatable, but what was not this morning was the three Red-heads that put on a wonderful show for us, flying back and forth between snags drumming at every possible opportunity. We picked up a few more warblers with male Black-throated Blue and Cape May showing well.

Scanning the endless River of Grass, better known as the “Everglades”, Jim spotted a female Snail Kite. She slowly flew in towards us and quartered the sawgrass that paralleled the canal, that was in front of us Stalling, twisting and dropping down successfully, twice, to pick up an apple snail and fly into a small pond apple barely a hundred yards away.

On our first day we missed our first attempt at seeing the Red-footed Booby that has been hanging out around the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station. Early this afternoon following 40 minutes of scanning the inland waterway and mangrove islands for potential roosting sites, The booby flew onto its favorite perch atop of the main rehabilitation cage. For twenty minutes we watched it within close proximity as it decided whether it should stay or go. It did indeed leave and flew out over a multitude of docked yachts before landing on the calm open water.

Three down, one to go! We encountered heavy traffic as we worked our way down US 1 and through South Miami, but we had enough time to stop and look at the Caribbean race of Cave Swallow at the traditional nesting spot under the 216th Turnpike bridge! After checking into our motel we headed the 11 miles to the main entrance of the Everglades National Park. The agricultural fields along the way were full of migrant workers picking the produce that will undoubtedly be our supermarkets by weeks end. A short distance from the main is a road that leads to Royal Palm, the first stop on the long journey down the only road in the Everglades. It was here that we walked the Anhinga trail, dodging Alligators that ambled across the trail and others that opened their mouths wide as we walked by. The Smooth-billed Ani could be heard making a low barking chatter which gave us an indication of its location. Before we knew it it was perched up in full view. This is only one of two remaining accessible sites where one has a chance to see this rapidly vanishing species from Southern Florida - It remains common in the Caribbean.

Luck was certainly on our side. It made today a very special one and we celebrated with a delicious meal at the casual El Toro Taco where the owner, Hector, was proud to tell us that he would be closed for a couple of days as his restaurant was being used for an episode in a TV show.

## **Day 4 / April 28 - Tropical Hardwood Hammocks**

First up this morning was a stop for Cuban Golden Warbler, the resident race of Yellow Warbler that lives amongst the mangroves in the Upper Keys. One was soon heard and found flitting about the mangrove lined roadside.

Set between the John Pennekamo Coral Reef State Park and Crocodile Lake Wildlife Refuge on the upper third of Key Largo, the Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park and neighboring areas contain the largest remaining fragments of rockland tropical hardwood hammock in the continental United States. The small 'islands' are made up of a West Indian plant community that includes many plants such as Gumbo Limbo, Poisonwood, Stoppers and Stranger Fig that were introduced naturally as birds carried their seeds in their digestive tracts as they made their northbound migration.

As we walked the paved road that is lined with a low encroaching canopy, White-crowned Pigeons would be startled and take flight inevitably away from us while Ovenbirds and Northern Waterthrush could be seen walking amongst the leaf litter that was scattered ahead of us. There were probably more thrushes than the Veery and Gray-cheeked that we saw as they seem to disperse into the dense shrubs each time we made attempts to get close enough to see. The most common sound coming from the hardwoods was that of White-eyed Vireos and Red-bellied Woodpeckers along with a lone Black-whiskered Vireo pining away at various times.

Over the course of three hours we took our time working through the pockets of migrants that we kept running into. There was a group of male Scarlet Tanagers as well as an Eastern Wood Pewee but it was the warbler flocks that we sorted through that were most impressive. Black-throated Blues and American Redstarts were very common with dozens seen at head height over the course of the morning. There was a sprinkling of Blackpolls, Black-and-whites, Prairies, Cape Mays, Palms and Northern Parulas along with a single Common Yellowthroat, Magnolia and Worm-eating. That gave us a total of 13 species in a short period of time much to the delight of the group.

The icing on the cake came in the form of a vocal Mangrove Cuckoo that surprised us when it called after we unknowingly walked right past it. How many of this secretive species did we walk by on this morning before seeing this one? Once located it was very cooperative posing for us, even if it was against the sun, and devouring a juicy large yellow caterpillar.

## **Day 4 / April 28 - River of Grass Everglades**

It was the conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas in the 1940's that coined the phrase "River of Grass" to describe the unique Everglades ecosystem. The dominant visible feature is certainly the endless golden sawgrass that blankets this National Park, yet it is rain water that is critical to the survival of the Everglades.

For 38 miles the only road leads from the eastern entrance gate to the marine village of Flamingo on Florida Bay. The landscape is flat yet we pass through extensive stands of Pinelands and Cypress before finally reaching the prop-rooted mangrove-lined coast. At no time along the way were we ever higher than 4 feet above sea level!

We started in Flamingo at the southern point and worked our way back up the Everglades. The Flamingo area was devastated by the hurricanes that came through this part of the country in 2005, which included Katrina. The lodge and cabins are now gone, and Eco Pond was not spared. Though there was water in this water treatment basin it is still in a sad state. However, the birds certainly were taking advantage of the shallow water including two rarely encountered American Avocets, along with Black-necked Stilts, Little Blue Herons, half a dozen Stilt Sandpipers, Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers and a Dunlin.

At the marina, three salt water American Crocodiles effortlessly swam towards a small crowd of onlookers, their tails slowly wagging from side to side, propelling them forward. Several Osprey with fish in their talons flew to favored perches in the buttonwoods that lined the roads around the marina. It was amongst the Brown-headed Cowbird flocks, feeding mostly in the shade of these buttonwoods, that we found a female and a few male Shiny Cowbirds. There was a large flock of two dozen Indigo Buntings moving through the tops of these trees and Orchard Orioles magically appeared from a tree re-enforcing that migration was well under way.

A Roseate Spoonbill gliding over Paurotis Pond gave it a touch of color amongst a sea of white - this being the very vocal nesting egrets, White Ibis and Wood Storks.

At Mahogany Hammock, a half-mile boardwalk begins by crossing the "River of Grass" and loops through a subtropical tree island dominated by towering Mahogany's. The *wheep* calls of Great Crested Flycatchers were often heard as was the Red-shouldered Hawks high pitched *keeyur*. Other than anole's barking the only other sound we heard was the wingbeats of a White-crowned Pigeon as it exploded out of a dense shrub and landed at the top of a tree.

The Anhinga Trail allowed us to get close up views of alligators, the ani, and of course nesting Anhingas. The most fascinating sight was studying a Wood Stork as it swept its submerged bill from side to side in the murky waters feeling confident that the alligators sunny themselves inches away would not lunge at her. She feeds not by sight, but by touch, having the fastest known reflex action for a vertebrate species. Using her pink toes she stirs up the muddy water and extends an arcing wing to aid in shading any potential food source.

## **Day 5 / April 29 - The Keys**

As a complete contrast to the days that we have been having today was overcast with lower temperatures yet slightly more humid. By day's end we had driven the 'Overseas Highway' for 106 miles down the Keys and were hearing and watching an Antillean Nighthawk in Key West in a light drizzle.

We began in Key Largo at the Wild Bird Center where the small mangrove lined pool on the bay side was busy with a mixed group of waders frantically feeding. These included a pair of Roseate Spoonbills as well as many White Ibis, Great and Snowy Egrets.

On Grassy Key the edge of a large coral limestone pit held Black-bellied Plovers, Dunlin, Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers along with three Wilson's Plover amongst twenty well camouflaged Semipalmated Sandpipers. Both morphs of Reddish Egret could be seen chasing each other around in courtship as well as dancing with their wings out as they fed.

Art spotted a Wurdemann's Heron, this being the intermediate morph of Great Blue Heron or a hybrid of Great Blue and Great White, the white morph of Great Blue - confusing? Not really! The diminutive Key Deer was found browsing amongst the roadside vegetation on No Name Key and we had a second one cross the road in front of us.

The afternoon was spent in Key West where we paid a visit to three sites. The Key West Tropical Forest and Botanical Gardens, Indigenous Park and Fort Zachary Taylor State Park all with varying degrees of success. Red-eyed and Black-whiskered Vireos were everywhere at Indigenous. A flock of a dozen Bobolinks moved about the tall weedy vegetation at Zachary while Swainson's and Wood Thrushes worked the berm besides the moat. A male Rose-breasted Grosbeak was one of three seen between these locations. Eastern and Gray Kingbirds kept company as they made numerous sorties from the more open branches. There was splattering of warblers including Worm-eating, Hooded and Yellow while Baltimore Oriole, Blue Grosbeak, Summer Tanager and Ruby-throated Hummingbird were all new trip birds.

Key West is full of chickens - Red Junglefowls - though more closely related to Red Junglefowl than Frank Perdue's, there is a heated debate going on with what to do about this species!

There was a comical moment when a Green Heron was stalking the minnows that were being stirred up by the turtles in the pond at Indigenous. As the heron stretched his neck forward in anticipation of making a strike, a turtle broke the surface and stared at him, as if to say, "What do you think you are doing?"

Following Conch Fritters and Key Lime Pie for dinner at the Hogfish Bar and Grill we met up with Nancy, John and Bob to get the Antillean Nighthawk before heading to board the "Tiburón" for our journey to the Dry Tortugas.

## **Day 6 / April 30 - Dry Tortugas**

It certainly was an interesting start to our journey out of Key West to the Dry Tortugas. We had hardly gotten out of the harbor when we had to change course as the seas were too rough. The winds had picked up from the south and for the first half of the trip we were under overcast skies with the occasional spritz. Instead of heading out into the Gulf Stream we hugged the bay side, sailing inside the remaining keys that lie west of Key West. Consequently our journey was far more tolerable.

After a good night's sleep and a light breakfast most of us were on the upper level gently rolling from side to side as we watched numerous immature Northern Gannets landing near the boat. At Ellis Rock we picked up our first Sandwich and Royal Terns to go along with the many Least Terns that we passed leaving Key West. It was a great tern day as we encountered a feeding flock of eight Roseate Terns and came across a few more on Rebecca Tower. To my surprise we had a single Bridled Tern cross our bow close to East Key, which is the nearest I have ever seen them to the Dry Tortugas.

Brown Boobies have become a common sight in recent years to those that spend time watching these seas. They also test one's identification skills which when seen relatively close soon becomes less challenging. After a year nesting on Middle Key, the Masked Boobies have returned to raise their chicks on the small sand-coral island of Hospital Key. We slowed the boat

to a crawl and circled as close to the island as we could. Most were just standing but there was one individual that flew out to sea and dove in with lightening speed and precision to make a catch and return back to the colony.

After an eight hour journey we dropped anchor in the harbor on the southern side of Garden Key. Fort Jefferson and what remained of yesterday's fallout beckoned. We took the zodiac in for our first wet landing and marveled at the Magnificent Frigatebirds that hung above the fort's eastern side. The noise coming from the hundred thousand strong tern colony on Bush Key was not only loud enough to hear but pleasantly unobtrusive - music to our ears - it made for the perfect soundtrack to these magical seven islands.

It is always exciting to check out the campground and fort environs as soon as we set foot on Garden Key. Though I would estimate that ninety percent of yesterdays birds had taken full advantage of the overnight southerly winds and headed to points north, there was still myriad species for us find. One first warbler was a Worm-eating followed by a Chestnut-sided, both feeding feet away away from us and at times too close to focus our cameras! This was followed by a Tennessee and we knew that this afternoon it was all going to be good. American Redstarts were the most common with over half a dozen including young males with black splotches. A couple of Ovenbirds goose-stepped their way through the buttonwood leaf litter in the campground. Black-throated Blue, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Waterthrush, Black-and-white and Blackpoll all put in an appearance at the fountain in the parade grounds. Including a few Yellow Warblers there were 11 warbler species.

The fruiting Gumbo Limbo tree in the southwestern corner of the fort proved to exceedingly popular with the vireos - all three, Red-eyed, White-eyed and Black-whiskered repeatedly made forays to feed. Baltimore Orioles, Catbirds and a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak joined in. We found a nighthawk species roosting on a cross branch, which began the discussion as to whether it was a Common or Antillean - it would only be decided if we heard it call!

A few swallows remained, with those that still had energy, Northern Rough-wing and Barn, flying around the upper level of the fort. A nice surprise was seeing a lone Chimney Swift joining them. Sadly the Bank Swallows did not fair as well with a few unable to continue the long route from South America to the northern hemisphere.

Several thrush species showed well, mostly feeding on the lawn in the shade of Buttonwood trees. We followed a couple of Blue Grosbeaks and a dozen skittish Yellow-billed Cuckoo all of whom would never sit still long enough to see through the scope. Maybe it was the Merlin or immature Peregrine that had them on edge?

## **Day 7 / May 1 - Dry Tortugas**

Following breakfast we ventured to Loggerhead Key as the sun rose over Fort Jefferson. Dropping anchor on the lee side of this elongated coral island we took the zodiac onto the island dodging the coral reefs along the way. A Ghost Crab was the first to greet us followed by a bathing Cattle Egret that proceeded to act like a Reddish Egret as it left the water!

We walked our way all around the island on this lovely morning but sadly the strong southerly 15 to 20 knot winds had sent most of the birds northward. There were only a handful of

warblers, a Palm, Blackpoll, Yellow and a few Common Yellowthroat and American Redstart. Our only kingbird was a Gray. All the three Yellow-billed Cuckoos that we found were hunkered down and the two Peregrines and a Merlin, who prey heavily upon these birds, probably wondered where they all were.

By early afternoon we were back on Garden Key. We soon found that most of yesterday's species were still around, though there seemed to be fewer thrushes and warblers. The Yellow-billed Cuckoos were flittering about the buttonwoods as a Merlin kept a watchful eye on the situation. Ron and Katharine choose to go snorkeling for an hour, while those that choose to relax in the shade at the fountain were treated to an uncommon visitor to the island, a Warbling Vireo. We scanned the noddy colony for a Black Noddy but this year seemed to be one of the few years that one has not been located one. The campground was alive with Ovenbirds, American Redstarts, Worm-eating and Black-throated Blue Warbler.

We made several runs in the zodiac along Bush and Long Key, so that the whole group had a chance to witness the seabird colonies up close. The Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns would fly out from the low vegetation that covered Bush Key and drop down to the water level where they cruised slowly along and scooped up a drink of water. Rising up they would pause and shake any excess water off their feathers and resume their flight.

Dutch negotiated the coral beds and shallow water with precision encountering a pair of 8 foot Nurse Sharks in the process. Scores of Magnificent Frigatebirds hung in the air above their colony on Long Key. There was even a Brown Booby that was being chased by a frigatebird who hoped to harass the booby to the point of giving up its meal. A few young fluffy all white chicks could be seen standing on their exposed flimsy stick nests. Those on the second ride got to see a male in flight with his inflated red gular pouch.

Nancy, John and Art joined me for a walk around the moat at Fort Jefferson after dark. With our torches in hand, we spotlighted a wide variety of corals and sea creatures. The expected Keel-tailed Needlefish, Mangrove Snapper, Conchs, Upside-down and Mangrove Jellyfish, Sea Cucumbers, Sea and Long-spined Urchins were all seen in numbers along with a few Sea Anemone. What makes the moat walk most fascinating is that one never knows what else we might encounter, and on this evening for an hour there was plenty to keep us enthralled. A juvenile Cushion Sea Star, which is green color, lay on a concrete platform on the ocean side of the moat. Our first Caribbean Reef Squid was a small one of about 2 inches, which were in awe with, but two 6 inch ones, which are transparent with an unusual barred stripe down the body and flashing golden eyes. The Spiny Lobsters ranged in size up to 2 feet with two fighting over a territory! One of the two Brittle Stars that we saw was very cooperative and did not make a hasty retreat. There were several very thin Ribbon Worms that must have been over 2 feet in length. As for fish, a few small Barracuda took refuge in the moat amongst the eel grass while Beau Gregories hung out near the wall. The prize for prettiest certainly went to the French Angel.

## **Day 8 / May 2 - Dry Tortugas**

In the early hours of the morning the winds picked and what had begun as a calm night slowly became more rocky. There was another wonderful sunrise over the tern colony. Shortly after daybreak we took the zodiac into Garden Key for a final check of the fort. Art soon had a large

nightjar flying around the campsite but in spite of many eyes searching we were unable to find what was in all likelihood a Chuck-will's-widow. Those that checked the fountain and trees within the fort found that most of the birds that we had seen yesterday had not taken off during the night - in spite of favorable conditions. The Warbling Vireo was seen again and the only new bird was a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak that Bob found.

By 9AM we were back on board the "Tiburon", the zodiac had been tied up, and we began our return journey to the mainland. At Hospital Key we slowed down to view the Masked Boobies, many of whom were flying around the sand island. The marine forecast was spot on and the ride back was rough as we cut through steady 4 to 6 foot seas. There were a few Brown Boobies around the park boundary and little else for the first 3 and a half hours. As we cleared Rebecca Channel there was a period of 15 minutes during which we encountered a total of 5 Audubon Shearwaters crossing the bow of the boat along with a Bridled Tern. For Bob and John who are doing a "Big Year", the shearwater was number 514. Shortly after this the seas became too rough for us to be outside and most of us retired to rest inside.

Following 9 hours on the boat we disembarked at Stock Island, said our goodbyes to Ron, Katharine, Bob, John, Nancy and the wonderful crew, and began our road trip back up the keys. Looking for a good shorebird spot along the way we picked the eastern end of Ohio Key and were rewarded with a White-rumped Sandpipers amongst many Least and a few Semi-palmated. We reached Marathon in time to make a stop for dinner at Subway and then proceeded the short distance to the airport at dusk. Here, three Antillean Nighthawks put on an outstanding show, calling, displaying and flying over our heads. This bird made it ABA number 600 for Jim - congratulations. There was still an hour and a half of driving to go to get to Florida City for our last nights stay. We were in our rooms shortly after 10PM.

### **Day 9 / May 3 - Our Last Morning - Nothing but Exotics**

Our last morning was spent looking for any Caribbean strays that could have around the Miami area. We began at Matheson Hammock Park in the beautiful Coral Gables section with a walk through the West Indian hardwood trail, which was eerily quiet. Other than a Cardinal there was not one migrant! Once the trail opened up we came across a multitude of Red-bellied Woodpeckers checking out potential nesting sites along the rows of Royal Palms.

Upon hearing the tropical calls of distant Hill Mynah's we walked towards them. Jim located a pair of Red-masked Parakeets at a nest hole. Starlings soon showed up to claim the site, which led to the upset pair becoming very vocal as they flew around expressing their displeasure. Starlings are not the only ones vying for these older Pileated Woodpecker cavities, Hill Mynahs use them as well. All three species could be seen chasing each other around and eventually out of sight, with the outcome undetermined.

A Cooper's Hawk showed up in the area and this got another pair of Hill Mynah's all relied up as they perched on an open stalk.

We ended our trip on Key Biscayne beginning at Bill Baggs State Park where a Western Spindalis and LaSagra's Flycatcher had been seen over the course of the last month. We took a very pleasant along the bike path through the hardwoods and along the bay front from which one can see Stiltsville - seven homes that hover over the water, that originate back to the late

1930's. Once again there was very little around with the exception of a female American Redstart and a Black-whiskered Vireo. Any hope we had of hearing a LaSagra's was thwarted by a Cardinals doing a good imitation.

Several years ago we had seen a Western Spindalis at Crandon Park so we made one last attempt. In the end it was nothing but the exotics that have hung around the abandoned 'zoo'.....this is Miami after all!

Along with 8 mammals, 27 butterflies, 12 dragonflies, and 23 reptiles and amphibians, our nine day trip tallied a wonderful variety of 183 bird species including 6 non-ABA countable exotics.