



SOUTH FLORIDA - April 20-29, 2016

TRIP REPORT and PHOTOS By Adrian Binns

Day 1 - April 20: Miami Exotic

It was a quick start to the trip as we gathered the last of the group, Gary and Carol, from Miami airport early evening and headed to see White-winged Parakeets (*right*) at their roost site in Canary Island Palms. Several pairs were seen very well and one Yellow-chevroned Parakeet was amongst them allowing us to compare these two species, that were once considered to be one!



Day 2 - April 21: Exotics and Wetlands

We ventured north out of Miami towards Fort Lauderdale with a stop for obliging Monk Parakeets on wires and a Red-crowned Parrot inspection a Monk Parakeets stick nest. At John Lloyd State Park, in spite of the Thick-billed Vireo never showing itself, our first full day turned out to be packed with wonderful sightings. The beach held a pair of Piping Plovers that Lew spotted when they moved out from being well hidden in the wrack, while out at sea we observed a Gannet, Royal and Least Terns.

Owls are always a group favourite, and we did exceptionally well on this trip with Burrowing Owls, then two separate Eastern Screech-Owls and Barn Owls later in the trip. After the first of what would be almost daily stops at Publix supermarket to pick up lunch we explored the two wonderful West Palm Wetlands - Wakodahatchee and Green Cay.

The waders at Wakodahatchee were in the midst of raising young with raucous rookeries full of Wood Storks, Tri-colored Herons, Great Egrets, Anhingas and Double-crested Cormorants dotted about the various impoundments. Amongst the latter at least one Neotropic Cormorant had paired up with a Double-crested. Purple Gallinules stalked the fireflags, while their larger cousin the Purple Swamphen could be seen feeding a single large black chick. We watched a Green Heron go after a dragonfly. A few pairs of Mottled Ducks along



with a lingering pair of Blue-winged Teal paddled amongst the spatterdock. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were preening in the shade of pond apples trees while Black-necked Stilts were sitting on their mud nests a few inches above the water line. A single Roseate Spoonbill was resting on a mudflat that Least and a Spotted Sandpipers were patrolling. We found Green Cay to be far quieter, though surprisingly it was here that we saw our first Least Bittern (*left*). It was an exception view of it in flight followed by it working its way

through the bulrushes to the edge to hunt. Limpkin was heard and a Sora was seen preening.

We ended the day with marvelous looks at pairs of Nanday Parakeets (*right*) at their nest hole in a metal cross bar on a telephone pole and Spot-breasted Orioles perches atop a favourite nest tree.



Day 3 - April 22: Pinelands, Prairies and Wetlands



It was another beautiful start to the day with bright sunshine as we entered the pine woods at Dupuis. It was not long before we were surrounded by five Red-cockaded Woodpeckers around their nest hole. One of them frequently returning to peer in. Maybe they had young in there, but none of them brought food with them. It proved a little more difficult to locate a singing Bachman's Sparrow (*left*), but when we did we found a very cooperative bird that flew from back a forth from saw palmetto to short pines, posing for us. Pine Warblers, Great Crested Flycatchers and Carolina Wrens were added to the list in this habitat.

Heading north we encountered a Pileated Woodpecker flying across the road. Once in the prairie region of south central Florida we soon came across Eastern Meadowlarks as well as Crested Caracaras including one that we being harassed by a Northern Mockingbird. We all got out of the van to watch our first Swallow-tailed Kites gliding effortlessly over the top of a woodlot, when Pati questioned what a dark raptor was. A Short-tailed Hawk flying above the kites! Though the bird kept going higher and further away we were able to get the identification marks. We were extremely lucky since this species is far harder to find at this time of year when they are breeding in the open country.

With one of Florida's specialty raptors under our belts we proceed to Lake Kissimmee to look for Snail Kites. Five birds could be seen quartering the edge of the wetlands giving us more than satisfactory views through the scope. The surrounding short fields held pairs of Sandhill Cranes (*right*) with young and on the sod fields a tom Wild Turkey was courting four females. Nearby Lake Marion held American White Pelicans and our first look at a Limpkin. As we ventured west towards the central part of the state and the orange groves, we made a stop for a Barred Owl which proved to be a highlight as it perched in stately live oaks covered in Spanish moss. Our final stop in Avon Park produced Eastern Bluebirds and Palm Warblers just as the skies darkened and downpours began.



Day 4 - April 23: South-Central Florida to Florida City



Today we would make the long drive south leaving the orange groves of the sandy Avon Park-Sebring ridge to end the day south of Miami in Florida City. There would be stops along the way that proved to be very fruitful. The endemic Florida Scrub-Jay (*left*) was first up with a few easily located along the road that separated their scrub oak habitat. The Florida race of Eastern Towhee, with its golden eye, showed well along with Common Ground Dove, Eastern Kingbirds and Red-headed Woodpecker. A farm pond beside the road in Venus caught our attention with larger shorebirds. These being both yellowlegs and Short-billed Dowitchers.

The Six-mile sod fields had held a Pacific Golden Plover for a number of days prior to our arrival. Both Jim and Carol got to see it pre-trip. Unfortunately no plover was there on this day! A Common Nighthawk was perched on a telephone wire as we drove to see Barn Owls and both species of night-herons. The nighthawk was gone when we returned!



Early afternoon was not the best time of day to look for Smooth-billed Ani (*left*) but Loxahatchee NWR was the next logical destination on our schedule. Recent hurricanes have all but wiped out anis in Florida and after a year without seeing one, a pair was seen carrying nesting material in the wildlife refuge. For two hours in the heat of the day we worked the dike along the canal and adjacent impoundment where a biologist had told us he regularly saw them. Nothing!! There was a Limpkin as well as Curly-tailed Lizards, colourful Lubber Grasshoppers and an assortment of butterflies to keep us occupied. Walking back to the

van Carol spotted two birds on the edge of the shrubs and reeds that line the canal. Yes, Anis! Both birds were on a low perch before dropping down and working their way through the thick grass as they fed. Jim was delighted as this was his most sought-after bird!

It was onto Miami and a couple of ABA countable exotics. Egyptian Goose was easy as it stood guard along the edge of pond possibly waiting for a mate! Luck was with us again as a Red-whiskered Bulbul flew along side the van and everyone was able to see it hang around someone's house for a few minutes. Surprisingly this is often a hard bird to locate.

The Caribbean race of Cave Swallows were flying all around the turnpike bridges they nest under and at Cutler Wetlands we had an assortment of shorebirds including Solitary, Least and Semipalmated Sandpiper. As we pulled into the motel in Florida City a Common Myna was patrolling the McDonald's car park. Jim jumped out the van and headed into Mickey D's to celebrated his life Ani with a shake! (One of many!)

Day 5 - April 24: Down the Keys

The allure of possibly seeing two rare Caribbean strays had us heading straight down the Keys. Since Mangrove Cuckoo can be such a hard species to find we made a quick stop at sunrise on Key Largo. We heard one but it never showed. We quickly moved on to look for a female Zenaida Dove that had paired up with a Mourning Dove at Long Key State Park. Unfortunately it had been a few days since it was last seen and after giving it almost 2 hours we cut our loses. There was a good chance that it was now sitting tight on a nest. However, there was a Black-whiskered Vireo that was often heard calling and we were able to track it down in the car park as it fed in a gumbo limbo tree. American Redstart and a couple of Veery's were also seen here.

Just after noon we pulled into Zachary Taylor State Park at the very southern end of Key West. Six days earlier a Cuban Vireo (*right*) had been found here, his being a first record for North America. Many people had come from all across the country to view it. Our luck continued as the bird was feeding at the top of a tree some 10 feet above us. We watched it for half a hour in which time it sang twice. What a lovely sweet tropical call. After it left the tree we never were able to relocate it. Little did we know that that was the last time anyone saw it!



Though there were not great numbers of migrants, there was some diversity amongst the warblers with Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Parula, Palm, Yellow-rumped, Yellow, Black-and-white, Common Yellowthroat and Cape May's. Black-whiskered Vireo, Gray Kingbird, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were also seen. By comparison Indigenous Park was quiet with only a few warblers and a Swainson's Thrush. After stopping along the bustling Duval Street for ice cream, a return to Zachary Taylor

produced a handful of species visiting the the 'secret' drip behind the blacksmiths cabin, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Tennessee and a young male Painted Bunting.

Another major highlight occurred on the way to the marina to join our boat the 'Playmate' we encountered mating White-crowned Pigeons (*right*). We were in awe of the length of time that they engaged in copulation. Several minutes. Rather remarkable for an avian species!



At the marina we were joined by Don, Wayne, Joe and Sherry for the next leg of our trip, to the Dry Tortugas. Adam, one of the crew, gave us an orientation before we settled in for the first of three nights aboard the 'Playmate'.

Day 6 - April 25: Key West to the Dry Tortugas

By 7am we could smell the coffee and bacon and were soon having the first of Jenny's wonderful meals. We had set sail a few hours earlier and by the time we were finished breakfast we were in the Gulf Stream, a section of warmer water where we hoped to find a few sought-after pelagic species.



The morning turned out to be probably the best pelagic I have had in these waters, and to add to that, the waters were very calm! The sheer number (compared to previous years) of Audubon's Shearwaters including one amazing flock of two dozen, was wonderful to see. There would be a few Bridled Terns (*left*) in flight distinguished by their white tails and greyish back, but it was the 3 pairs that we found sitting on jetsam that delighted our group, especially since we were able to get close! There was a jaeger at a distance, possibly a Long-tailed, as it had a light coloured underside, lower head and chin, and was slender with a long thin tail. By comparison we had a Pomarine Jaeger later, which was much bulkier, and darker. On the red Tail's End buoy we had twenty Roseate Tern's, three-quarter of which were

1st year birds, while on the crumpled Tail's End there were two Sandwich Terns. A lone Brown Booby was spotted before we got to Hospital Key where over 80 Masked Boobies were standing on the small barren coral island, the only place they nest in North America.

After having lunch on board we slowly worked our way around the buoys that marked the entrance channel into Fort Jefferson on Garden Key to dock at 2pm. The anticipation is always high when we arrive at this truly remarkable 9-acre key in the middle of this tropical waters. One never knows what migrants we will find as we search the campground, parade grounds and surrounding sea grapes. A birder who arrived mid-morning on the day boat told us about a Chuck-will's-widow (*right*) by the north coaling docks. Though it was on an open branch there were branches in front of it, making it hard to pin-point. Seeing how we were struggling to get a good view, a camper told us he had one above his tent - in the complete open 6 feet over his tent! It was amazing to think that in spite of all the activity around it, this largest of our nightjars stayed motionless on the branch and was not perturbed by what was going on feet away. By comparison we had a Common Nighthawk perched inside the fort, this being much grayer, smaller and slender than the massive and bulky Chuck's.





There were good numbers of warblers that included American Redstart, Palm, Hooded, Blackpoll (*left*), Black-and-white, Ovenbird, Black-throated Green and Prairie. Certainly enough to keep us on our toes are we searched for reported Swainson's, Worm-eating and Prothonotary. A female Scarlet Tanager, Gray Catbird and Wood Thrush rounded out the passerines.

I would begin my search for a Black Noddy by scoping out over Bush Key in the hopes of finding what is likely only one bird amongst the thousands of Brown Noddy's that nest on the island! It took a little while but I did manage to find one. Jim was the only one with me at the time and he got to see it as I called everyone to come to the top of the fort. Unfortunately the bird flew, which we both did stay on until we lost it when it decided to land behind a wooden beam on the North Coaling Docks, just as people starting to arrive!! It was never seen again this afternoon! As a consolation there was a Brown Booby sitting on the end of the docks, something that is unusual.

Since the nearest US soil from Cuba is the Dry Tortugas, it is a location that sees a number of migrants, not just the avian kind! This afternoon there was a little commotion when a chug (their homemade rigged up boat) with 10 cubans ran aground on the reef leading away from the frigatebird colony on Long Key. They climbed out and walked onto dry land, the only prerequisite for citizenship! Welcome to the US!

Day 7 - April 26: The Dry Tortugas

After breakfast we took turns, four at a time, in the skiff for the short ride from where the 'Playmate' was anchored in the harbor to the small boat dock on Garden Key. A Peregrine was seen flying onto the tall radio tower with a Gray Catbird in its talons! Apparently earlier, one of the campers had seen another Peregrine with a Yellow-billed Cuckoo! The larger passerines are easy targets for this powerful raptor.



Thrushes were well represented in particular around the campground with a Veery, and several Swainson's and Gray-cheeked. There were at least 4 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, a good number for the Tortugas, as well as Indigo Buntings, a female Summer Tanager, and both Red-eyed and Black-whiskered Vireo (*left*), along with a Sharp-shinned Hawk that could be seen making quick flights through the parade ground. A nice assortment of swallows flew around the upper fort walls, these included a couple of Caves and Cliffs, a Rough-winged and Bank, and half a dozen Barns. With few insects for them to feed on, it was nice to see that by the following morning most had moved on.

We worked our way around the parade grounds checking all the sea grapes, buttonwoods and gumbo limbos. We would encounter 14 species of warblers - Parula, Hooded, Black-throated Blue, Common Yellowthroat, Magnolia, American Redstart, Blackpoll, Yellow, Cape May, Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, Prairie (*right*), Ovenbird with Palm's being the most numerous.



After we had lunch back on the 'Playmate', we returned to Garden Key, and with the light getting better as the afternoon went on I was back on Black Noddy watch! I kept an eye on the spot that I had seen it the day before and it was not long before it did return. This time it was not harassed by the Brown Noddies and everyone got to see it in the scope. It was smaller and darker with a thinner bill than its larger cousin. This was the first time that I had seen an adult, as in previous years those that had shown up that we had seen were immatures with a brighter cleaner more delineated white cap! Everyone was happy!

For the remainder of the afternoon we ran four skiff rides from Garden Key to the Magnificent Frigatebird (*right*) colony on Long Key, each lasting about half a hour. The relaxing ride took us past Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies as they flew low over the water in front of the skiff. Between all the trips we found Purple Martin, Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Black-bellied Plover, Least Sandpiper and an American Crocodile well camouflaged in green algae. At the frigatebird colony two males were sitting on nests and in full display, with blown-out red throat sacs for females to see as they wound their way over the narrow mangrove lined key. After viewing the wonderful show each party returned to the 'Playmate' for a shower, and to relax with sundowners on the deck before dinner.



Day 8 - April 27: The Dry Tortugas to Key West; The Keys



Our final morning in the Dry Tortugas had us return to Garden Key for an hour at sunrise. We scoured the fort, the campground, coaling docks and sea grapes in the hopes of finding something new. There were fewer numbers of swallows and warblers, a sign that birds had continued on their journey northwards, and nothing new had arrived overnight. The male Hooded Warbler (*left*) that had never left the sea grape beside the book store was still there entralling everyone that walked feet away from him.



By 8.15am we had pulled away from the dock and were on our way back out of the National Park slowing down at various markers and buoys. Iowa Rock held three frigatebirds, around the #2 red marker five Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphins rode the bow and at the park boundary marker Captain Joe slowed the boat down so that we could get a good look at two Brown Boobies (*left*). The conditions going back as we went into the wind were rougher to begin with, but by about half way into the 8-hour journey things had calmed down. Unfortunately returning back along the shorter more inshore route there would be far fewer birds. It was not until we got near Key West that we would see Least and Royal Terns as well as Osprey's. As we pulled into the marina a Wurdemann's Heron, a cross between a Great Blue and Great White, alighted along the mangroves.

After saying our goodbyes to those that had just joined us for the Tortugas the rest of us headed back up the Keys. There would be stops along the way for Great White Herons (*right*), the white morph of Reddish Egret and at Ohio Key the high tide had forced many shorebirds to roost in the lagoon. These were mainly Semipalmated Plovers and Sandpipers, Black-bellied Plovers, Short-billed Dowitchers and Willets.

Following a lovely dinner at the 7-Mile Grille in Marathon we made our way to the airport to position ourselves for Antillean Nighthawks taking to the air at dusk. We would not be disappointed with two birds calling and seen well given the fading light.



Day 9 - April 28: Everglades NP

At daybreak we made our third attempt at Mangrove Cuckoo (*right*) and were rewarded with an excellent view of a calling bird, in where else but the mangroves! We spent the remainder of the day in the Everglades National Park. Given that this time of year is nearing the end of the busy winter season, it was not surprising that we encountered few people along the 37 mile drive to Flamingo.

Our first stop was amongst the sawgrass for the endangered Cape Sable race of Seaside Sparrow. From the roadside we found a single bird a good distance away singing from the top of a grass stalk. It was a shame that we had to view it into the sun, though through the scope it was identifiable. A small pool of water beside the road attracted a nice variety of waders including Little Blue Heron, Wood Stork, Great and Snowy Egret and the showy Roseate Spoonbill. A shocking surprise was a calling King Rail in the middle of the afternoon when we returned by this same spot. Unfortunately I was the only one standing in a position to see it as it walked across a gap along a narrow channel.



We reached the marina at Flamingo by mid-morning and set about searching for the cowbird flock(s) that are often roaming about the short mowed grass. There would be a small group of about a dozen birds and amongst the Brown-headed, a pair of Shiny Cowbirds (*left*), our target species! We spent a fair bit of time with them following them as they went from the shade of one buttonwood to another. Though the males are easily separable, the females are more difficult since they much alike. The Shiny has a more pointed bill whereas the Brown-headed has a more conical bill. We could all see that. The

Shiny was a little darker with not as noticeable a light throat, that the Brown-headed shows. Though we did not come across any migrant warblers in the buttonwoods, we were able to find Pileated Woodpecker, Gray Kingbird, Great Crested Flycatcher and Ospreys, with Swallow-tailed Kites flying overhead.

Along the edge of Florida Bay the high tide meant shorebirds were close as they roosted in the wrack. It gave us a wonderful opportunity to compare Least, Semipalmated and Western Sandpiper all side by side. The larger species comprised of Eastern Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin and Black-bellied Plover. Our attention was drawn for a moment to a flotilla of 25 American White Pelicans coming in from the bay. As we returned to our van an Osprey with a fish alighted on a bare tree branch and was joined by an American Crow. We took photographs and listened in amazement as the crow purred, likely begging!

There would be a stop at Paurotis Pond to see the rookery which mainly comprised of visible Great Egrets, Wood Storks (*right*) and Roseate Spoonbills. Gary spotted two Least Bitterns flying along the reeds. Our visit of the Everglades ended at the visitors center where we enjoyed the interpretive exhibits. As we returned to Florida City, there was the obligatory stop of shakes at Robert is Here. A perfect way to end the afternoon!

Our after dinner excursion ended at dusk with a calling Common Nighthawk and very cooperative Eastern Screech Owl. It is amazing to realize that when they call softly, that they are not miles away, and in reality very close!



Day 10 - April 29: To Miami

It was our final morning and we had a subspecies and exotic to try and find. Both proved far harder than they should have been! The Cuban Golden Warbler (*right*) is a resident race of Yellow Warbler that is found in the mangroves that line the Upper Keys. Prairie Warblers and White-crowned Pigeons showed well as we waited. After hearing them tease us for a considerable time Lew spotted an immature which has a two-toned light and yellow colour. It was soon joined by an adult, probably one of its parents.



For the Hill Myna, a non-countable ABA species from Asia that was introduced many decades ago, we headed north into southern Miami to Matheson Hammock. We would find Orange-winged Parrots feeding in Royal Palms and an Eastern Screech Owl roosting in a cavity, but no myna! With a little time left before we had to get to the airport we tried the Kendall area, alas in vain. Regardless, the trip was a tremendous success, with all the specialties seen well as well as a first North American record, the Cuban Vireo. We finished with 184 species plus 8 non-countable ABA birds; 7 mammals; 15 reptiles; 4 amphibians; 23 butterflies and 9 dragonflies.

