



DRY TORTUGAS - TRIP REPORT April 17-20, 2018

By Adrian Binns

Day 1 / Tuesday April 17 - Key West; Key West Botanical Gardens; Zachary Taylor State Park

[This is the day that we meet some of our group in Key West, time-permitting enabling us to bird the area prior to boarding the boat]

An hours walk around Key West Botanical Gardens at midday, while not the most ideal time, did produce Palm, Cape May, Prothonotary Warbler, Common Yellowthroat and Northern Waterthrush, Summer and Scarlet Tanager, Orchard and Baltimore Oriole, Blue Grosbeak and Indigo Buntings and a Swainson's Thrush.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent at Zachary Taylor State Park working the hardwood hammock berm which was productive. While quantities of migrants were low, with the exception of Indigo Buntings, we did have 14 species of warbler. Adding to the ones seen earlier, were American Redstart, Magnolia, Hooded, Prairie, Bay-breasted, Tennessee, Black-and-white, Worm-eating, Northern Parula and Blackpoll. Several Yellow-billed Cuckoos were having no trouble finding caterpillars, while one unlucky one was caught by an immature dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk, picked off at the top of a bare branch! It flew a short distance and we enjoyed watching it perched, with its catch in its talons. That was not the only raptor, a Merlin terrorized the berm a few times. Black-whiskered Vireo, Dickcissel and Painted Bunting were seen well, while Wood Thrush and four Bobolink were added at the far wooded section of the park.

Following a quick dinner at the Hogfish Tavern we boarded the '*Playmate*', our home for the next 3 days, were given an orientation by Captain Rafael before settling in for the first of three nights.

Day 2 / Wednesday April 18 - Key West to The Dry Tortugas; Hospital Key, Garden Key, Bush Key, Long Key

The '*Playmate*' motors were started at 4.40am and shortly after we set sail on our way to the Dry Tortugas. A few Northern Gannets were first to be sighted after day break. We were surprised by how early on in the trip that we encountered a flock of Audubon's Shearwaters. Two hundred or more in a feeding frenzy working patches of small fish and shrimp. They were joined by a few Roseate Terns. This would be the first of several big flocks we saw over the course of the next two hours. This in turn attracted a few Pomarine Jaegers including one individual who endlessly harassed a shearwater until it got its reward. We estimated we saw well over a thousand shearwaters! It was by all accounts the very best shearwater show I've ever seen in these waters!

At the Tails End marker, scores of Roseate Terns were sitting only taking flight when a Magnificent Frigatebird made a move, before returning. Four Brown Boobies were also in attendance. Strangely enough what followed for almost two hours was nothing being seen, before reaching the Masked Boobies on Hospital Key. These were viewed from the boat, with the water depth only allowing us to get about 300 meters away. About 80 adults were clustered in the center of the small coral island, with a few taking off in flight.

We dropped anchor in the harbour at Fort Jefferson at 1.20pm and were soon birding Garden Key. A walk around the parade grounds revealed a handful of warblers, Hooded, Palm, Black-throated Green, Yellow-rumped, American Redstart, Prairie, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, Blackpoll and two beautiful Cape Mays. Peregrine and American Kestrel were our only raptors, while a Gray Kingbird, Bank Swallow showed well as did two Dickcissels drinking from the fountain.

We set up the scopes at the top of the fort opposite the North Coaling Docks and began to scan from left to right. The third birds in were two Bridled Terns sitting on a large wooden beam. Three rows of rusty pilings further on sat an immature Black Noddy, noticeably smaller in size than the ubiquitous Brown Noddies, blacker with worn coverts, and with a thinner bill. For Susan this was an eye-opening ABA 847th species! Congratulations!

By late afternoon we made three sets of dingy rides along Bush Key to Long Key. A number of Brown Pelicans were seen diving, a few even synchronized! A Short-billed Dowitcher, handful of Black-bellied Plovers and Ruddy Turnstones crossed in front of one of the rides heading to the shoreline. As expected many Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns put on a tremendous spectacle with thousands of the latter taking off at the same time and swarming around us with their '*wide-awake, wide-awake*' calls. Certainly one of the highlights. Along side Long Key the Magnificent Frigatebird colony was in full swing with as many as a dozen males seen with their red throats fully inflated and we could hear their bill-clacking as they made a serious attempt to woo a mate.

The dingy ride culminated back at the boat to enjoy a shower and relaxing drink before the sun went down behind Loggerhead Key. For dinner Jen cooked up a delicious Meatloaf, corn and mashed potato meal.

Day 3 / Thursday April 19 - Dry Tortugas: Garden Key; Bush Key; Long Key

Our morning foray onto Garden Key began in the general vicinity of the North Coaling Docks where a Lesser Yellowlegs was walking along the beach. The row of Sea Grapes kept us enthralled with Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Bobolink, Hooded and Cape May Warbler, Northern Parula and a White-eyed Vireo.

Once inside the Fort two Dickcissels were waiting patiently to come into the fountain. A walk around the parade ground revealed many of the same birds we saw yesterday, Palm and Prairie Warbler, American Redstart, Indigo Bunting, Gray Kingbird and Gray Catbird along with a very agitated Peregrine who was very vocal whenever a second one showed up! Black-throated Blue Warbler was a new find.

Around the campground two male Rose-breasted Grosbeak showed very well as did a confiding female Yellow-bellied Sapsucker on a palm tree. This is about as far south as one can expect to see them! The South Coaling Docks held a number of Brown Noddies as well as Royal and Sandwich Tern with two pairs of Bridled Terns seen in flight courting.

It was back to the boat for a scrumptious lunch and short break before returning to Garden Key. The afternoon walk around the fort produced a few new birds, namely Merlin, Black-necked Stilt, Black-whiskered Vireo and Northern Waterthrush. The Black Noddy was found once again sitting on one of the North Coaling Dock pilings near to yesterday spot. An adult Brown Booby was seen on the South Coaling Dock.

The wind had dropped since yesterday and our late afternoon dingy ride along Bush and Long Key gave us another chance to see the terns, noddies and frigatebirds up close. We got to witness the courtship display of a pair of Sooty Terns as they followed each other around, never more than a foot or two apart, twisting and turning, occasionally with slow beats but all the time synchronized, and when one was below the other, the lower one would have its head turned to look up! An extraordinary sight to witness.

For dinner Jen cooked up the most delicious chicken florentine followed by key lime pie! There wasn't anything left, it was that good!

Day 4 / Friday April 20 - Dry Tortugas to Key West; Garden Key; Tails End

An hours walk at 7.00am one last time around the fort soon had us finding the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker drilling away on the same palm tree. Palm Warbler numbers seemed to have increased. A juvenile Northern Mockingbird with its streaked flanks had us doing a double take since that aged bird is similar to a Bahama Mockingbird. A Sharp-shinned Hawk was new as were two Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Well, one in the end as we watched a Merlin fly out from a campground buttonwood with one in its talons! Hot in pursuit was the Peregrine that had been stationed on the radio tower for our whole visit. The outcome was never in doubt, the smaller falcon dropped the cuckoo and the Peregrine picked it out of the air, and returned to the tower for its breakfast! This was yet another amazing spectacle (following the shearwater show, the profusion of sooty terns as they exploded out of the colony surrounding our boat) that we witnessed on our trip.

We set sail from the fort at 8.30am with relatively calm seas and NNE 5mph wind we had an 7 hour journey ahead of us. Frigatebirds, four Brown Boobies and 40 Roseate Terns on the Tails End marker gave us our final show of the trip.

Species recorded in Key West on Day 1 / April 17

Glossy Ibis; Turkey Vulture; Broad-winged Hawk; Short-tailed Hawk; Eurasian Collared Dove; Common Ground Dove; Yellow-billed Cuckoo; Merlin; Gray Kingbird; Black-whiskered Vireo; Wood Thrush; Worm-eating Warbler; Prothonotary Warbler; Tennessee Warbler; Common Yellowthroat; Hooded Warbler; American Redstart; Cape May Warbler; Northern Parula; Magnolia Warbler; Bay-breasted Warbler; Blackpoll Warbler; Palm Warbler; Prairie Warbler; Blue Grosbeak; Indigo Bunting; Painted Bunting; Dickcissel; Orchard Oriole;

Species recorded Dry Tortugas Day 2-4 / April 18-20

Audubon's Shearwater; Magnificent Frigatebird; Masked Booby; Brown Booby; Northern Gannet; Double-crested Cormorant; Brown Pelican; Great Blue Heron; Great Egret; Snowy Egret; Cattle Egret; Green Heron; Sharp-shinned Hawk; Black-necked Stilt; Black-bellied Plover; Ruddy Turnstone; Short-billed Dowitcher; Spotted Sandpiper; Lesser Yellowlegs; Pomarine Jaeger; Laughing Gull; Brown Noddy; Black Noddy; Sooty Tern; Bridled Tern; Roseate Tern; Royal Tern; Sandwich (Cabot's) Tern; White-winged Dove; Mourning Dove; Yellow-billed Cuckoo; Ruby-throated Hummingbird; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; American Kestrel; Merlin; Peregrine Falcon; Gray Kingbird; White-eyed Vireo; Black-whiskered Vireo; Bank Swallow; Barn Swallow; Gray Catbird; Northern Mockingbird; Ovenbird; Northern Waterthrush; Black-and-white Warbler; Tennessee Warbler; Common Yellowthroat; Hooded Warbler; American Redstart; Cape May Warbler; Northern Parula; Blackpoll Warbler; Black-throated Blue Warbler; Palm Warbler; Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler; Prairie Warbler; Black-throated Green; Rose-breasted Grosbeak; Indigo Bunting; Dickcissel; Bobolink; Brown-headed Cowbird;

Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphin; Hawksbill Turtle;