

ORNITHOLIDAYS' Tour to USA - FLORIDA
Introduction to New World Birding

18 – 31 January 2009



Florida Scrub Jay

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Leader: Richard Coomber

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A Personal Diary

Sunday, 18 January

On a fine, but chilly January morning the 2009 Ornitholidays' party to Florida met up at Gatwick's South Terminal for the Virgin Atlantic flight to Orlando, not to visit Disneyland, but for winter sun and some of the avian delights the Sunshine State has to offer at this time of the year.

Our 747-400 backed from the gate at least 10 minutes ahead of schedule and with little or no delay took-off heading north-west to the coast of County Donegal before heading out over the blue yonder. We passed well south of Iceland, but just south of Greenland, before reaching the eastern seaboard of the North America north of Goose Bay, Labrador. Our route was then south-west over a frozen world towards the Great Lakes and across the Canadian border near Toronto into United States airspace. Could Tuesday's presidential inauguration explain why we flew so far inland and not down the east coast as usual?

We landed on schedule at Orlando shortly before sunset at 5.25 p.m. The formalities, whilst a little slow, were quite hassle-free and before long we were reunited with our bags. Then we had to transfer to the main terminal, where John Barker, who had come in earlier from Manchester, was waiting.

From the rental company we collected a Ford Clubwagon and were soon driving towards our hotel a few miles away. Once checked in and refreshed we went to dinner at a nearby friendly restaurant, after which we were more than ready for a good night's rest!

Monday, 19 January

Prolonged sunny periods after overnight rain, but with an increasing coastal breeze during the afternoon. 65°F.

We had breakfast at a nearby Denny's, where the staff were really friendly and provided good service. The birding from their car park wasn't bad either, with a restless flock of 80+ Cedar Waxwings being unsettled by the presence of a Sharp-shinned Hawk perched on top of a street lamp. Julia saw a House Finch, but it might have been an escapee.

Today's excursion was to Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, some 50 miles away on the Atlantic coast to the east. Much of the journey was on the Beeline Expressway, but there was no opportunity to stop for a number fleeting sights of such flybys as Bald Eagle, Wood Stork and Belted Kingfisher, all species we would be seeing later today or later on the tour. Nearing the coast at Titusville we stopped at a Subway for rolls freshly made to order.

On reaching the shore we could look south towards the Kennedy Space Centre at Cape Canaveral or north towards Merritt Island and the birds. We chose the latter and soon started seeing the first of many Ospreys, some fishing or carrying fish and others standing, or in one case incubating, on a nest. The first unusual bird was an adult Great Black-backed Gull resting on the remains of an old jetty next to a Royal Tern.

Heading north we didn't have to go far before reaching the causeway that led across to the wildlife refuge. On the way over we looked down on many birds - Double-crested Cormorants and Brown Pelicans and many crows, which we didn't fully appreciate as being Fish Crows at the time. Once across we stopped to look at a flock of Ring-billed Gulls resting in a car park and with them was a lone Black Skimmer, but it looked unwell and probably wouldn't last the winter.

Julia spotted two Bottle-nosed Dolphins swimming across the bay on the other side of the road. We went

over for a closer look and although everyone saw them, the views were relatively brief as their dorsal fins only appeared intermittently. Nevertheless there were other compensations that included two lone Common Loons and at least two Horned Grebes. Further on we passed two female Lesser Scaup. An information board and view point provided the excuse for another stop, but this time the area was dominated by Mangroves. Barbara found the first of the day's three Eastern Phoebes, Geoff found a male Northern Cardinal, whilst Julia discovered a small party of Yellow-rumped Warblers feeding on the verge.

Heading deeper into the refuge we started to see more and more egrets and herons - white and blue ones and sometimes a mixture, but it wasn't until we started to explore the Black Point Wildlife Drive that we began to get to grips with the variety of species. The whites during the day were Great Egret, Snowy Egret and immature Little Blue Heron. The blues were Great and adult Little Blue, whilst the mixture was Tricolored. Two others that didn't fit into the colour scheme were Reddish and Green!

Black Point Wildlife Drive meandered through an area of brackish and fresh water lagoons scattered amongst marshes, palms and pines. This year many seemed much drier than I recall from past visits. As a result we saw relatively few shorebirds - Killdeer, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitchers and Least Sandpipers. Where there was water there was often an abundance of wildfowl, coot and wading birds. The light was perfect giving superb views of confiding American Coot and Blue-winged Teal in a number of places and at one in particular at least a thousand coot were in a tight bunch in what might best be described as a bathing frenzy!

We stopped to eat our rolls at a small car park beneath the watchful gaze of a hopeful Northern Mockingbird as Turkey Vultures rocked their way across from one horizon to another. Once an immature Bald Eagle came over and throughout the day somewhere or other a ring-tailed Northern Harrier was always in view, but we did become a little blasé about them.

There was one lagoon in particular, soon after lunch, that almost gave us avian indigestion - so many birds of so many species. We had been seeing White Ibis on and off through the morning, but Julia noticed that amongst a group of egrets was a white goose - it was either a rare Snow Goose or its smaller and even rarer relative from the western United States - Ross's Goose. We didn't want to talk ourselves into optimistically identifying it as a Ross's, but it was only a little larger than the ibis and the head was round and the bill looked neat. The conclusion was reached only a minute before Geoff noticed two immature Snow Geese walk into view and feed alongside our Ross's - no problem now! I must admit that the Florida Rare Bird Alert had been reporting these three for the last few days.

Sometimes bird names can cause confusion. I had thought that Ross's Goose and Ross's Gull were named after the same Ross, but it is not the case. Bernard Rogan Ross was a trader for the Hudson's Bay Company and the goose was named after him by Cassin in 1861, although the species was described, but not collected some 90 years earlier. Ross's Gull was named after the British naval officer, James Clark Ross, who in 1818 was a midshipman on an expedition to search for the North-west Passage. Also on board was Edward Sabine and it was on that voyage that the two Arctic gulls were discovered. James Clark Ross rose through the ranks and went on to command the *Erebus* and *Terror* Antarctic expedition in 1839 that went further south than any previous expedition to Antarctica and discovered the Ross Sea, Ross Ice-shelf and Mount Erebus. (See *Biographies for Birdwatchers* by Richard & Barbara Mearns (1988) and published by Academic Press for more details).

Across the rest of the lagoon were thousands of duck, some familiar like Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler and Gadwall, others less so like Green-winged Teal and Mottled Duck - a local Mallard variant. What made many birds take to the air in panic we never knew, a passing raptor perhaps, but from amongst the wheeling masses came a dozen or so beautiful rose-pink Roseate Spoonbills which we were to watch at close range as they fed near the road later. In the same part of the lagoon as the feeding spoonbills was a flock of American Avocets in winter plumage, so they looked grey, black and white and without the pale chestnut heads the species has in breeding plumage.

Some public loos further on were well-patronised and while they waited Phyl found a male Common Yellowthroat, but by the time others arrived it had disappeared. Surprisingly, a brief view of a Sora crossing a gap, while we waited for the yellowthroat to reappear, was the only rail of the tour, reflecting perhaps the

changed habitat at regular sites further south after the hurricanes of recent years. Nearby a Green Heron was far more confiding. The rest of the drive produced our first Common Moorhens, the same species as at home, and some Great and Snowy Egrets preening by a shallow lagoon in the late afternoon sunshine.

Before heading back to the causeway we paid a brief visit to the Manatee Viewing Platform, but there were no West Indian Manatees today, just Black and Turkey Vultures and Brown Pelicans flying over and several small flocks of Cedar Waxwings flying to roost. Amongst the gulls near the causeway back to the mainland we found one Ring-billed Gull with a huge yellow wing tag and we were able to get some pictures of the Black Skimmer that was still present.

We seemed to get back to Orlando quicker than coming out this morning, but because of other traffic we were unable to stop to see the Nine-banded Armadillo and White-tailed Deer we passed en route to the hotel.

Having been quite happy with our breakfast at Denny's, we returned there for dinner this evening.

Tuesday, 20 January

Virtually cloudless until the late afternoon, when became overcast. 46°F, but much colder with the wind-chill factor.

Today the wind of change blew across America. In Washington it was the Inauguration of Barak Obama as the 44th President of the United States, but for us in Florida it was a bitterly cold strong north-westerly that brought the temperature down from yesterday's pleasant 70°F to today's to what was supposed to be 46°F, but which was actually much lower with the wind-chill factor.

After breakfast we loaded the minibus and headed south to Kissimmee, where along the Lakefront Park we came across the first of the day's many Sandhill Cranes, the endemic non-migratory Florida race. How strange to see them striding across front lawns and searching for food beneath Live Oaks draped with Spanish Moss. Along the lakeshore were feral Muscovy Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes and American Coot. Julia briefly saw a River Otter on the edge of a patch of emergent vegetation, but it disappeared, presumably into the weeds and bushes judging by the number of Boat-tailed Grackles that suddenly erupted from cover. An elderly gentleman feeding the grackles also attracted Ring-billed Gulls and White Ibis, but he had not seen the Monk Parakeets, that used to frequent the area, for some time.

Our next birding stop was to the east of St. Cloud, where beyond the water treatment area on the shore of East Lake Tohopekaliga (called Lake Toho locally) we watched a pair of immature Bald Eagles attempting talon grappling. Soon afterwards an adult landed on top of a utility pole beside us! Fortunately we were able to reposition and were treated to Rolls Royce views before it flew off. Driving eastwards we soon came across a couple of immature Snail Kites. We watched the first catch a snail and then had telescope views as it tried to extract the body from its shell. The second was beating up and down the margins of the lake a little further on giving great views, which we also had of the family party of three Sandhill Cranes feeding just beyond the edge of the car park.

Continuing south the commonest small passerines were Eastern Bluebird and Palm Warblers and although we were passing cattle country only one Eastern Meadowlark was seen. Several miles to the south we took a dirt road towards Lake Kissimmee. The wind was blowing the sandy topsoil from bare fields as Loggerhead Shrikes clung to the wire fences beside the road. Where the indigenous woodland hadn't been turned to farmland we watched a long-tailed Fox Squirrel running from tree to tree and stump to stump. Our first Wild Turkeys were nearby, but somewhat distant. Eventually we found a better position from which we could see the eight birds running away towards woodland beyond a field of cattle.

Lunch was way overdue by the time we reached a picnic area on the lake shore, where the bitter wind was blowing straight across the lake towards us. However, there were birds to be seen, lots of them, with pride of place going to six stately Whooping Cranes feeding with 30+ Sandhills on the edge of woodland three or four hundred yards away. Unfortunately they came no closer, but thanks to the scopes we still had good views. Food must have been put out for livestock, for with the cranes were huge numbers of Brown-headed Cowbirds and dozens of Glossy Ibis.

A Loggerhead Shrike gave great views in the trees and on the fences near the picnic area. Also seen along the shores of the lake were Bald Eagles and at least one Northern Harrier. On the edge of a boating area Forster's Terns sat on piles, whilst amongst a large flock of Ring-billed Gulls resting in a field nearby we found two Black Skimmers and an American Herring Gull. A White Ibis was robbed by a Great Egret of the Southern Leopard Frog it had just caught. The egret took it to a pool to be washed, but the lucky frog managed to escape and got away unharmed.

We returned to the tarmac road, where at the junction we watched a mating pair of Red-shouldered Hawks. Two more parties of Wild Turkeys fed in fields near the road but both were rather wary. As we stopped they headed for adjacent woodland suggesting they associated man and vehicles with hunting. It took a while to come across our first Northern Caracara, which we were also able to scope.

Our route took us through places with such unlikely names as Yeehaw Junction and Fort Drum. By the time we turned westwards gathering clouds showed the best of the day was over. The countryside was drier looking more like prairie, Northern Harriers were seen over the fields and we passed two more Northern Caracaras, one of which gave us excellent views. Both species were to be expected, but an adult Snail Kite along a small roadside drainage ditch certainly wasn't! That was the day's last good bird, for we searched fruitlessly for the Burrowing Owls near Lorida.

Wednesday, 21 January

Bitterly cold and cloudless. Warmer out of the wind and later in the day. 33°F rising to 52°F.

After a buffet breakfast at the hotel we began birding on the sandy shore of the lake behind the building. The Killdeer and Least Sandpipers were joined after a while by a Spotted Sandpiper. Amongst a host of Boat-tailed Grackles we found a number of Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds, whilst Phyl managed to photograph a House Wren before it disappeared into the rushes. Roy had expressed a desire to see woodpeckers and he began the day with a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker on a palm trunk and then a female Red-bellied Woodpecker nearby. Julia who had missed the previous Wood Storks had her wish granted as well! Before we left Sebring this morning we must have seen at least half a dozen Bald Eagles, including two adults sitting side-by-side near the top of a bare tree.

Birding began in earnest at Highland Hammock State Park, where we spent the morning and even stayed to have lunch in the small café. It was the perfect place on a day like today for being in woodland we were sheltered and wherever there was sunshine it was warmer. As we drove in from the entrance gate we had stunning views of a very confiding Red-shouldered Hawk, that was so unafraid that it swooped down to take a small grey toad from the leaf litter only feet in front of those photographing it!

We stopped as we drove the main loop road and found a number of new species including American Robin, Gray Catbird, Yellow-throated Warbler and a Downy Woodpecker. The robins and catbirds were feeding on the berries of a small bush near the road.

At the far end of the loop a boardwalk led into flooded Bald Cypress woodland. It should have taken us 20 minutes, but it took us more like an hour and a half. The trail meandered amongst cypress trees, whose buttress roots grew from shallow pools, before our route crossed a slow moving river and back. To begin with there were few birds, but on nearing the river we found a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker taking berries from a small tree and then it was joined briefly by a Hermit Thrush. Along the river Anhinga and a couple of White Ibis were seen.

As we recrossed the river we started to see small birds feeding hungrily in the canopy and amongst the trunks and roots of the trees that grew at the waters edge. It was a perfect spot, for being surrounded by bald cypress trees we were out of the wind and had warm sunshine on our backs. The commonest species was Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, with a number of wood-warblers and vireos amongst them. Black-and-white Warblers were a treat, delicately creeping around the gnarled cypress trunks. Prairie and Pine Warblers were newcomers along with two species of vireo – Blue-gray, formerly part of the Solitary Vireo complex and Yellow-throated, which is a rare wintering species in the southern United States. On a partly submerged log in the shade a Northern Waterthrush teetered, almost Spotted Sandpiper-like, as it searched for insects. A Carolina Wren showed well and as we walked back to the minibus, one sang well too.

One of the features of Highland Hammock is its café and it wasn't long before we were inside around a large table by the fire tucking into bowls of soup or into burgers - we'd earned them!

Red-cockaded Woodpecker is one of the local birds that is becoming increasingly hard to find nowadays and one that Geoff and Margaret had missed on their previous trip to this part of the world. To the north of Sebring the bird is still found at Avon Park Air Force, where there is limited access if the range is not in use, so we headed over there only to discover that the distant smoke we had seen as we had approached was the range in use! However, it wasn't all in vain for we saw another small party of Wild Turkeys, another Prairie Warbler and had a photo shoot around a Nine-banded Armadillo as it fed along the verge before it disappeared into the woods beyond the fence.

A cross-country route to Lorida took us through a vast area of orange groves for which the area is well known, but with all monocultures it was relatively birdless and it wasn't until we reached the ranching country beyond we saw any birds. At a roadside pool fed Glossy Ibis and we also saw Song Sparrows. Further on in the grassy fields we had good views of Eastern Meadowlarks, but again we drew a blank when we reached Lorida and started looking for the Burrowing Owls. There was time to explore beyond Lorida and that produced our first male Northern Harrier and excellent views of a Northern Caracara that perched obligingly on a roadside post.

We went for dinner earlier this evening at the Sebring Diner, a good choice, and caught up with the checklist back at the hotel afterwards.

Thursday, 22 January

Overnight frost. Cloudless throughout the day with little or no wind. 28°F rising to low 50°F.

I never expected my first chore after breakfast today would be to scrape the ice off the minibus's windows with my plastic room 'key', but it was! Our eight o'clock departure was too early for Subways, so a visit to a nearby supermarket provided us with supplies for today's picnic. Then it was south through Lake Placid (stamps from the post office there) and on to the Archbold Research Centre, where amongst other things they study the endangered Florida Scrub-Jay.

We were still some way from the centre when the first small party of jays appeared and with a bit of 'pishing' they were encouraged to come up onto the tops of bushes to show themselves to best advantage in the sunshine; views that were appreciated by watchers and photographers alike.

Once checked in as day visitors at the Centre we began birding. More scrub-jays and their Blue Jay cousins were enjoyed. Eastern Towhees were an addition to the list - several were seen during the morning and others heard scratching for food in deep cover. Another new bird was White-eyed Vireo, a species that from a distance bore more than a passing resemblance to one of the wood-warblers that were actively feeding in the trees as well.

Before lunch we walked the marked nature trail, where the various shrubs and trees were signed along the path. Unfortunately birds were at a premium, although those seen were goodies. Two or three American Goldfinches in non-breeding plumage fed in trees at the beginning of the trail. There were one or two Downy and several Red-bellied Woodpeckers around including one of the latter tucking into an orange still growing on a tree! Away from the centre Geoff spotted a Cooper's Hawk perched in a bare tree and Julia found a Brown Thrasher, which was only seen by a handful of us as it disappeared into thick cover, unlike the hawk that provided us with telescope views.

By the time we returned to the centre the vultures were becoming active and cruising around overhead. A Ruby-crowned Kinglet gave everyone good views, making up for the poor ones that some of us had yesterday. A lone Savannah Sparrow fed outside the centre's office, where we were able to buy postcards to go with the stamps.

After lunch we drove across to an area formerly know as Venus Flatwoods in the hope of finding Red-headed Woodpecker and Brown-headed Nuthatch, two species that we might have found during the morning,

but had not. Unfortunately we didn't see them in the afternoon either, so we returned towards Lake Placid and headed west to Arcadia and then south-west to Myakka River State Park. On the way we saw two Northern Caracaras, a male Northern Harrier and several family parties of Sandhill Cranes.

We arrived at Myakka River State Park and drove to the first river bridge, where amongst a party of Least Sandpipers we found two Western Sandpipers. As we arrived a Raccoon was just leaving the water's-edge after a drink. Geoff spotted a distant group of Hooded Mergansers resting amongst waterlily pads. We walked through a stand of palms to view some shorebirds on a shallow lagoon. Initially we found Short-billed Dowitchers, a few Lesser Yellowlegs and at least one Greater Yellowlegs. The Greater Yellowlegs was with two Lessers and a fourth shorebird, but they all flew just as I was getting the scope on to them. Was the fourth bird the vagrant Ruff that had been around for the last few weeks and seen just before we arrived by the American birders we met as we walked the path? The yellowlegs just crossed the lagoon, but sadly the other bird disappeared around the bend. Sod's Law states that the bird you think might be something unusual is the one that disappears completely.....we'll never know! By the time we walked back to the minibus a smart Black-crowned Night-heron was fishing below the bridge.

Driving on we saw a number of distant Feral Hogs in a broad expanse of dry rank grass. Some were quite large animals and as we drove on we came across several other groups. Over the following days we discovered that the booming feral population was becoming an increasing problem in conservation areas where they find refuge from encroaching development in this part of Florida. We had hoped for Limpkin when we reached a huge lake, but initially the only new bird was Grey (or Black-bellied) Plover along the muddy shore. It was a lovely evening, still waters and reflections, but with the sun dipping to the horizon we had to leave. Passing close to a small marina, as we left the area, I noticed a Limpkin bathing and preening just below us. It was a pity the light wasn't better, as the views were very good and visiting the park was completely justified at a stroke. On the way out we passed White-tailed Deer.

We reached our hotel in Fort Myers at 7.15 p.m. Our room keys were ready, so all we had to do was get the bags to the rooms, freshen up and go out to dinner across the road at the Alehouse, a bustling hostelry, where the food was good.

Friday, 23 January

Cloudless and warmer - reaching 72°F!

After breakfast we headed for the Gulf Coast and began birding at Bunche Beach, where in a shallow lagoon an adult Reddish Egret fed alongside a Snowy Egret and a Little Blue Heron. The light was perfect and the entertainment first class. Along the beach we found two Piping Plover, a distant American Oystercatcher and some Semipalmated Plover. The commonest gull was Laughing and distant terns were Royal with single Forster's and Sandwich Terns.

From there we crossed over to Sanibel Island - the causeway has now been spruced up and no longer appears to offer the same birding opportunities of old. Our first stop on the island was at the southern-most end at Lighthouse Point. Sanibel is one of America's shelling hotspots, not artillery, but shells of the mollusc kind washed up from the Gulf of Mexico. It has always been a popular past-time with the snowbirds down for the winter from the northern states, but we weren't quite prepared for the hundreds of people out walking along the beach on a lovely warm January morning. Almost oblivious to the human intruders were the Sanderling, Grey Plover and a lone Willet that fed along the water's-edge. It was terrific seeing these species showing no fear of our presence.

Having walked north several hundred yards we realised that we weren't going to see any new birds. Offshore, and in particular between Lighthouse Point and the mainland, were 10 or so Common Loons. Near the fishing jetty a male Osprey perched on a bare branch as nearby his mate sat on their nest incubating. At the jetty itself an adult Snowy Egret with full plumes was one of several that waited patiently as a fisherman cleaned his catch and appreciated a few handouts as much as we appreciated some wonderful photographic opportunities of such a beautiful bird. As we walked back to the car we saw one or two Yellow-rumped Warblers and rather worn Gulf Fritillary.

The island was getting busier so we drove north stopping at Jerry's to buy our picnic lunch which was

enjoyed in the warm sunshine on the decking outside the store. There the first House Sparrows of the tour were found around the cages of some parrots and macaws.

Trying to park and get onto the beaches is a pain nowadays, but we managed to take the only space remaining in the small carpark at Blind Pass Bridge where a channel used to divide Sanibel from neighbouring Captiva. Sadly someone has decided the two islands should become one and the channel has been filled with sand in a major civil engineering project. On reaching the beach we were treated to really good views of Laughing Gulls, Royal and Sandwich Terns and a Willet, but precious little else, so we headed back along the island, stopping in the middle when somehow I spotted a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers as we drove towards a small mall. Being able to park we were treated to some superb views of what is probably North America's largest woodpecker. Probably, for although the larger and supposedly extinct Ivory-billed has been claimed in recent years, there has been no substantiated proof.

On our return to the mainland we headed north before crossing the Orange River to Cape Coral. A few blocks further on we found ourselves at a ball park. Monk Parakeets were feeding on the ground and taking nesting material to the tops of the floodlight poles, where the nests were being constructed amongst the wires and cables of the lights.

Today Burrowing Owl was a target species again and thankfully this time we were successful, finding them on the verges of the roads around the ball park and in a number of places nearby. It was all made easier as many nesting burrows were marked or protected by a low rope fence. In the end we saw five or six birds including a delightful pair close to the road. In the course of our explorations we discovered a large flock of Fish Crows, confirming the retrospective i.d. of the flock seen along the causeway to Merritt Island at the beginning of the tour.

Philip navigated us back to the hotel and an hour later we returned to the Alehouse for dinner, but unfortunately we had a long wait for tables tonight and the service was slower. It was Friday night after all.

Saturday, 24 January

Another warm and sunny day. Some thin cloud late afternoon. 70°+F

We left the hotel after breakfast and headed back towards Sanibel, passing two ponds with dark Muscovy Ducks soon after leaving Colonial Boulevard to join McGregor. As we crossed the causeway we pulled over onto one of the intermediate islands to watch fishing Bottle-nosed Dolphins that were a few hundred yards offshore.

J 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge was the main focus of our attentions today, starting with a morning of leisurely birding as we, and a host of other people, made our way slowly around the five mile one-way drive. The tide was low - ideal for the host of wading birds - herons, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills and a few Wood Storks. The light was perfect for watching, viewing and photography. There were Ospreys everywhere, some catching fish in the lagoons where we watched some Racoons. that had emerged from the surrounding mangroves to search for crabs out on the mud, which provided feeding in places for many shorebirds. Dunlin were new, but greatly out-numbered by Willet, Least Sandpiper and Semipalmated Plover. Amongst them I found a lone Stilt Sandpiper, which according to staff at the visitor centre is a rare bird here during the winter months. Most of us had good telescope views, but just before the last had a look a major panic took place with everything taking to the air and eventually settling much further away. Relocating the Stilt Sandpiper was a hopeless task.

There were a few other things of note - Mangrove Water Snake resting in the stumps of a Red Mangrove, Tree Crabs, several Brown Anoles (lizards) and two butterflies - Gulf Fritillary and Soldier, the latter being a Monarch mimic.

It was almost lunchtime by the time we completed the drive, so we drove into the middle of the island and raided the salad bar at Jerry's. Once again we used the peaceful tables and chairs on the decking outside the store.

During the morning a visiting birder from Connecticut suggested we should visit the Gulf shore beach from

the end of Algiers Lane off Casa Ybel Road, so that's where we started after lunch. There were many fewer people than we encountered yesterday at Lighthouse Point and many more birds - Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Grey Plover, Willet, our first Red Knot, Royal, Sandwich and Forster's Terns. Geoff spotted an immature Bald Eagle circling offshore.

Afterwards we returned to Ding Darling and called in at the visitor centre to buy post cards from the limited choice. Then we did the wildlife drive again. Nothing startling, but a Spotted Sandpiper was the first of the day and very confiding. In several places the Roseate Spoonbills were superb. Elsewhere we had good views of Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Snowy Egrets and White Ibis. As we watched the latter from an observation platform and the setting sun, an adult Bald Eagle flew into a neighbouring lagoon to collect a take-away fish supper.

We had brilliant views of a gang of three Raccoons as they ambled along the edge of a lagoon and the road, perhaps to take advantage of the falling tide to search for crabs amongst the roots of the mangroves that surrounded all the area's lagoons.

On leaving Sanibel Causeway we stopped to watch a party of Red-breasted Mergansers fishing along the edge of one of the islands crossed by the road. Birding wasn't completely over for as we reached the hotel a flock of feral pigeons exploded from the building, perhaps frightened by the Sharp-shinned Hawk that landed on the canopy of the next door service station, supper-less. We were more fortunate and enjoyed a good meal at the Alehouse.

Sunday, 25 January

Another very warm cloudless day after a cool start. 75°C

After breakfast and loading the minibus we drove down to Six Mile Cypress Slough, where hardly had we begun the boardwalk trail when one of the reserve's volunteers suggested that we visited Lee Manatee State Park sooner, rather than later. The West Indian Manatees that overwinter in the warm waters of the power station outfall head out into the surrounding waters of the Gulf of Mexico to feed. About 20 minutes later we were there and enjoying a wonderful experience with other people in the warmth of the morning sunshine. It was estimated that this morning there were some 150 of these docile mammals present, but in fact they were not all as placid as we might have expected. Some 20 large males were vying for the attention of a receptive female so there was quite a bit of jostling for pole position! Further downstream mothers floated gently with their young ones beside them. There were a few birds as well - Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers, Red-bellied Woodpecker and two Wood Storks.

On the way back to Six Mile Cypress we picked up lunch at a Subway and on arrival at the Slough noting that there were picnic tables near the car park, we set off to do the boardwalk trail. On reaching the first pond overlook we found an Alligator sunning itself on the ramp of a pontoon that had a Little Blue Heron and an Anhinga resting on the other end. Across the water Glossy and White Ibises were perched in the sun on the trees opposite our vantage point. Other White Ibis fed in shallow pools amongst the Cypress trees as we walked around. Within the woodland areas we came across a number of passerines, but not in the numbers we saw a few days ago in Highlands Hammock. Still there were Palm, Prairie and Yellow-rumped Warblers, but just one Black-and-white Warbler that behaved just like a nuthatch. We also found Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and in several places we could hear Red-shouldered Hawks, for on such a spring-like day their thoughts were turning to the coming breeding season.

We managed to get two tables close together for lunch in the park before we continued down Six Mile Cypress Parkway to Lakes Park, one of the Lee County parks. It was busy with families enjoying a Sunday afternoon in the sunshine, but we had been advised not to be deterred by the numbers of other visitors for here were lots of birds to be seen. Actually most we had seen before, but here they were more used to people. Herons, cormorants, Anhinga as well as a few gulls and Royal Terns often posed within a few yards of us. Along the edge of the reeds Geoff found a male Common Yellowthroat and when Julia went to see what some small boys were looking at, she was just in time to see a Florida Water Snake disappear. The majority of warblers were in the Fragrant Garden and included Yellow-throated. Two Blue Jays favoured that corner of the park beneath the watchful eyes of an American Kestrel and Loggerhead Shrike.

By the time we had walked around in the hot sunshine we were ready for some cooling refreshment, so a nearby ice-cream seller picked up some extra trade before we left and drove south to Naples, where apart from refuelling, our hotel was the next stop. We were there before sunset, so plenty of time before going out to dinner.

Monday, 26 January

Fine and sunny with some cloud after lunch. 70°F

On leaving Naples this morning after breakfast we headed for Corkscrew Swamp, an Audubon Society reserve with a splendid two and a quarter mile boardwalk mainly through stands of Pond and Bald Cypress trees and sawgrass prairie.

In the area of the visitor centre a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks were even noisier than yesterday's pair at Six Mile Cypress Slough. A short walk took us to some feeders where a Common Ground-Dove fed alongside Eastern Grey Squirrels. The main attraction, however, was a pair of Painted Buntings with the male in particularly fine breeding plumage. From time to time Wood Storks passed over en route to colonies on the far side of the reserve.

During the walk we found two large mixed bird parties. The bulk of the species present were Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, but careful searching revealed Pine and Prairie Warblers, Blue-headed Vireos and Tufted Titmouse as well. During the walk we tended to hear Red Cardinal and Carolina Wren rather more than see them. As the boardwalk returned towards the visitor centre once again we passed more and more water lying beneath the Bald Cypresses that offered feeding areas to White Ibis and Great Egrets, but unfortunately we didn't see the hoped for Limpkins. At Lettuce Pond, named after the abundance of the introduced Water Lettuce, we had good views of Anhingas and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, as two lethargic Alligators lazed amongst the vegetation on the far side.

We returned to the minivan more than ready for a late lunch and afterwards we had some quality time around the reserve to allow people to do their own thing for a couple of hours. A return to the feeders to try and see the Painted Buntings was a popular choice and rewarded those who did so with no less than five buntings and hopefully some quite good photos in spite of a regular succession of other visitors to the site. In addition we at last had good views of a pair of Red Cardinals and added Ovenbird and a rare White-throated Sparrow to the list!

Mike, Julia and I also made it back to Lettuce Pond, but little had changed over there except perhaps some repositioning by some of those species we had seen earlier. By chance we met again an English couple we had been walking with earlier in the morning. They had just seen a Barred Owl perched in full view in a Red Maple further back along the trail. After a quick look I left the others enjoying the splendid bird and hoofed it back to the feeders and the visitor centre to alert the rest of the party. Leaving Barbara and I with the minibus, everyone went off to enjoy the owl, which thankfully was still there, but disappointingly it didn't open its eyes. The truth of the matter was that it had seen it all before! With time in hand Mike and Julia stopped off to enjoy a cup of coffee at the visitor centre café, where they also enjoyed good views of a Pileated Woodpecker flying around and settling on nearby trees.

During the day both Brown and Green Anoles were seen and during the afternoon some had seen an Eastern Garter Snake. Butterflies were surprisingly few and far between, but did include the impressive Ruddy Daggerwing although the one we saw was a bit tatty.

It was almost 5 p.m. by the time we left Corkscrew and before returning to the hotel I wanted to check an area nearby for Burrowing Owls, but sadly they were no longer there, overgrown fields and ribbon development along 40th St. had driven them out, a fact that was confirmed by a local farmer.

We did have one slightly amusing incident when I stopped to ask a couple driving along the road about the owls. They were new to the area, having just returned to Florida after living in Germany for 18 years. It seems that this morning they had just bought a plot of land along the road on which they were to build their retirement home and were just checking it out. It seems hard to believe that that they hadn't visited the area before purchasing, for they had just had discovered that there was no access to their land and that their

neighbour-to-be had built on half of their plot anyway! Buyer beware!

We had a good run back through the traffic to the hotel and just over an hour later went out to dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant opposite Chilis'. We had to wait a while for our tables, but once the order was taken the food arrived quickly and was hot. On our return to the hotel the checklist was brought up to date and we went to bed reflecting on another excellent day that had been an 'owling success'!

Tuesday, 27 January

Hot and sunny with overcast period during the afternoon. More humid than other days. 80°F

On leaving the hotel in Naples we drove south out to Tigertail Bay on Marco Island, where we walked north along the beach. Initially we watched various herons in the shallows between the beach and a sandy ridge offshore that had been colonised by mangroves in 1996 according to our informant, Tony, an ex-pat, who was setting out sunshades on the well-manicured sand. He was an interesting fellow, who was West Ham's other supporter along with Roy and before coming to the United States had been in the Grenadier Guards. He suggested that we carried on walking north as the birds would be better and that afterward we might like to call in to the cafe, which he stocked with PG Tips for his British customers!

As we walked further we came across Semipalmated Plovers and Least Sandpipers, but just as he said the birding got better the further on we went. A pair of Ospreys were breeding on a pole on the edge of the beach. Where the channel widened, the variety of shorebirds increased. Greater Yellowlegs called noisily as they flew up and down, there was a small party of Short-billed Dowitchers, another of Red Knot, a conglomeration of Dunlin, Least and Western Sandpipers, Black-bellied, Piping and more Semipalmated Plovers and best of all the crab-eating Wilson's Plover, one of the morning's target birds.

Beyond the barrier sandbar was a large fishing flock of gulls, terns and pelicans, amongst which Geoff picked out three immature Northern Gannets and we could see a male Magnificent Frigatebird drifting north on cranked wings. The latter was a bird that we might have picked up off Sanibel, but the weather was too good! We overtook a group of Americans on a local bird walk. Unfortunately their leader had no scope so we ended up showing them the goodies we were seeing and they had missed until then. After they had gone round the corner of the bay all the shorebirds exploded into the air in panic. The reason soon became apparent when a large female Peregrine effortlessly plucked a Greater Yellowlegs from the mud some 75 yards in front of us! After landing briefly she took-off and disappeared from view on the seaward side of the mangroves.

We settled down to see if anything new had appeared with the re-shuffling of shorebirds on the mud. Most were those we had seen before, but they had been joined by three or four Snowy Plovers. Unfortunately, before everyone could enjoy telescope views, panic set in again as a Peregrine came over carrying just the head and bill of the yellowlegs. That seemed strange – no body! Mike commented that he thought the bird seemed smaller, so do these large northern race Peregrines winter together as a pair? It was likely that we would never know, until as we walked back toward the car park we realised that the female was on the mud feeding on a headless yellowlegs. She wasn't bothered and we had superb views as she tucked in, a trail of white feathers drifting across the beach in the breeze.

The only way to follow that was with elevenses. PG Tips, coffees and hot chocolate were at the café, but not Tony, who we would have liked to have thanked for his advice.

On leaving Marco Island we headed back towards the Tamiami Trail, which would lead us to the Everglades. Soon after we left the beach we stopped to see what a couple were looking at in some tall *Casuarina* trees in a park area. The huge Bald Eagle's nest with the incubating female was easy to see and as we watched we had the male circling nearby. Marco Island still had something else to show us, for as we drove around to a Subway for our picnic lunch a large Iguana, perhaps three feet long, was on the verge, but ran for the safety of an overgrown tree as we stopped.

Our lunch companions today were Ospreys and Turnstones, but we were eager to press on and visit Fakahatchee Strand Preserve, where a board walk took us into another Bald Cypress Swamp. Along the trail toward the boardwalk we passed Zebra Longwing and White Peacock butterflies. Barbara found one Red-

shouldered Hawk by a drainage ditch and Julia another perched in a tree the other side of the track. Again excellent views of a very attractive raptor.

Some way along the boardwalk an information board explained about the Bald Eagle's nest we could see, but omitted to mention that the nest contained the two chicks we could see through our scopes. A Barred Owl was calling intermittently nearby, but as we started to search for it Philip and Julia saw it briefly fly from a dead tree trunk into thicker woodland beyond.

The boardwalk finished on a large observation platform, where we spent a pleasant 30 minutes or so watching the comings and goings of various herons, White Ibis, Wood Storks and Anhinga. Almost beneath us a Green Heron was stretched out poised to catch a passing fish, it scarcely moved the whole time we were there. An immature Great Blue on the other hand soon caught a catfish. On a small pool at the beginning of the walk back a River Otter appeared only feet away. The views would have been wonderful had a lady not said "Hello" to it and began calling as if it were her pet moggie! A splash and it was gone in an instant.

This morning's blue skies had gone and for a while the grey clouds threatened rain, but it came to nothing and as we proceeded eastwards the weather improved again. A Short-tailed Hawk flew over the road and the sides of drainage channels were lined with alligators, egrets and herons for mile after mile. When we reached the more open country of sawgrass prairie, where the Miccosukee Indians run their air boat trips, a Snail Kite was quartering the vast grassy expanse. We were in traffic and there wasn't really time to stop as we wanted to reach our hotel in Florida City before dark. We did, just, and an hour or so later went for an excellent dinner at The Mutineer, just up the road.

Wednesday, 28 January

Hottest day so far. Some cloud, but sunny all day. 80°+F.

After a continental breakfast at the hotel we headed west to the Everglades National Park and after a short stop at the visitors' centre, we began the day at Royal Palm Hammock, one of the premier sites at this end of the park.

It is a great place for herons, egrets and Anhingas, in fact the boardwalk loop is known as the Anhinga Trail. As hundreds of Turkey Vultures circled overhead we began with good views of a Great Blue Heron standing on the edge of the first pond. The path then led alongside a channel where we encountered the first of the morning's many American Alligators and American photographers with their huge lenses. The focus of one groups' attention was an American Bittern that had disappeared into the grasses beyond the channel shortly before we arrived. We only had to wait another five to ten minutes before it reappeared again and we had excellent views. Geoff had said to me at Gatwick that this was one of the few birds on the list he hadn't seen!

As we walked on another Great Blue Heron had caught a Walking Catfish and seemed to be slightly bemused with its prey as it didn't swallow it immediately and seemed to be adjusting the fish's position in its bill. It had actually skewered the fish with its lower mandible. Basically virtually every bird ate fish for there were several Belted Kingfishers around the area and we had very good views of extremely patient Green Herons as they watched for small fry from the edge of the bank or some partly submerged aquatic plants. At the far end of the main trail a number of large alligators were hauled out and as we made our way around the Anhinga Trail boardwalk we came across several Anhinga nests with well-grown young.

In addition to alligators other reptiles included at least two species of turtle - most were Red-bellied with their black and yellow striped faces, whilst as we neared the end of our walk a large flat one was a Florida Softshell Turtle.

Today we saw more butterflies than on the rest of the trip put together. A Julia (Heliconia) was a new one as was a Common Checkered-Skipper and a tiny blue, which seems to have been the aptly named Eastern Pygmy Blue. Zebra Longwings were common nectaring from a small daisy-like flower that grew by the path.

With birding and photography satisfied we continued driving through the park, stopping at a number of sites. At Pa-hay-okee we found an elevated boardwalk from which we had a panoramic view of the surrounding sawgrass prairie with its skeletal clusters of dormant Dwarf Cypress trees. Further on we enjoyed watching

Wood Storks coming and going from their rookery in the bushes on the far side of Paurotis Pond, which they shared with Roseate Spoonbills, egrets and Anhingas. An Osprey patrolled the open waters as a dark-phase Short-tailed Hawk drifted high overhead.

Nine Mile Pond held just a lone Pied-billed Grebe, but Mrezak Pond was much better with the first Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal we had seen since that first day on Merritt Island. Doesn't that seem a long time ago now? There were several Pied-billed Grebes on the small pond along with a party of Lesser Yellowlegs and the usual variety of herons and egrets.

Flamingo used to have a lodge where all our past Florida groups have stayed whilst in the Everglades, but a few years ago it was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and only the facilities currently open are the store and another visitor centre. They had just begun to demolish the old lodge, but apparently there are no funds available for the rebuilding!

We had lunch outside the store watching the comings and goings of Laughing Gulls and Ospreys. A female sat with a chick on a nest by the lock gate on the canal beside us and she seemed to be getting quite cross with her mate for not bringing in food! On the sandy bank of the canal six American Crocodiles were hauled out and basking in the sun. One was a massive brute and apparent known locally as Gumby as it is so old that it has lost most of its teeth! Their snouts lack the broad tip which is characteristic of the alligator and their scaly skin is much greyer. Most of the other crocs showed many more teeth along the sides of their snouts than do alligators.

The once delightful fresh water Eco Pond, a great place for wading birds, rails and migrants, at the appropriate time of the year, was also devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The saltwater brought in by the storm destroyed the vulnerable eco-system. Gone are the reeds and rushes that held the rails and gems like Least Bitterns, now an expanse of mud surrounds an island of trees in the centre of the pond, with just skeletal remains standing of those species not resistant to the effects of the saline water. Nevertheless we had good views of a variety of wading birds, with particularly good views of a feeding Roseate Spoonbill and a fishing Little Blue Heron. The only shorebirds were Lesser Yellowlegs. One or two Belted Kingfishers used dead snags as fishing platforms and in the bushes by the path we had good views of a male Prairie Warbler. We came across several butterflies, a Monarch and the similar Soldier, Gulf Fritillary and Florida White, were identified. Before leaving the area completely we checked out the adjacent part of Florida Bay, where some Bottle-nosed Dolphins were passing, but the high tide denied feeding and resting areas to the birds.

We looked at the ponds again on our way back out of the park, but things were much the same as earlier. Mahogany Hammock failed to produce the hoped for Barred Owl, but we did see a pair of Pileated Woodpecker and Mike found a Brown Thrasher feeding furtively in the undergrowth.

An optional night drive back into the Everglades was planned for this evening so we had a quicker dinner at Denny's this evening. A still evening with no moon should have produced something worthwhile as we drove steadily along the road, scanning the verges and adjacent trees. It was very quiet however, so we turned around just beyond Mahogany Hammock. We would have seen even less had it not been for a Southern Leopard Frog sitting in the road!

Thursday 29 January

Hottest day of the trip. 80°F

Following breakfast at the hotel we stopped for sandwiches, fruit and fuelled up for the last time before entering the Everglades National Park. We might have been to Royal Palm Hammock yesterday, but we didn't explore the Gumbo Limbo Trail.

Leaving John photographing along the Anhinga Trail, we walked through woodland along the Gumbo Limbo Trail, named after the flaky red-barked trees. Another name for the Gumbo Limbo is Tourist Tree as on some Caribbean island or other their bark reminded the locals of sunburnt tourists. Unfortunately from a wildlife point of view there was little about, so we joined John on the Anhinga Trail. Before we met up with him some briefly saw the American Bittern again and there were stunning views of a preening Anhinga that showed the intricacies of applying oil from its preen gland to various parts of its anatomy.

John greeted us with the news that he had found a Purple Gallinule, the fact that it was an immature and not a colourful one as we hoped was by the by. It is becoming increasingly rare in the area, perhaps attributed to the decline in the waterlilies that used to grow along the water channel where we watched alligator, turtles and Florida Garfish.

The public camp site at Long Pine Key was our next stop, where a few years ago a pair of Great Horned Owls held territory. Sadly they seemed to have moved away, but we were treated to some 5,000 or more Tree Swallows twisting and turning in swirling masses over a lake set amongst the pines to have a refreshing plunge bath before flying away to hawk insects in the warm sunshine. We came across a number of Yellow-rumped Warblers with one or two Pine Warblers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers mixed in with them. Also seen were Northern Cardinal and Eastern Bluebird.

Next it was blinkers on to get down to Flamingo and have lunch overlooking Florida Bay. A flock of Caspian Terns added a species to most people's lists, but there was no sign of the Black Skimmers that had been present yesterday. Around at the Marine Stores only one or two American Crocodiles could be found, but the Osprey was still calling for food from the nest above the lock gates.

A road I had never explored before was the track towards Bear Lake, but it became a hiking trail to the lake after a dusty two or three miles. It was a single track road and with the lake being another two or three miles further on we decided to return to the main road. The only thing of interest was a Dusky Pygmy Rattlesnake in the track. Unfortunately the car ahead of us must have clipped its head as its jaw was broken but the thin tail with a miniscule rattle at the end was still twitching. By the time we passed it on our way back out it had died and no doubt would have been fodder for one of the patrolling vultures or American Crows.

Mrezak Pond was much as yesterday without the Roseate Spoonbill and as we drove east towards Paurotis Pond we saw a light phase Short-tailed Hawk - perhaps it was the male of the dark bird we had seen in the area yesterday and that Geoff was to spot soon after we arrived at the pond this afternoon. Across the pond we saw a few Roseate Spoonbills in flight, but the great majority of birds standing on the bushes were Wood Storks with over 80 present. Our final stop was at the Visitor's Centre, where John, who was on good spotting form today, found our first Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

With packing for the flight home tomorrow ahead of us, we returned to the hotel just after five o'clock. Dinner was at the Mutineer again this evening and it was nice that we were able to all sit together on the same table in good light! The food was good and the service was excellent. Afterwards we did the checklist in the motel lobby before turning in for the night.

Friday, 30 January

A fine morning with a misty start, but thunder clouds began to build up by midday. 80+°F in the morning, much cooler during the overcast afternoon which produced a few spots of rain.

After two days in the Everglades we decided to have a look at the Keys before returning to the hustle and bustle of Miami. Key Largo was the first key, but like most of the north-eastern Keys it had suffered at the hand of the developers. Finding somewhere to walk and bird was a challenge, but the Wild Bird Centre ticked most of the boxes. The centre is run by an elderly lady and her helpers who rehabilitate injured birds that are brought in for care. Most injuries to herons, egrets, cormorants and pelicans come from taking fish hooks. One Yellow-crowned Night-Heron has come back for the last 12 winters after being 'repaired' and released back into the wild.

We came across Palm Warblers, Northern Cardinals, Blue Jays and Red-winged Blackbirds as well as large numbers of wading birds and pelicans after we passed the cages along the boardwalk that passed through the mangroves to the shore. One of the workers did us a favour by feeding the wild birds in the morning instead of 3.30pm in the afternoon. The birds were happy and so were we as the scraps attracted many more birds than we would have seen otherwise. It was good comparing Great Egret and Great White Heron side by side at close range.

Our journey down the keys continued until we reached the bridge and causeway that separated Upper and

Lower Matecumbe Keys. At last we could appreciate the expanse of shallow blue waters and dark green mangrove keys that were scattered across Florida Bay to the north and the Atlantic to the south-east. While we were out of the vehicle enjoying the breeze and fresh air Geoff spotted a Merlin fly over. Earlier we had seen a Bald Eagle perched on a utility pole and seen a hunting Cooper's Hawk in addition to many Ospreys.

With Mike navigating we threaded our way back through Florida City and Homestead to Castellow State Park, where we had lunch. Unfortunately it was overcast by that time and much cooler. We spent nearly an hour there wandering around and enjoying two or three Ruby-throated Hummingbirds feeding and resting around the Hummingbird and Butterfly garden. The only butterflies were Zebra Longwing and a Long-tailed Skipper which was the first of that species we had noted.

At 2.45 p.m. we began the final leg to the airport. Mike was navigating and Geoff gave advance warning of road signs by using his binocs. Heavy traffic was made worse by a crash as we headed north on the Florida Turnpike, but otherwise the run was faultless and an hour later we arrived at Alamo rental car return - a fantastic effort by my helpers!

Wet roads and huge puddles showed that we had missed a particularly heavy shower and while we were waiting for the airport shuttle bus another couple told that they had driven through rain all the way from Fort Myers! We had been lucky and perhaps seeing something of the Keys this morning had been the right move!

Our Virgin Atlantic Airbus A340-600 left Miami on time with the captain promising a flying time of under eight hours.

Saturday, 31 January

Dawn broke as we headed towards the Western Approaches we crossed the Cornwall's Atlantic coast before the rest of the county disappeared below a bank of cloud. The next land seen was Dorset and Hampshire and had we been low enough we might have seen Phil's, Mike's and our houses as we came along the Channel coast. It looked a nice day down there, but we weren't prepared for the bitter easterly wind we would encounter on leaving the terminal building!

Eventually we landed on time, having first been stacked by air traffic control to the south of London and then delayed on the tarmac as another aircraft was still at our gate. Once through immigration and in the baggage hall we were reunited with our bags and said farewell to one another before heading home.

Acknowledgements

Thank you all for coming and being such good travelling companions, Florida had changed since I was last there with more development, but in a number of cases the birding was better than previously with, for example, better views than I have known of Wood Storks and Roseate Spoonbills and more of other species such as Bald Eagle and Red-shouldered Hawk.

Thanks to the navigating by Geoff, Mike and Philip in particular we always arrived at the correct reserve or hotel, which was far more fun than it would have been had the rental company prevailed and I had succumbed to renting a GPS! In total we covered exactly 1,533 miles, but I won't bore you with other statistics such as how much fuel or how many chocolate chip cookies we ate! Thanks again and I hope it won't be too long before we travel on another Ornitholidays together – there are plenty to choose from in the brochure!

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March 2009

Itinerary and Weather

- 18 January Dept. London Gatwick for Orlando, Florida, where overnight
- 19 January Day excursion to Merritt Island NWR. Prolonged sunny periods after overnight rain, increasing coastal breeze p.m.. 65°F
- 20 January Transfer to Sebring birding in Kissimmee and St. Cloud areas en route. Virtually cloudless until the late afternoon, when became overcast. 46°F, but much colder with the wind-chill factor.
- 21 January Morning visit to Highlands Hammock State Park. Afternoon to Avon Park area and to Lorida. Bitterly cold and cloudless. Warmer out of the wind and later in the day. 33°F rising to 52°F.
- 22 January Transfer to Fort Meyers with birding en route at Archbold Reseach Station, Venus Flatwoods and Myakka State Park. Overnight frost. Cloudless throughout the day with little or no wind. 28°F rising to low 50°sF near Gulf Coast
- 23 January Birding at Bunche Beach, Sanibel Island and Cape Coral. Cloudless and warmer - reaching 72°F!
- 24 January Birding on Sanibel Island including two visits to Ding Darling NWR, Another warm and sunny day. Some thin cloud late afternoon. 70°+F
- 25 January Transfer to Naples, birding en route at Six Mile Cypress Slough, Lee Manatee State Park and Lakes Park. Another very warm cloudless day after a cool start. 75°C
- 26 January Day excursion to Corkscrew Swamp. Fine and sunny with some cloud after lunch. 70°F
- 27 January Transfer to Florida City birding en route at Tigertail Bay and Fakahatchee Strand Preserve. Hot and sunny with overcast period during the afternoon. More humid than other days. 80°F
- 28 January Day excursion to Everglades National Park. Hottest day so far. Some cloud, but sunny all day. 80°+F.
- 29 January Day excursion to Everglades National Park. Hotter than yesterday. Again 80°+F.
- 30 January Morning drive along the Keys as far as Lower Matecumbe Key, stopping at the Wild Bird Centre on Key Largo en route. Lunch at Castellow State Park before driving to Miami Airport. Overnight flight to Gatwick. Fine morning with a misty start, but thunder clouds building. 80°+F in the morning, much cooler during the overcast afternoon which produced a few spots of rain.
- 31 January Morning arrival at Gatwick and back to winter!

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

No of days recorded	Location	Abundance Scale (max. seen on 1 day)
1 2h means seen on	A = Atlantic coast including Merritt Island & Titusville	1 = 1-4
1 day and heard on	C = Central Florida - Orlando, Kissimmee and Sebring areas	2 = 5-9
2 other days	S = Sanibel, Bunche Beach, Cape Coral & Ft. Myers areas	3 = 10-99
	N = Naples, Tigertail Beach and inland to include Corkscrew Swamp	4 = 100-999
	E = Everglades also including Fakahatchee, Homestead and the Keys	5 = 1000-9999

SPECIES	No of days recorded		Locations				Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Common Loon	3	A		S			3	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Horned Grebe	1	A					1	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	8	A	C	S		E	3	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>
American White Pelican	4	A		S		E	3	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>
Brown Pelican	8	A		S	N	E	4	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>
Magnificent Frigatebird	1				N		1	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>
Double-crested Cormorant	12	A	C	S	N	E	4	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>
Anhinga	11	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>
Northern Gannet	1				N		1	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
American Bittern	2					E	1	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>
Great Blue Heron	12	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Great Egret	12	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Snowy Egret	12	A	C	S	N	E	4	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Reddish Egret	4	A		S	N		1	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>
Tricolored Heron	10	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>
Little Blue Heron	12	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>
Cattle Egret	10	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Green Heron	5	A		S	N	E	2	<i>Butorides virescens</i>
Black-crowned Night-Heron	4			S		E	1	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	2			S			2	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>
White Ibis	12	A	C	S	N	E	4	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>
Glossy Ibis	7	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Roseate Spoonbill	4	A		S		E	3	<i>Ajaia ajaja</i>
Wood Stork	11	A	C	S	N	E	4	<i>Mycteria americana</i>
Ross's Goose	1	A					1	<i>Chen rossii</i>
Snow Goose	1	A					1	<i>Chen caerulescens</i>
Muscovy Duck (<i>introduced</i>)	6			S	N		3	<i>Cairina moschata</i>
Mallard	2	A	C				1	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Mottled Duck	5	A		S	N		2	<i>Anas fulvigula</i>
Gadwall	2	A	C				3	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Northern Pintail	1	A					4	<i>Anas acuta</i>
American Wigeon	1	A					4	<i>Anas americana</i>
Northern Shoveler	1	A					3	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Blue-winged Teal	3	A				E	4	<i>Anas discors</i>
Green-winged Teal	4	A	C			E	3	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>
Lesser Scaup	1	A					1	<i>Aythya affinis</i>
Hooded Merganser	1			S			2	<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	1			S			2	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Turkey Vulture	12	A	C	S	N	E	4	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
Black Vulture	12	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>
Northern Harrier	5	A	C			E	3	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Snail Kite	2		C			E	1	<i>Rostrhamus sociabilis</i>
Sharp-shinned Hawk	3		C	S		E	1	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>
Cooper's Hawk	2		C			E	1	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>
Red-shouldered Hawk	11		C	S	N	E	3	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>
Short-tailed Hawk	3					E	1	<i>Buteo brachyurus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	6	A	C	S			1	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Bald Eagle	9	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Osprey	11	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>

Northern Caracara	3		C					1	<i>Caracara cheriway</i>
Merlin	1						E	1	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
American Kestrel	12	A	C	S	N		E	3	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
Peregrine Falcon	1					N		1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Wild Turkey	2		C					3	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
Purple Gallinule	1						E	1	<i>Porphyryla martinica</i>
Common Moorhen	5	A	C				E	3	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
American Coot	5	A	C				E	5	<i>Fulica americana</i>
Sora	1	A						1	<i>Porzana carolina</i>
Limpkin	1			S				1	<i>Aramus guarauana</i>
Whooping Crane (<i>introduced</i>)	1		C					2	<i>Grus americana</i>
Sandhill Crane	4		C			N		4	<i>Grus canadensis</i>
Black-bellied Plover	4			S	N			3	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Piping Plover	2			S	N			3	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>
Semipalmated Plover	3			S	N			3	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>
Snowy Plover	1				N			2	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Wilson's Plover	1				N			3	<i>Charadrius wilsonia</i>
Killdeer	10	A	C	S	N		E	3	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
American Oystercatcher	1			S				1	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>
American Avocet	1	A						4	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>
Black-necked Stilt	1			S				2	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
Greater Yellowlegs	4	A		S	N			3	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>
Lesser Yellowlegs	5	A	C	S			E	3	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>
Willet	2			S				4	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>
Spotted Sandpiper	3		C	S			E	1	<i>Actitis macularia</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	5	A		S	N		E	3	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Red Knot	2			S	N			3	<i>Calidris canutus</i>
Sanderling	3			S	N			4	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Dunlin	2			S	N			3	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Western Sandpiper	2			S	N			3	<i>Calidris mauri</i>
Least Sandpiper	6	A	C	S	N			4	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>
Stilt Sandpiper	1			s					<i>Calidris himantopus</i>
Short-billed Dowitcher	4	A		S	N			4	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>
Wilson's Snipe	1		C					1	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>
Laughing Gull	8	A		S	N		E	4	<i>Larus atricilla</i>
Ring-billed Gull	11	A	C	S	N		E	4	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>
Herring Gull	3		C	S				1	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	1	A						1	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Caspian Tern	2	A					E	3	<i>Sterna caspia</i>
Royal Tern	8	A		S	N		E	3	<i>Sterna maxima</i>
Sandwich Tern	2			S				3	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Forster's Tern	6	A	C	S				3	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>
Black Skimmer	3	A	C				E	3	<i>Rynchops niger</i>
Mourning Dove	12	A	C	S	N		E	3	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Eurasian Collared-Dove (<i>introduced</i>)	11	A	C	S	N		E	3	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Common Ground-Dove	2		C	S				1	<i>Columbina passerina</i>
Rock (Feral) Dove (<i>introduced</i>)	11	A	C	S	N		E	4	<i>Columba livia</i>
Monk Parakeet	1			S				3	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>
Barred Owl	2					N	E	1	<i>Strix varia</i>
Burrowing Owl	1			S				2	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	2						E	1	<i>Archilochus colubris</i>
Belted Kingfisher	12	A	C	S	N		E	3	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>
Red-bellied Woodpecker	7	1h	C	S	N		E	2	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	3		C	S	N			1	<i>Sphyrapicus varius</i>
Downy Woodpecker	2		C					1	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker (rare)	1		C					1	<i>Picoides villosus</i>
Northern Flicker	2	A	C					1	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>
Pileated Woodpecker	4			S	N		E	1	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
Eastern Phoebe	7	A	C			N	E	3	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>
Great Crested Flycatcher	2					N	E	1	<i>Myiarchus crinitus</i>
Loggerhead Shrike	11	A	C	S	N		E	3	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>
White-eyed Vireo	2		C			N		1	<i>Vireo griseus</i>

Yellow-throated Vireo	1		C				1	<i>Vireo flavifrons</i>	
Blue-headed Vireo	3		C	S	N		1	<i>Vireo solitarius</i>	
Blue Jay	8	A	C	S	N	E	2	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	
Florida Scrub-Jay	1		C				3	<i>Aphelocoma coerulescens</i>	
American Crow	12	A	C	S	N	E	3	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	
Fish Crow	3	A		S			4	<i>Corvus ossifragus</i>	
Tree Swallow	12	A	C	S	N	E	5	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	
Tufted Titmouse	2		C			N	1	<i>Parus bicolor</i>	
Carolina Wren	2	1h	C			N	E	1	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>
House Wren	2		C	S				1	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	3		C			N		1	<i>Regulus calendula</i>
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	6		C	S	N	E		3	<i>Poliophtila caerulea</i>
Eastern Bluebird	4		C				E	3	<i>Sialia sialis</i>
American Robin	1		C					3	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
Hermit Thrush	1		C					1	<i>Catharus guttatus</i>
Gray Catbird	8		C	S	N	E		3	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>
Northern Mockingbird	12	A	C	S	N	E		3	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
Brown Thrasher	3		C	S	N			1	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>
European Starling (<i>introduced</i>)	11	A	C	S	N	E		3	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Common Myna (<i>introduced</i>)	2						E	3	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
Cedar Waxwing	3	A	C					4	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
Yellow-rumped Warbler	9	A	C	S	N	E		3	<i>Dendroica coronata</i>
Prairie Warbler	4		C			N	E	1	<i>Dendroica discolor</i>
Palm Warbler	12	A	C	S	N	E		3	<i>Dendroica palmarum</i>
Pine Warbler	5		C	S	N	E		3	<i>Dendroica pinus</i>
Yellow-throated Warbler	3		C			N	E	1	<i>Dendroica dominica</i>
Black-and-white Warbler	3		C	S	N			1	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>
Ovenbird	1					N		1	<i>Seiurus aurocapillus</i>
Northern Waterthrush	1		C					1	<i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>
Common Yellowthroat	4	A	C	S	N			1	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>
Northern Cardinal	4	A	C			N	E	1	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>
Painted Bunting	2					N	E	2	<i>Passerina ciris</i>
Eastern (Rufous-sided) Towhee	1		C					2	<i>Pipilo erythrophthalmus</i>
Savannah Sparrow	1		C					1	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>
White-throated Sparrow	1					N		1	<i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i>
Song Sparrow	2	A	C					1	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>
Eastern Meadowlark	4		C				E	1	<i>Sturnella magna</i>
Brown-headed Cowbird	4		C	S	N			4	<i>Molothrus ater</i>
Red-winged Blackbird	4		C	S			E	3	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>
Common Grackle	11	A	C	S	N	E		3	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>
Boat-tailed Grackle	12	A	C	S	N	E		4	<i>Quiscalus major</i>
House Finch (<i>introduced</i>)	1		C					1	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>
American Goldfinch	3		C			N	E	2	<i>Carduelis tristis</i>
House Sparrow (<i>introduced</i>)	4	1h		S			E	2	<i>Passer domesticus</i>

MAMMALS

Nine-banded Armadillo	3		C	S				1	<i>Dasyurus novemcinctus</i>
Eastern Gray Squirrel	7		C	S	N	E		2	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>
Fox Squirrel	3		C					1	<i>Sciurus niger</i>
Raccoon	2			S				2	<i>Procyon lotor</i>
Northern River Otter	2		C				E	1	<i>Lutra canadensis</i>
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	4	A		S			E	2	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>
West Indian Manatee	1			S				4	<i>Trichechus manatus</i>
Wild Boar (feral)	1			S				3	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
White-tailed Deer	3		C	S	N			2	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>

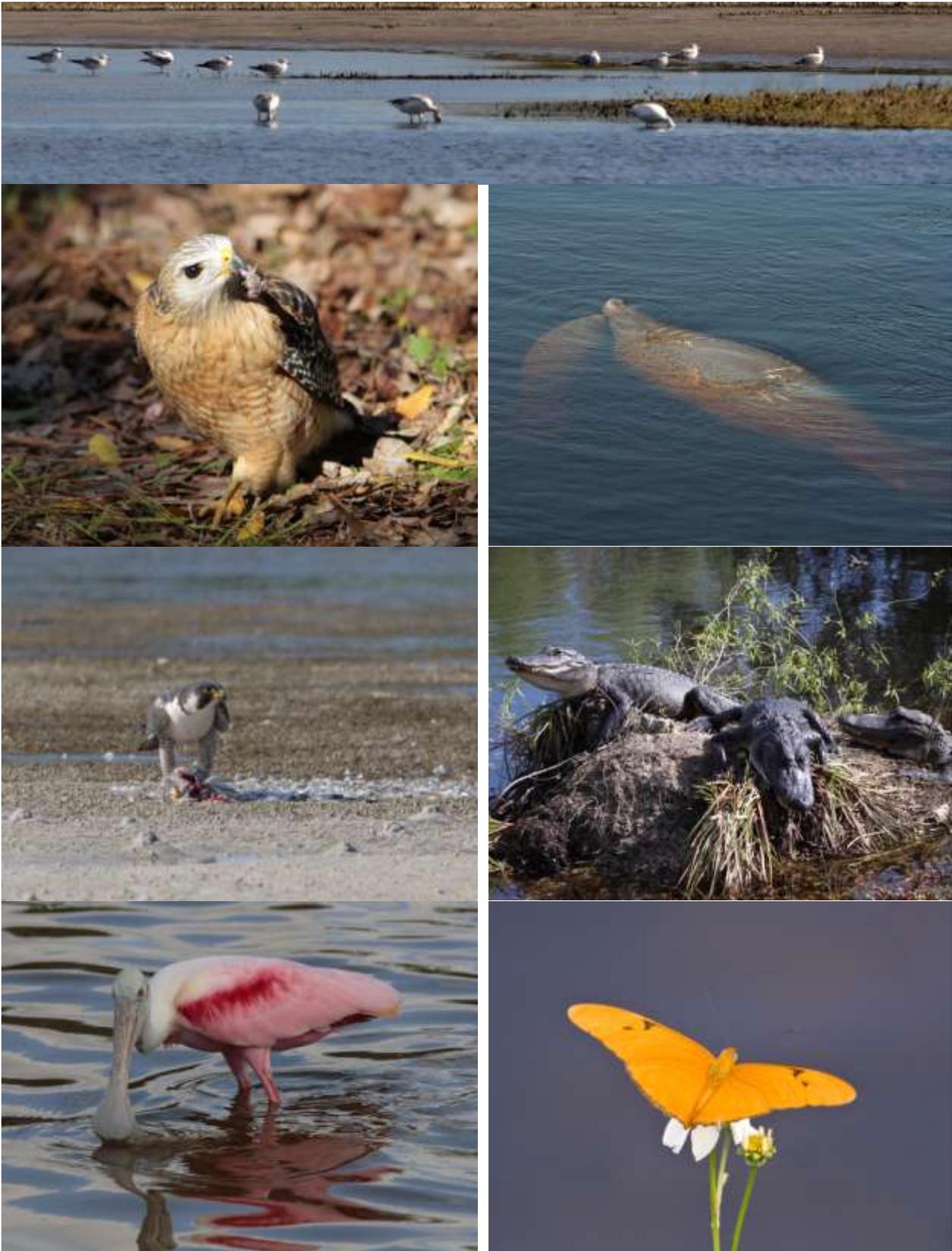
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

American Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus acutus</i>	Flamingo, Everglades
American Alligator	<i>Alligator mississippiensis</i>	Widespread
Florida Redbelly Turtle	<i>Pseudemys nelsoni</i>	Widespread
Gopher Tortoise	<i>Gopherus polyphemus</i>	Tigertail Beach
Florida Softshell Turtle	<i>Apalone ferox</i>	Royal Palm Hammock, Everglades
Green Anole	<i>Anolis carolinensis</i>	Corkscrew Swamp
Brown Anole (introduced)	<i>Anolis sagrei</i>	Widespread
Green Iguana	<i>Iguana iguana</i>	Marcos Island
Brown Water Snake	<i>Nerodia taxispilota</i>	
Florida Water Snake	<i>Nerodia fasciata pictiventris</i>	Lakes County Park, Ft. Myers
Mangrove (Water) Salt Marsh Snake	<i>Nerodia clarkii compressicauda</i>	'Ding' Darling, Sanibel
Eastern Garter Snake	<i>Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis</i>	
Dusky Pigmy Rattlesnake	<i>Sistrurus miliarius barbouri</i>	Everglades
Southern Leopard Frog	<i>Rana urticularia</i>	L. Kissimee & Everglades

BUTTERFLIES

Florida White	<i>Appias Drusilla</i>	Mangrove Buckeye	<i>Junonia genoveva</i>
Little Yellow	<i>Pyrisitia lisa</i>	White Peacock	<i>Anartia jatrophae</i>
Cloudless Sulphur	<i>Phoebis sennae</i>	Ruddy Daggerwing	<i>Marpesia petreus</i>
Large Orange Sulphur	<i>Phoebis agarithe</i>	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>
Eastern Pygmy Blue	<i>Brephidium pseudofoea</i>	Queen	<i>Danaus gilippus</i>
Zebra Longwing	<i>Heliconius charithonia</i>	Soldier	<i>Danaus eresimus</i>
Gulf Fritillary	<i>Agraulis vanillae</i>	Long-tailed Skipper	<i>Urbanus proteus</i>
Julia	<i>Dryas iulia</i>	Common Checkered-Skipper	<i>Pyrgus communis</i>
American Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	Saltmarsh Skipper	<i>Panoquina panoquin</i>

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by party members of this tour.



Top row Snow and Ross's Geese (RC) *second row* Red-shouldered Hawk with prey (RC), Female Manatee with young (JC). *third row* Peregrine feeding (RC), Alligators (PE) (*above*) Roseate Spoonbill (RC) , Julia butterfly (PE)
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Top row: Reddish Egret (GS), Greta White Heron & Great Egret (JC), Anhinga & preen gland (RC), second row Snail Kite & Carolina Wren (both GS), third row Northern Cardinal & Painted Bunting (both GS) above American Crocodile (RC). Copyright: Julia Coomber, Richard Coomber & Geoff Sharp