

FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES

FLORIDA

APRIL 17-26, 2010

TRIP REPORT

“Never in a million years would I have stopped at a place like this”, remarked one participant as our van into the Alligator Farm in St. Augustine, Florida. Oh, but was she ever glad that we did, only two hours after getting off a plane in Jacksonville. The “farm”, actually an excellent zoo with one of the most extensive collections of crocodylians from all over the world, is an astonishing place to see. With alligator filled moats surrounding tall live oak trees that host a wide variety of nesting wading birds, the birds are completely protected from predators. Displaying, courting and tending to their young, up close and personal, it is an experience no birder should miss. Little blue herons, green herons and wood storks all had their nests within a few feet of the boardwalk and there were hundreds of active nests to watch. Brilliant pink roseate spoonbills cruised back and forth overhead while black-crowned night-herons lurked in the shadows. All these birds were in their brightest, most colorful, decorated breeding finery. The snowies had red faces and feet; greats had chartreuse facial skin, little blue and tricolored herons showed bright blue beaks and cattle egrets, with chests and crowns of toasted marshmallow, had beaks of purple, red and orange. Snowies chortled like Donald Duck while throwing back their heads and flaring their plumes. Great egrets fanned their aigrets into sprays of glory. Incredibly impressive! The funniest and saddest scene we witnessed was a pair of tricolored herons, who managed to produce an egg long before their nest was ready. While the female desperately tried to keep the egg from falling to the ground, the male kept bringing her sticks that they attempted to weave below their prospective offspring. Ultimately, one bounce too many, the egg fell to ground. I’m sure they did better on the next try.

Our second day started with a beautiful sunrise over the Atlantic Ocean at nearby Anastasia State Park. We went out for about an hour and a half before breakfast (not before coffee!) and checked shorebird flocks along the lagoon, walked the back dunes

nature trail and finally wandered along the marsh boardwalk that led out to the open ocean. A few warblers were in the woods, but mostly it was just a nice walk. Along the inside lagoon, amidst the peach-colored dawn, a small group of black skimmers cut knife edge trails through the shallow water, splitting the liquid like opening envelopes. Four American oystercatchers whistled their way down the beach, happily greeting the morning. Our walk along the marsh boardwalk to the ocean beach proved outstanding, with exceptionally close views of four soras and three clapper rails, plus a chattering sedge wren not far behind them. A flock of northern gannets were plunge diving in the ocean. Then it was time to return for breakfast, load our gear and drive south along the east coast of Florida to Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, near Titusville.

Although the day had become overcast and cool, we were not deterred from our path. We slowly circumnavigated Black Point Drive, admiring all the waterfowl and shorebirds in the tidal and rain pools. Then we visited the Manatee Overlook, where, amazingly, no less than five West Indian Manatees were lounging around next to the platform. Swimming back and forth in front of us, resting half-submerged and generally putting on quite a show, we were thrilled to have such wonderful looks at these huge marine mammals. After a short stop at a nearby wooded area for migrant warblers, we slowly drove Bio-Lab Road, a narrow dirt road that skirts the shallow ocean flats off Merritt Island. Alligators, wading birds and terns were abundant. Then the real fun started. A short stroll along the Scrub Trail brought us to the home of a resident family of Florida scrub jays, who greeted us with enthusiasm, to say the least. Looking for handouts, they sat on our hands, our heads and shoulders, posing for photos, all in hopes of a peanut!

We took another little jaunt before breakfast on our third day, popping over to the Blue Heron Wetlands in Titusville. This was the first of several human created wetlands we would visit, Florida innovations that recycle and clean the gray water that emerges from nearby sewage treatment plant. By running the treated water through large areas of native vegetation, not only does the water come out pure, but a vast amount of habitat is created for resident, wintering and migratory birds. By adding either dike roads or boardwalks, these facilities then cater to the birding crowd by making visitation and observation very easy. After breakfast, we continued south to the Viera Wetlands, another even more expansive sewage treatment facility with miles of dike roads maintained for excellent birding. Limpkins were abundant this year, along with close looks at mottled ducks, white and glossy ibis, bald eagles, and a wonderful experience with a family of crested caracaras. Dozens of black-necked stilts patrolled the shallows, along with wading birds shuffling their feet to stir up breakfast from the bottom. A pair of loggerhead shrikes were building a nest near the entrance.

The we drove inland to the Three lakes Wildlife Management Area and Lake Kissimmee, seeing sandhill crane families en route, as well as another caracara feeding on some road kill. At the WMA, we heard and then

found a Bachman's sparrow along with a brown-headed nuthatch and pine warbler. Try as we might, however, red-cockaded woodpecker eluded us. A jaunt to quiet Lake Jackson proved fruitful, when several snail kites flew by, with perching on a nearby snag to eat an apple snail. Joe Overstreet Road to Lake Kissimmee offered loggerhead shrikes, more sandhill cranes and just down the road a piece, a couple of resident whooping cranes. We continued on south, passing through the bustling metropolis of Yeehaw Junction, for our night in Lantana.

Day four brought us to the premier sewage treatment wetlands in all of Florida: Wakodahatchee and Green Cay ("key"), near Boynton Beach. These two nearby areas, comprising hundreds of acres, feature boardwalks, nature guides and even a full blown nature center. Yet they are completely artificial, occupying totally flat former farmland, and are surrounded by upscale gated communities that seem to have swallowed everything in south Florida. They are total treasures and are heavily utilized by local birders, walkers, and nature lovers. We visited Wakodahatchee first, watching wading birds build and tend nests, thousands of common moorhens (with adorable chicks), black-necked stilts, a few migrant shorebirds and courting least terns. A least bittern patiently sat on its nest only ten feet away. At Green Cay, a sora fed quietly right next to the boardwalk, while dozens of purple martins noisily circled, catching insects to bring back to their young in several nest houses. Brightly hued purple gallinules clambered through the dense vegetation. In the small upland islands there were terrestrial birds, like summer tanager, blackpoll warbler and northern parula. We found four green heron nests right near the entrance. Black-bellied whistling-ducks were fairly common, along with numerous blue-winged teal. Humor was provided by a moorhen daintily strolling along the backs of eight painted turtles lined up on a fallen log, like it was crossing a stream on stepping stones. Lunch was a delightful visit to the winter home of Joe and Rosalie Wilkes, who had graciously extended an invitation to our group. We finished the day with a through the fence view of burrowing owls at Brian Piccolo Park (the park was closed that day due to budget cuts) and then a quick non-productive stop in Miami to try and see the red-footed booby that had been hanging around. Onward to our hotel in Kendall for the next four nights, which we would use as our base while we explored the Miami -South Florida area.

After a delightful breakfast at the hotel, we headed south toward Everglades National Park. Our first stop was at Cutler Ridge, where we found the first cave swallows of the year, migrants that had just arrived and were setting up housekeeping under the Florida Turnpike bridges. In Homestead, a quick spin around a couple of industrial parking lots found common mynas (locally referred to as "Burger Kinglets"), now countable for the ABA area. We made a quick circumnavigation of Lucky Hammock just outside the park entrance and then drove all the way to Flamingo to catch high tide in search of a bar-tailed godwit that had been there the week before. That bird was gone, but the small flock of marbled godwits and willets that it had been hanging out with were still around. In the Flamingo parking area, we had fantastic looks at a gray kingbird and then no less than three male shiny cowbirds! Prairie warblers sang continuously from the mangroves, entertaining us while we enjoyed a picnic lunch

at Flamingo while swallow-tailed kites soared by, having lunch as well, catching insects on the wing. A large flock of American white pelicans soared overhead. We then worked our way back toward the park entrance, stopping to tour the boardwalk at Mahogany Hammock and stroll around the world-famous Anhinga Trail. The highlight was without question the first smooth-billed ani that had been seen in Florida in a couple of years. We couldn't find it at first, but then it simply flew right over to us and perched five feet away. Then, to everyone's amazement, it began to forage in a bush where it snatched a frog for dinner! Leaving the park, we made a mandatory stop at "Robert Is Here", a fruit and veggie stand that makes the best key lime milkshakes in the world. We made a quick run down to Key Largo in search of a mangrove cuckoo, which we never did find. This elusive species seemed to be very scarce or late in arrival this year. After dinner in Homestead, we returned to Kendall for the night.

For our next day's adventure, we made a short stop at Castellow Hammock Park in search of Painted Buntings, but all we could find were lovely green females and droves of white-winged doves. Then we drove north to the Tamiami (Tampa to Miami) Trail and crossed the northern portion of the Everglades vast "river of grass". The Shark Valley section of the 'glades offers a different perspective than the road to Flamingo, so we walked the bike/tram road south for about a mile, seeing many white-eyed vireo, green heron, anhinga and the omnipresent Florida race of red-shouldered hawk. We continued west on a backcountry road, driving through the Miccosukee Indian lands and into the Big Cypress National Preserve. First, at mid-day, we stopped at a little nature trail where I hoped to find a barred owl. My hopes and dreams were wildly exceeded when we found a pair of these swamp denizens and they landed right over us, crazily calling to each other and dueting a barred owl operetta right before our amazed eyes! It was a display no one in the group had ever been privileged to witness before and was a highlight of the trip for many. Then the bouncing started. The next 25 miles of dirt road, we learned, had not been maintained by the county for over a year. It had some potholes. Potholes so deep that quite a few alligators were using them for bathtubs. I'm not making this up. Despite the grueling ride, or because of it, we had the rare opportunity to travel through a near pristine cypress swamp without being troubled by any other vehicles. At every roadside pool of dark tannin stained water, egrets, herons and aningas patrolled, white ibis waded among the cypress knees, and alligators were everywhere - in the water, on the roots, on the road. Eventually, we made it to one of the most beautiful places on earth, where the road crosses the Sweetwater Strand creek. While we had a picnic lunch, so did a nearby group of black vultures, feasting on a large dead alligator. The reptile's hide was so tough, they had been only able to make one hole through the throat and were trying to tug everything out through that opening. Cheers! A yellow-billed cuckoo provided diversion.

Day seven was devoted to chasing all over Miami with our local guide, Paul Bithorn. Our goal was to find all of the introduced exotic species now breeding in Florida and "countable" by the ABA, as well as everything else we could find along the way. Let's just list the silly birds we found and now won't ever have to go back and look at them again: white-winged parakeet, red-whiskered bulbul, spot-breasted oriole, Eurasian collared-dove, and monk parakeet. Our "real" birding took us to Bill Baggs

State Park on Key Biscayne, where despite not finding the LaSagra's flycatcher that had been seen on-again, off-again, we saw some wonderful birds. On the beach, we found lesser-black-backed gull, piping plover and an assortment of other shorebirds. Wandering through the beach scrub woods, we found two beautiful male Cape May Warblers, bronzed cowbird and bobolink. Then we revisited the Pelican Island Bird Rehabilitation Center in northeast Miami and this time we struck gold! Or red, as the case may be. The red-footed booby was present for all to admire. Here's the story on this bird: It was found late last fall, in poor health, on a beach near the rehab center. Brought in for rehab, the booby was kept for two weeks and released. It returned to sit on top of the outdoor cages and accepted food for a few weeks. Then it continued to appear irregularly and stopped accepting food. It was often seen out in the bay, catching it's own fish. Eventually, in May, it disappeared for good. Although there has been much discussion as to whether or not this bird is "countable" under ABA rules, the strong consensus is that it is a "good" bird and may be counted on your ABA area life list, since the booby was free-flying, and long-removed from being under any human influence or support. 'Nuf said. The day wound down with a visit to the home of artist Miguel Padura, a friend of Paul's, where we found the bulbul and, best yet, a male painted bunting in all its multi-hued glory. As light faded and so did we, a last stop at the Cutler Wetlands for some shorebirds.

Now for the excitement we were waiting for - our tour along the Florida Keys! Dagny Johnson State Park on Key Largo was our first stop. We quickly found one of our specialty tropical birds - black-whiskered vireo. Then over to Pennekamp State Park, which offered up few species. We continued down the lovely keys on a sunny day, crossing myriad bridges over tropical aquamarine water. Numerous magnificent frigatebirds hovered over the bridges on tropical thermals. We saw the great white heron form of the great blue heron, which only occurs in the Keys. Next stop was Grassy Key and Lake Edna, which is actually a series of fresh water ponds created by quarries when the Keys Highway was built. Both color forms of reddish egret were present and acting like they were a pair, both running around like nitwits chasing fish. Looking out over the ocean at shorebirds, we saw a flock of eight migrating whimbrel come in over the Caribbean for a landing on a friendly shore. An unusual find was an immature great black-backed gull, loafing along one of the key beaches. We continued on to Big Pine Key and No Name Key, where we encountered a host of Key Deer, up to 14 (catorce!) in one day! Many white-crowned pigeons flew back-and-forth across the road. We finished up at Porky's BBQ joint, an outdoor eatery featuring... guess what. After dinner, at dusk, our final stop for the day was the Marathon Airport, where we hoped to at least hear Antillean nighthawks, which had not yet been reported this year. In the fading light, we saw none, but in the distance were two calls of "ka-dick, ka-dick" as at least one bird had arrived for the season. We retired for the evening.

On our final day of birding, we drove down to No Name Key once again and this time were successful in finding a small group of white-crowned pigeons perched in a roadside dead tree, allowing perfect views. A drive down Sugarloaf Key in search of the elusive mangrove cuckoo proved fruitless. These birds just weren't around much this year. Drove me cuckoo! It seemed like there was a prairie warbler singing its head off

every hundred yards, though, with a smattering of black-whiskered vireos thrown in for tropical spice. As we entered the city of Key West, we took a leisurely stroll around the Tropical Gardens on Stock Island. In the heat of the day, and it was HOT, we saw little and continued on for an air-conditioned van tour of Key West proper. After lunch and checking into the motel, with its inviting large pool, only some of the group went out to Fort Zachary Taylor to continue our avian quest. In the broiling sun, there wasn't much to quest after, so we soon retired back to that delicious pool. Our farewell dinner was delightful, at Abbondanza Ristorante, a short walk from the motel. Everyone revealed their favorite birds and experiences during the trip over wine and relaxation.

Overall, our inaugural FOFA trip to Florida was a great success! We saw 161 bird species, with fantastic looks at most of them.

FOFA has more exciting trips coming up soon: Tanzania, Africa in 2011, California Spring in 2011 and the Pantanal of Brazil in 2012, plus others as they develop. As always, if there is a particular place you would like to visit with FOFA, let me know and we'll see if we can get a group together. Remember our motto at Flights of Fancy Adventures -

WE HAVE FUN!

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