

SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND

JANUARY 8 - 12, 2009

LEADER: BRENNAN MULROONEY

COMPILED BY: BRENNAN MULROONEY

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND JANUARY 8 - 12, 2009

Leader: Brennan Mulrooney

South Florida is well-known in the birding world for having several species, both native and introduced, found nowhere else in the ABA area. Our winter tour was designed to provide an escape from the winter weather being experienced in other parts of the country, while seeing many of these special species and visiting some of the destinations for which South Florida is rightly famous. This year's tour was a great success on all counts.

We had great weather; in fact it was almost *too* warm! (I did say "almost.") We enjoyed temperatures in the upper 70s and abundant sunshine, just like I ordered. With brutally cold temperatures throughout so much of the country, we felt pretty fortunate to be in sunny South Florida.

We started our tour with visits to two "sewage ponds" in Palm Beach County. Of course, calling Wakodahatchee and Green Cay Wetlands "sewage ponds" is like calling Mt. Rushmore a hill with some faces on it. These places are the Rolls Royce's of water treatment facilities. Each has an excellent boardwalk that takes you out into a gorgeous wetland where normally secretive marsh birds can be found right at your feet! We had many great views of things like Tricolored and Little Blue herons, Great Blue Herons and Anhingas on nests, and Blue-winged Teal and Mottled Ducks paddling around at close range, but the highlights were the superb views of Purple Gallinule and a breathtaking experience with a Sora only 10 feet away in perfect light. At Green Cay we saw many of the same species, with the notable addition of Limpkin. This Florida specialty has become quite reliable at this spot in the last few years and we were successful here once again.

On our way south to Florida City, we took a side trip out the Tamiami Trail where we found the defining bird of the Everglades system, the Snail Kite. We had great views of several birds foraging over the sawgrass marshes, occasionally dropping down on an unsuspecting snail and carrying it back to a perch. We were then able to watch as they used their specialized bills to quickly extract their juicy prize. This was a fitting way to cap a fantastic first day of our trip.

Our next two days were spent exploring Everglades National Park and a few select areas of South Dade County (the dump!). We continued our streak of fantastic views of gorgeous birds with a knock-out performance by a Roseate Spoonbill glowing in the afternoon light at Mrazek Pond and a very close, confiding American Bittern at Anhinga

Trail. Burrowing Owls put on a good show for us at the airport while singing Eastern Meadowlarks did their best to draw our attention away. An adult male Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was quite a sight as it sat on a wire with those improbably long tail feathers hanging down. Short-tailed Hawk is always a priority on this tour and, finally, we spotted one that was soaring with the vultures, right where it was supposed to be. A Canada Goose was a new species for the cumulative tour list. South Florida is one of the few places in North America where this species makes the Rare Bird Alert.

The last morning of our tour was spent searching the more urbanized areas of South Florida for some of the many exotic species that now call it home. Our main targets were those species deemed countable by the ABA, and we did quite well, finding them all in record time. First up were Red-whiskered Bulbuls, which distracted us from our great scope views of White-crowned Pigeons (a native in exotic habitat) that have adapted to this neighborhood. We found a pair of Monk Parakeets tending to their huge, bulky stick nest, then we changed locations and quickly found a small flock of White-winged Parakeets. A bit of searching in a neighborhood near the Miami Airport turned up many more Monk Parakeets and a very cooperative pair of Spot-breasted Orioles.

We had bagged all our targets for the morning with plenty of time to spare, so we headed off to Fort Lauderdale to see if we could relocate the Smooth-billed Ani flock that lives near the airport. I hadn't found them during scouting and there were no recent positive reports, but the way our morning was going, why not give it a shot? Well, the gamble paid off; in almost no time at all we found a group of 5 Smooth-billed Anis foraging in a weedy field. It's good to know that this family group persists, as it's the last consistently seen group in Florida. We were able to watch these odd cuckoo cousins for a good 20 minutes before it was time to head off to the airport for departures and goodbyes. What an end to an already fantastic trip!

ITINERARY:

January 8 - Tour orientation and dinner at nearby restaurant

January 9 - We started our trip with a spectacular visit to Wakodahatchee Wetlands where there seemed to be spectacular views around every corner and a Sora tried to steal the show; next was Green Cay and then after lunch we took a trip out Tamiami Trail before pulling into Florida City

January 10 - Morning birding at "Flynn's", Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area, A.K.A. Lucky Hammock and the Annex; the rest of our day was spent exploring Everglades National Park with stops at the Coe Visitor Center, Long Pine Key, Paurotis Pond, and Flamingo before having a picnic at West Lake. After lunch we returned to Flamingo and explored Eco Pond after scanning the flats, then had a great stop at Mrazek Pond.

January 11 - Morning birding in rural Homestead with a stop at the Homestead Airport; we then headed into the park and spent the rest of the morning at the

justly famous Anhinga Trail and birding the hardwood hammocks of Old Ingraham Hwy, ending with a visit to the wonderful park Visitor Center. After lunch we took a trip to the dump.

January 12 - It was back into the big city in search of those flashy exotics; we visited the cities of Kendall, Miami, and Miami Springs before making the drive back up to Fort Lauderdale for a last ditch search for anis before heading to the airport departures

BIRDLIST

Note: Species appearing in underlined print are birds of special note that are either rare, local specialties, or are otherwise generally hard to find. The taxonomic order and nomenclature follows American Ornithologist Union Check-list of North American Birds, 7th edition (including 47th suppl.).

Abbreviations:

FP: Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area, including Lucky Hammock and the Annex

ENP: Everglades National Park

WW: Wakodahatchee Wetlands

SD: South Dade County including Dump Marsh and Cutler Wetlands

WATERFOWL

Canada Goose – yes, this is actually a rare bird here!

(Muscovy Duck) - This species is considered to be an established exotic in Florida, but does not count for your ABA list. These birds bear little resemblance to their wild ancestors

American Wigeon – one in SD

Mottled Duck - we had great looks at WW, GC and Dump Marsh

Blue-winged Teal - great looks at WW and scattered other locations

Northern Shoveler – a few in SD

Northern Pintail – several at Mrazek Pond

Green-winged Teal – several at Mrazek

Ring-necked Duck - a nice close flock in a pond by the side of the Turnpike near WW

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe – several at scattered locations

PELICANS

American White Pelican - We saw several of these giants on the flats at Flamingo

Brown Pelican – one over WW was odd so far inland, the birds around Flamingo were in their expected location

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant - seen daily

DARTERS

Anhinga - many fantastic looks, birds in high breeding colors, birds on nests, and big, white, fluffy, awkward chicks (at least I didn't say ugly)

BITTERN & HERONS

American Bittern – three different individuals in one day was a shock, two at ENP and one at Dump Marsh

Least Bittern - heard only at Anhinga Trail

Great Blue Heron - many close looks, including nesting birds at WW

Great Egret - seen daily

Snowy Egret - fairly common and widespread

Little Blue Heron - several seen at scattered locations

Tricolored Heron - great close looks at WW and elsewhere

Reddish Egret – great looks at a dark morph adult feeding on the flats at Flamingo

Cattle Egret - seen daily

Green Heron - many fantastic close views

Black-crowned Night-Heron – several perched at WW

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – a distant adult foraging on the flats at Flamingo

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis - many seen daily

Glossy Ibis - good looks at WW and SD

Roseate Spoonbill - good looks at nesting birds at Paurotis Pond were overshadowed by phenomenal views at Eco Pond and Mrazek

STORKS

Wood Stork – First at GC then we saw several of these prehistoric looking creatures at scattered locations

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture - seen daily

Turkey Vulture - seen daily in direct comparison with the former species

HAWKS, EAGLES, & KITES

Osprey - we saw lots of these guys, including several active nests

Snail Kite – excellent views of foraging birds near the 40 mile bend of Tamiami Trail

Bald Eagle – a young bird at Flamingo and an adult in SD

Northern Harrier - many good looks including a couple adult males

Sharp-shinned Hawk – a couple of flybys

Cooper's Hawk - same

Red-shouldered Hawk - the most common hawk in South Florida, the resident race is distinctively pale

Broad-winged Hawk – a single bird seen in flight

Short-tailed Hawk – we finally spotted a juvenile light morph bird at Anhinga Trail

FALCONS & CARACARAS

American Kestrel - seen daily

Merlin – a distant perched bird at Dump Marsh

Peregrine Falcon - a juvenile sitting in the dirt at Lucky Hammock

RAILS & COOTS

Sora - we couldn't have had better views, a bird at WW walked around in the open practically at our feet!

Purple Gallinule - the same story here, point blank looks at this stunner at WW and also at Anhinga Trail where they are tough to come by

Common Moorhen - we saw the red bands around the tops of their legs at WW

American Coot - seen daily

LIMPKIN

Limpkin – I was starting to sweat this one, but then Frances saved the day spotting one at GC. We were able to spot a couple more before we left.

CRANES

Sandhill Crane – two pair in the field at FP

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS

Killdeer - several scattered about

STILTS & AVOCETS

American Avocet – two in SD were a nice surprise

SANDPIPERS

Greater Yellowlegs – a single bird in SD

Willet – the western subspecies is a common non-breeding bird in FL, we saw a couple at Flamingo

GULLS, TERNS, & SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull - hundreds at Flamingo

Ring-billed Gull - seen most days, thousands at the dump

Royal Tern – several on the flats at Flamingo

Forster's Tern – a couple at a golf course near WW

Black Skimmer – just one sitting at Flamingo

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon - seen daily

White-crowned Pigeon – Several in Kendall gave us superb views. This species just barely reaches the US in extreme South Florida

Eurasian Collared-Dove - ubiquitous in South Florida, the origin of their U.S. invasion

White-winged Dove – we saw a few in Kendall; the origin of these birds is not exactly clear; it has been speculated that escaped birds have become establish, but certainly this species is expanding in the core of its U.S. range and could have spread to FL on its own

Mourning Dove - seen daily, much daintier than the two former doves

Common Ground-Dove - little toy doves, we saw a few at Flynn's and elsewhere

PARROTS

Monk Parakeet - their huge bulky stick nests were quite impressive, we had excellent looks in Kendall

White-winged Parakeet – we found a small group near the airport in Miami

Aratinga sp. – we saw a few large flocks of parakeets of this genus, they were probably Red-masked Parakeets, but it was impossible to tell from our view

CUCKOOS AND ANIS

Smooth-billed Ani – What a way to end the tour! Scott spotted one in a distant bush and we eventually got great views of 5 of these bizarre tropical birds. This species used to be fairly common in FL, but they are now almost gone. The group we saw in Fort Lauderdale is the last regularly seen flock/family.

OWLS

Eastern Screech-Owl – fantastic looks at this diminutive owl in ENP

Burrowing Owl – several gave us great views at the Homestead Airport

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher - seen daily

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker - quite common in South Florida

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – one at Dump Marsh and one in Miami Springs

Downy Woodpecker - ENP

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Least Flycatcher – at least two at FP

Eastern Phoebe - seen daily

Great Crested Flycatcher - a few seen and heard, seen year round in South Florida

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – one stunning adult male in Homestead

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike - quite common in South Florida, especially compared to the Northeast where they have almost disappeared

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo - these guys sing just about year-round down here and we heard more than we saw

Blue-headed Vireo - we saw a few of these handsome vireos

CROWS & JAYS

Blue Jay - seen daily

American Crow - only in the Everglades

Fish Crow - only outside of the Everglades system, these guys stay along the coasts

SWALLOWS

Tree Swallow - we saw large numbers, especially over the Tamiami Trail

Northern Rough-winged Swallow – a small flock at WW

WRENS

House Wren – we heard several before we finally coaxed one into view

BULBULS

Red-whiskered Bulbul – Scott spotted a pair of these fancy countable exotics in Kendall in record time

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – a single bird in ENP was far south for this species

GNATCATCHERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher - common year-round in South Florida we saw many

THRUSHES AND ALLIES

Eastern Bluebird – great looks at a pair in ENP

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird - a common winter bird in South Florida, seen daily

Northern Mockingbird - seen daily

MYNAS & STARLINGS

European Starling - seen daily

Common Myna – the latest countable exotic for Florida, they are getting more common each year; we saw them in Florida City

WOOD WARBLERS

Orange-crowned Warbler – one at FP gave us close views

Northern Parula - seen a few times, a common winter warbler

Magnolia Warbler - uncommon in winter in South Florida, we had two

Black-throated Blue Warbler – rare in winter, we had one female in ENP

Yellow-rumped Warbler - quite common this year, seen daily

Black-throated Green Warbler – two together in ENP

Pine Warbler - several seen well in ENP

Prairie Warbler - common year round in FL we found several

Palm Warbler - “Western Palm Warbler” is the form that winters in South Florida, and they sure are common, many seen daily

Black-and-white Warbler – good looks at a couple different birds in FP and ENP

American Redstart – one at WW and another in ENP

Ovenbird - heard only

Common Yellowthroat - seen daily

SPARROWS & ALLIES

Savannah Sparrow - our most common winter sparrow, we had a few at Dump Marsh

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal - seen daily

Indigo Bunting - a couple at FP

Painted Bunting – same, but only green ones

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird - seen daily

Eastern Meadowlark - great looks at singing birds at the Homestead Airport

Common Grackle - seen daily

Boat-tailed Grackle - seen daily

Brown-headed Cowbird - a big flock near Mt. Trashmore and some in Homestead

Spot-breasted Oriole – we had great luck (thanks again Scott!) with a pair in Miami Springs that gave us breath taking views; a long established exotic in FL

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow – refreshingly uncommon

BUTTERFLIES

Giant Swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*)

Great Southern White (*Ascia monuste*)

Large Orange Sulphur (*Phoebis agarithe*)

Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)

Zebra Heliconian (*Heliconius charitonia*)

Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*)

Mangrove Buckeye (*Junonia evarete*)

White Peacock (*Anartia jatrophae*)

Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*)

Queen (*Danaus gilippus*)

Soldier (*Danaus eresimus*)

Long-tailed Skipper (*Urbanus proteus*)

OTHER CRITTERS

REPTILES

American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) an endangered species, we were lucky to see three in the Flamingo Marina

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) we saw some big'uns

Florida Cooter (*Pseudemys floridana*)

Florida Redbelly Turtle (*Pseudemys nelsoni*)

Red-eared Slider

Florida Softshell (*Apalone ferox*)

Brown Anole (*Anolis sagrei*) an exotic that is becoming abundant

Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) fairly common in South Florida, an exotic

MAMMALS

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

White-tailed Deer