

SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND

DECEMBER 8 - 12, 2010

LEADER: BRENNAN MULROONEY

COMPILED BY: BRENNAN MULROONEY

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

SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND

DECEMBER 8 - 12, 2010

Winter birding in Florida is attractive for several reasons, not the least of which is the weather. Although our first day of birding coincided with the arrival of a cold front accompanied by some light rain, the rest of the Atlantic seaboard was entombed in snow. During the remainder of our trip we enjoyed fine mild weather, and even one moderately warm day! But, of course, the birding was the main reason for our visit to the Sunshine State, and we had a great trip from that perspective as well.

We began our exploration of South Florida by visiting two of the fanciest sewage ponds to be found anywhere. Green Cay Wetlands and Wakodahatchee Wetlands are so nice, in fact, that they look a lot more like wildlife refuges than wastewater treatment facilities. Boardwalks that span the ponds at each facility offer unparalleled viewing experiences, and we had quite a memorable visit to each. There were Soras and Purple Gallinules running around at our feet, a Least Bittern lurking in the bulrush, Mottled Ducks paddling by at close range, a Limpkin screaming in flight, and a glorious Roseate Spoonbill posing for excited photographers. The diversity of birds at these spots was overshadowed only by how amazingly close we were able to get to them.

As we headed south toward Florida City, we made a quick detour out the Tamiami Trail in search of the iconic symbol of the Everglades, the Snail Kite. It wasn't long before we were enjoying fantastic views at close range as both a male and female foraged low over the sawgrass prairies. A brief stop at the Shark Valley entrance to Everglades National Park produced a truly staggering flock of Tree Swallows that must have numbered in the tens of thousands. They flew in great synchronized swirling clouds, creating amazing visual images, and looking more like smoke or some bizarre underwater creature than a flock of birds.

Our next two days were spent in and around the incomparable Everglades National Park. We drove the length of the main park road, all the way down to Flamingo, making many stops along the way. We walked through a mangrove forest, a tropical hardwood hammock, and pine flatwoods; drove through miles of sawgrass prairies; and saw fresh and saltwater marshes, extensive mudflats, and the mangrove islands of Florida Bay. At the marina in Flamingo we saw a family group of manatees. At Anhinga Trail we had American alligators and American Bittern right at our feet. We saw several Short-tailed Hawks, both light and dark morphs, adult and immature. We saw all flavors of herons: Great Blue Heron, Great White Heron, "Würdemann's Heron," Little Blue Heron (adult and the white immature plumage), Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Tricolored Heron, Reddish Egret, Cattle Egret, Green Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. We saw an amazing gathering of waterfowl at West Lake that contained more species than I've ever seen in one spot in South Florida. No, Everglades National Park did not disappoint.

We also spent some time birding around the suburbs of Miami. There were staggering numbers of birds near the Miami dump that included hundreds of White Ibis, Cattle Egrets, and Black Vultures. At a nearby marsh there were over a thousand gulls with at least 20 Lesser Black-backed Gulls among them. In the town of Kendall we spotted some flashy exotics. The real show-stoppers were a pair of Spot-breasted Orioles that allowed close approach and sat out in perfect light, much to the photographers' delight. Red-whiskered Bulbuls were also cooperative, though they had a nasty habit of moving just before the shutters could click. Large flocks of noisy Mitred Parakeets gave the morning a tropical feel, but soon we had to pack away our binoculars and head for the airport.

It was a wonderful trip with a wonderful group, and I can't wait for my next opportunity to visit this unique and fascinating part of our country.

ITINERARY:

December 8 - Tour orientation and dinner at nearby restaurant

December 9 - We started our trip with rainy, but very productive visits to Green Caye and Wakodahatchee Wetlands and then after lunch we took a trip out Tamiami Trail before pulling into Florida City

December 10 – Morning birding in rural Homestead with a stops at Flynn's, Lucky Hammock and the Annex, then we spent the rest of our day birding in incomparable Everglades National Park. We drove the length of the main park road with stops at the Coe Visitor Center, Long Pine Key, Paurotis Pond, Nine Mile Pond, West Lake for a picnic lunch, Mrazek Pond, and Flamingo. Optional post-dinner owling excursion this evening.

December 11 – Morning birding again in rural Homestead with stops at the Homestead General Airport, Larry Manfredi's yard, and Castellow Hammock; from there we headed over to South Dade County checking in on Cutler Wetlands and the dump. After a post-lunch siesta we headed back into Everglades visiting the Coe Visitor Center again, then took a splendid walk on Anhinga Trail at Royal Palm. We then returned to Lucky Hammock for the sunset and nightjar show.

December 12 - It was back into the big city in search of those flashy exotics; we spent most of our morning in the Kendall Baptist Hospital neighborhoods, then made a stop near the Miami Airport before making the drive back up to Fort Lauderdale for 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 48th suppl.).

Abbreviations:

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

ENP: Everglades National Park

WW: Wakodahatchee Wetlands

GC: Green Cay Wetlands

CW: Cutler Wetlands

WATERFOWL

(Egyptian Goose) - we saw at least two flocks, it will be interesting to see if they continue to get more numerous

Black-bellied Whistling Duck – three adults and a group of large chicks at WW

(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

Mottled Duck - we had great looks at WW and CW

American Wigeon - part of an unprecedented duck flock at West Lake

Northern Pintail - West Lake ENP

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

Northern Shoveler - West Lake

Green Winged Teal - ENP and GC

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

Lesser Scaup - West Lake

Ruddy Duck - West Lake

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 – Several in Flamingo over Florida Bay and also in Miami Shores

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant - seen daily

DARTERS

Anhinga - many fantastic looks with birds in high breeding colors on nests at WW

BITTERN & HERONS

American Bittern - point blank looks at Coe VC and Anhinga Trail

Least Bittern - glimpsed briefly at WW, heard only at Anhinga Trail

Great Blue Heron - many close looks, including nesting birds at WW
(Great White Heron) – this is currently regarded to be a subspecies of Great Blue with only a white morph, it was once considered to be a good species and my some day be again, we saw them in ENP and SD
(Würdemann's Heron) - the intergrade between Great White and Great Blue; we saw one each at Flamingo and Taylor Slough in ENP
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 - a dark morph adult feeding on the flats at Flamingo
Cattle Egret - seen daily; one at the dump had a strange black and white pattern
Green Heron - many fantastic close views
Black-crowned Night-Heron - several perched at WW and ENP
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron - an adult bird just a few feet from us at Mrazek

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis - many seen daily, hundreds at the dump
Glossy Ibis - good looks at WW and GC
Roseate Spoonbill - nice view of adults at WW and Paurotis Pond

STORKS

Wood Stork - Several 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 - unbeatable views of foraging birds near the 40 mile bend of Tamiami Trail
Bald Eagle - one young bird and a few adults in flight at scattered locations
Northern Harrier - a few scattered birds including a “Gray Ghost” at FP
Sharp-shinned Hawk - a couple of flybys
Cooper's Hawk - more common than the former
Red-shouldered Hawk - the most common hawk in South Florida, the resident race is distinctively pale
Short-tailed Hawk - both morphs seen well in ENP and in urban areas of South Dade County
Red-tailed Hawk - one juvenile at FP

FALCONS & CARACARAS

American Kestrel - seen daily
Merlin - a single flyby on our way to the airport
Peregrine Falcon - a high soaring bird at Flamingo

RAILS & COOTS

King Rail - heard only at Anhinga Trail

Sora - nice views at WW

Purple Gallinule - point blank looks at several at WW

Common Moorhen - lots of good looks

American Coot - seen daily

LIMPKIN

Limpkin - seen at GC and across the street from WW

CRANES

Sandhill Crane - four flying distantly at FP

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS

Killdeer - a few at FP

SANDPIPERS

Willet - Flamingo

Lesser Yellowlegs - a few at CW

Marbled Godwit - 3 at Flamingo

Short-billed Dowitcher - one at Flamingo

GULLS, TERNS, & SKIMMERS

Bonaparte's Gull - a surprise at CW

Laughing Gull - hundreds at Flamingo, THOUSANDS at CW

Ring-billed Gull - seen most days

Herring Gull - in the gull flock at CW

Lesser Black-backed Gull - about 20 at CW

Caspian Tern - good numbers on the flats at Flamingo

Royal Tern - several on the flats at Flamingo

Sandwich Tern - one with the other terns at Flamingo

Black Skimmer - a few on the flats at Flamingo

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon - seen daily

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

White-winged Dove - we saw a few in Kendall and ENP; 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 pair west of Homestead

PARROTS

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

Mitred Parakeet - we had a large flock feeding in a fruiting tree in Kendall

OWLS

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

Burrowing Owl - great views at the Homestead Airport

(*Bubo plasticus*) - spotted perched on the roof of a gas station, their preferred habitat

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Lesser Nighthawk - these are now seen annually in small numbers wintering in South Florida. We saw a few at dusk at FP

Whip-poor-will - we heard at least two and had quick views of a perched bird at FP

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird - several seen at flowering bushes

Rufous Hummingbird - these winter in small numbers in FL, we had quick looks at one at Castellow Hammock

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher - seen daily

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker - quite common in South Florida

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - one on a cement pole in Kendall gave us great looks

Downy Woodpecker - one at WW

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Phoebe - seen daily

Great Crested Flycatcher - a couple at FP

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher - great looks at FP

SHRIKES

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

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo - brief views at FP

Blue-headed Vireo - seen briefly with a warbler flock at GC

CROWS & JAYS

Blue Jay - a few here and there

American Crow - only in the Everglades

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

SWALLOWS

Tree Swallow - a breathtakingly large flock at Shark Valley twisted and turned like a school of fish, just an amazing sight

Northern Rough-winged Swallow - small flocks at WW and GC

Cave Swallow - just a brief look at a flyby just outside ENP

WRENS

House Wren - we heard a couple and saw one in ENP

Marsh Wren - brief view of a skulker at GC

BULBULS

Red-whiskered Bulbul - trying to distract from the Spot-breasted Orioles!

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet - uncommon in South Florida, one at GC

GNATCATCHERS

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

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird - a common winter bird in South Florida, we heard lots of them

Northern Mockingbird - seen daily

Brown Thrasher - one at FP

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

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

Magnolia Warbler - one at FP

Yellow-rumped Warbler - we saw a fair number, this species is somewhat irruptive this far south

Pine Warbler - a big flock at GC, scattered elsewhere

Prairie Warbler - common year round in FL we found a couple

Palm Warbler - "Western Palm Warbler" is the form that commonly winters in South Florida, but two "Yellow Palm Warblers" at FP were a real surprise

American Redstart - just a couple quick looks

Northern Waterthrush - heard calling at FP

Common Yellowthroat - multiple looks, a common year-round species

SPARROWS & ALLIES

Savannah Sparrow - a few at FP and the Homestead Airport

White-crowned Sparrow - uncommon in South Florida, one at FP

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal - a common resident

Rose-breasted Grosbeak - rare in winter in FL, we had a young male at FP

Painted Bunting - in short supply this year, but we managed to see a green one at FP

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird - WW, GC, and ENP

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

Common Grackle - seen daily

Boat-tailed Grackle - seen daily

Shiny Cowbird - quite unusual in winter, we saw at least four at Larry's feeders

Brown-headed Cowbird - 3 in Flamingo

Spot-breasted Oriole - spectacular views in Kendall, we watched a pair foraging at close range in great light for several minutes; voted favorite bird of the tour

Baltimore Oriole - a female in the tree with the Spot-breasts was a rare winter find

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow

BUTTERFLIES

Polydamas Swallowtail (*Battus polydamas*)

Great Southern White (*Ascia monuste*)

Large Orange Sulphur (*Phoebis agarithe*)

Barred Yellow (*Eurema दौरa*)

Cassius Blue (*Leptotes cassius*)

Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)

Julia Heliconian (*Dryas julia*)

Zebra Heliconian (*Heliconius charitonia*)

White Peacock (*Anartia jatrophae*)

Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*)

Queen (*Danaus gilippus*)

Hammock Skipper (*Polygonus leo*)

Dorantes Longtail (*Urbanus dorantes*)

Long-tailed Skipper (*Urbanus proteus*)

Checkered-Skipper (*Pyrgus sp.*)

Ocola Skipper (*Panoquina ocola*)

OTHER CRITTERS

REPTILES

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

Florida Redbelly Turtle (*Pseudemys nelsoni*)

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

Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) fairly common in South Florida, but many were killed by a cold snap last winter, an exotic

MAMMALS

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) - quite a surprise to see a family group in the marina at Flamingo, a tour first!