

DRY TORTUGAS

APRIL 28 - MAY 1, 2010

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Our Dry Tortugas tour got off to a rough start this year. Unfortunately, due to the damage our charter boat sustained in bad weather on a trip previous to ours, we had to devise an alternate plan to get to the Tortugas. Instead of canceling the trip, we decided to take advantage of the excellent ferry service that brings visitors daily to this amazing and unique national park. Our plan was very successful, and the birding was fantastic—more than I could have hoped for.

After breakfast on the ferry, we quickly started seeing birds as we were leaving the harbor in Key West. There were Least Terns and Laughing Gulls all around, and a few of us got on the Roseate Terns that were perched on a channel marker as we sped past. Once out in open water, we started seeing a few Northern Gannets, and then we got into a small group of Bridled Terns. Bridled Terns are very similar to the Sooty Terns that nest by the thousands at the Tortugas, but they are almost never seen there—only on the crossing. The Bridled Terns weren't there for long, but we were able to make out their whitish tails and napes, and the gray tone to their backs contrasting with the blacker cap. As we approached the park, the boat slowed for us to get great looks at a Brown Booby perched on a buoy.

Once on Garden Key we quickly realized that there were a lot of birds around. Swallows were swirling about, Indigo Buntings and Blackpoll Warblers were zipping past, and there were Yellow-billed Cuckoos everywhere! At one point we were looking at a gumbo limbo tree that had at least 10 cuckoos in it, along with a host of warblers and vireos. By the end of the day we had tallied 17 species of warblers including Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Worm-eating, Ovenbird, Kentucky, and Hooded. We had amazing point-blank views at almost all of them. Other migrants we encountered included Eastern Wood-Pewee; Veery; Gray-cheeked, Swainson's, and Wood thrushes; Red-eyed and Black-whiskered vireos; Summer Tanager; Rose-breasted and Blue grosbeaks; Dickcissel; and Bobolink.

Of course the migrants aren't the only show at Dry Tortugas, and we took time to marvel at the clouds of Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns constantly in the air over Bush Key. Hundreds of Brown Noddies covered the north coaling dock pilings like Christmas tree ornaments. Their frosty white caps looked as if they had been airbrushed on by an artist. Out on Long Key the Magnificent Frigatebird nest colony was in full swing, and we could see several males with their huge bright red gular pouches fully inflated in hopes of attracting a mate. Also in the snags out on Long Key we found at least 11 Peregrine Falcons waiting for their turn to strafe the tern colony for a meal.

On our return trip to Key West the captain of our ferry took us over close to Hospital Key where the Masked Boobies nest. There were well over 50 on the island and we saw several take flight, showing us all of their field marks. It was such a strange experience to drive up to this tiny little pile of sand in the middle of the ocean and see what must be the

vast majority of the Masked Boobies currently in the ABA area. Later, as we continued on towards Key West, an adult Pomarine Jaeger flew right over the boat, giving us a very nice view.

The next two days were spent birding Key West and the Lower Keys. We were able to find many birds that we didn't see at the Tortugas and get better looks at a few others. On Big Pine Key we found the distinctively diminutive Key deer tamely munching grass on the side of the road. We added birds like Broad-winged Hawk, Common Ground-Dove, Chimney Swift, the Keys race of White-eyed Vireo, Fish Crows of the oddly out of place Stock Island colony, the newly countable Common Myna, and a stunning Blackburnian Warbler. We got better looks at Bobolink, and we had fantastic scope views of Roseate Terns sitting with Least and Sandwich terns for comparison.

ITINERARY:

Apr 28 - Tour orientation

Apr 29 - Morning departure from Key West on the Yankee Freedom II for our day trip to Dry Tortugas National Park; birding was on Garden Key, but we stopped by Hospital Key for a view of the Masked Booby colony

Apr 30 - All day birding in the Key West area with stops at Fort Zachary Taylor State Park, Key West Tropical Forest and Botanical Garden, Indigenous Park, and Little Hamaca Park

May 1 - Early departure for Lower Sugarloaf Key / Saddlebunch Keys, Big Pine Key (Key Deer Blvd, Watson Hammock Trail, Blue Hole, Long Beach Rd) and No Name Key; return to Key West after lunch at the No Name Pub

BIRDLIST

Note: Species appearing in **bold 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.).

WATERFOWL

(Muscovy Duck) - This species is considered to be an established exotic in Florida, but does not count for your ABA list (by most accounts anyway).

Blue-winged Teal - distant flying pair from the ferry

GANNETS AND BOOBIES

Masked Booby - about 50 birds on Hospital Key, their only NA breeding site

Brown Booby - all immature birds this year, but we had some great looks on channel markers

Northern Gannet - great views of feeding birds on our way to the Tortugas, provided a good size comparison to the smaller Brown Booby

PELICANS

Brown Pelican

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant

FRIGATEBIRDS

Magnificent Frigatebird - spectacular views, especially displaying males on Long Key with their gular sacs inflated

HERONS, EGRETS AND BITTERNs

Great Blue Heron

(Great White Heron) - currently considered to be a subspecies of Great Blue that only has a white morph

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret

Green Heron - one at the fountain on Garden Key and several nesting at Blue Hole

Cattle Egret - several stalking Garden Key

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Turkey Vulture

HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES

Osprey

Broad-winged Hawk - well spotted by Sue, perched along the road in Key West

FALCONS AND CARACARAS

Merlin - at least one seen hunting Garden Key

Peregrine Falcon - at least one seven perched on Bush and Long Keys

RAILS & COOTS

Common Moorhen

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover - a small flock moved between the pilings and the beaches on Garden Key

Semipalmated Plover - on the beach on Bush Key

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Spotted Sandpiper

Lesser Yellowlegs - a very tired bird on Garden Key

Whimbrel - a couple on the pilings at Garden Key

Ruddy Turnstone - they take the place of the city pigeon on Garden Key, begging for crumbs around the picnic tables

GULLS & TERNS

Laughing Gull

Herring Gull - at least one immature in Key West

Brown Noddy - we saw the only nesting colony in NA, where thousands of birds were constantly present, we had our best views on the north coaling docks, it's estimated that about 4500 nest annually

Sooty Tern - the nesting colony on Bush Key has as many as 80,000 birds, the number was probably less than that this year, but it was still an amazing sight, and sound!

Bridled Tern - at least 3 adults seen on our crossing to Dry Tortugas

Least Tern - large numbers around Key West

Roseate Tern - brief views just outside the harbor and in flight on the way to the Tortugas, then excellent scope views in Key West

Royal Tern - several at various locations

Sandwich Tern - several around Key West

SKUAS & JAEGER

Pomarine Jaeger - a single bird gave us a close flyby on our return from the Tortugas

PIGEONS AND DOVES

Rock Pigeon

White-crowned Pigeon - great views in Key West

Eurasian Collared-Dove - even on the Tortugas

Mourning Dove

Common Ground-Dove

CUCKOOS

Yellow-billed Cuckoo - probably close to 100 birds on Garden Key were very cool to see

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift - Fort Zach

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird - a couple of females still lingering

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Wood-Pewee

Great Crested Flycatcher

Eastern Kingbird

Gray Kingbird - a couple at Garden Key had a few birders excited

VIREOS AND ALLIES

White-eyed Vireo - great views of the "Keys White-eyed Vireo" on No Name

Red-eyed Vireo

Black-whiskered Vireo - many great views

CROWS & JAYS

Fish Crow - we saw a single bird from the Stock Island colony

SWALLOWS

Tree Swallow - one on Big Pine

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow - a number at the Tortugas

Cliff Swallow - one with the Barn Swallow flock on Big Pine

Barn Swallow

THRUSHES

Veery - a couple in the Tortugas

Gray-cheeked Thrush - same as the former

Swainson's Thrush - on the Tortugas and back in the Keys

Wood Thrush - same as the former

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird

Northern Mockingbird

MYNAS & STARLINGS

European Starling

Common Myna - now a countable species

WOOD WARBLERS

Tennessee Warbler - several at the Tortugas

Northern Parula - Key West

Yellow Warbler - we saw a few including at least one male “**Golden Warbler**” at the Tortugas

Chestnut-sided Warbler - one at the Tortugas

Magnolia Warbler - at least two or three of these handsome warblers

Cape May Warbler - at least one at the Tortugas and one in Key West

Black-throated Blue Warbler - stunning birds

Black-throated Green Warbler - one at the Botanical Gardens

Blackburnian Warbler - our last new bird of the trip, she gave us fantastic long views

Prairie Warbler - both at the Tortugas and in the Keys

Palm Warbler - only a couple of birds that were in breeding plumage

Blackpoll Warbler - several males and females

Black-and-white Warbler - only one or two

American Redstart - seen all three days

Worm-eating Warbler - at least one at the Tortugas

Ovenbird - a couple of birds, both at the Tortugas and in the Keys

Northern Waterthrush - nice views in the Tortugas and in the Keys

Kentucky Warbler - great views of one at the Tortugas that foraged in the open for several minutes

Common Yellowthroat - several of these guys

Hooded Warbler - one female was elusive around the toilets in the Tortugas

TANAGERS & ALLIES

Summer Tanager - one at the Tortugas

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal - only up in Big Pine

Rose-breasted Grosbeak - nice views of males and females

Blue Grosbeak - a pair at the Tortugas was a nice surprise

Indigo Bunting - several gorgeous males enlivened our stay

Dickcissel - a very nice view of one at the Tortugas

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Bobolink - best views at Fort Zach

Red-winged Blackbird - only in the Keys

Common Grackle - only in the Keys

Orchard Oriole - one at the Tortugas

Baltimore Oriole - at least one at the Tortugas

OTHER CRITTERS

Flyingfish sp. - big ones and small ones and maybe some in between ones

Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) - small pale race of the keys

Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) - the diminutive “Key Deer” of Big Pine

Loggerhead Turtle (*Caretta caretta*) - This is the most common sea turtle in the area and probably accounts for most or all of our turtle sightings.

Six-lined Racerunner (*Cnemidophorus sexlineatus*) - one of the few native lizards

Marine/Cane Toad (*Bufo marinus*)