

DRY TORTUGAS

APRIL 10 - 13, 2005

LEADERS:
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SUMMARY

It is no exaggeration to say that a brief tour to the Dry Tortugas is unique among all the birding experiences in the U.S./Canada.

Not only is the birding something special, including Gulf Stream pelagics, one-of-a-kind nesting colonies, and the unpredictability of rarities grounded on remote tropical islands. But the Tortugas experience also involves our chartered boat limited to just the 10 or 12 of us, comfortable sleeping arrangements and excellent meals on board, a historical fort of epic proportions dating back to pre-Civil War days, the chance to view underwater marine life by snorkling or by spotlight in the fort's shallow moat, and the pre- or post-tour option of playing tourist at the many attractions in Key West.

Our 70-mile passage to the Tortugas begins with a pre-dawn departure from Key West, and after breakfast we are scanning the waters of the Gulf Stream for the possibility of pelagic species. Birds such as these are unpredictable almost everywhere, and this year's trip yields some fly-by gannets and frigatebirds, a distant Pomarine Jaeger with an especially long and impressive tail, some northbound Barn Swallows, plus a lone Cave Swallow zipping past the bow of the boat at one point. We also carefully check the channel markers, buoys, and flotsam we pass for birds at rest, and we are rewarded with groups of Brown Boobies crowded on various buoys less than 50 yards from the boat. We also see Brown Pelicans, close-up frigatebirds, and some terns – most notably a couple Roseates next to some Royal and Sandwich terns.

As we arrive at the Tortugas at midday, we first pass by birdless East and Middle Keys, which are nothing more than unvegetated sand bars, but at nearby Hospital Key there is the colony of 40 or so Masked Boobies waiting for us. Here is the only nesting site of this species in the continental U.S., and landing on this protected sand bar is not possible, but we have nice views of the birds as the boat bobs off shore. We also notice an unexpected and lone adult Northern Gannet with an injured wing resting among them. One of the boobies seems especially curious about our presence and repeatedly flies back and forth past the boat just a few yards away: unfortunately it's so close that aiming and focusing our cameras is a challenge.

Naturally, we spend most of our time on this and the next day at Garden Key, its acreage dominated by the imposing brick walls of Fort Jefferson. Both around and inside the fort are trees and shrubs offering temporary refuge for whatever migrants might drop in. When there are rains or cold fronts passing through and grounding birds, both regular migrants and stray rarities alike, the birding can be nothing short of spectacular. During our brief visit the weather is uneventful, but we still manage to turn up a respectable total of 17 warbler species, most of these attracted to the bubbling fountain inside the fort. Equally attractive are the shaded benches next to the fountain, where birders can easily see most of the migrants around.

Probably the best of the warblers we see is a male Cerulean, but just as interesting is the

obviously exhausted Worm-eating Warbler which flies in to the fountain and promptly falls asleep. Other birds of note on Garden Key in and around the fort include Purple Gallinule trying to hide in a sea grape, Black-whiskered Vireo, Painted Bunting, female Shiny Cowbird, and even a disturbingly out-of-place starling. Garden Key also provides us with close looks at a sub-adult Roseate Tern resting on pilings by the boat dock, our best looks at Brown Noddys roosting on the coal dock pilings (these noddys nest among the tens of thousands of Sooty Terns on adjacent Bush Key), and the ever-present frigatebirds (coming from their colony on nearby Long Key) drifting over the fort.

There is also time during our brief stay at the Tortugas to motor over to nearby Loggerhead Key. Here a lighthouse is the dominant structure, but unlike Garden Key there are few trees. Almost every year Loggerhead holds something different, and this year we observe (and puzzle over) an oddly plumaged Broad-winged Hawk, there is an unexpected American Golden-Plover on the beach, and we have our only real looks at Gray Kingbirds. The volunteer lighthouse keepers also relate the previous week's incident of some Cuban refugees who had reached Loggerhead, and we see their small boat and other remains of their brief landing before the Coast Guard arrived. The Dry Tortugas, it seems, attracts and offers refuge to both human and avian strays.

ITINERARY

10 April - Meet at the Hampton Inn in Key West for transfer to the *Playmate*, where we have an evening orientation session, and we turn in for the night in our cabins.

11 April - Pre-dawn departure for the Tortugas via some booby buoys and the Gulf Stream; arrival at Hospital Key and Garden Key/Fort Jefferson.

12 April - Garden and Loggerhead Keys, skiff runs to Bush and Long Keys, and evening moat walk.

13 April - final check of Garden Key and return to Key West.

BIRD LIST (Species listed in **boldface** were the main highlights of the tour, either as unexpected rarities or highly sought South Florida specialties.)

Masked Booby (about 40 individuals on Hospital Key)

Brown Booby (several on various buoys)

Northern Gannet (injured adult on Hospital Key)

Brown Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

Magnificent Frigatebird (a few on Long Key with red gular sacs fully inflated)

Great Blue Heron

Snowy Egret

Cattle Egret

White Ibis
Osprey
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Broad-winged Hawk (unusually plumaged immature on Loggerhead Key)
American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon
Purple Gallinule (hiding in a sea grape; nice spotting, Christina)
Black-bellied Plover
American Golden-Plover (unexpected on Loggerhead Key)
Willet
Spotted Sandpiper
Whimbrel
Ruddy Turnstone
Pomarine Jaeger (an adult with a fully grown tail flew past the boat)
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Royal Tern
Sandwich Tern
Roseate Tern (nice looks at a second-year bird perched on the docks)
Sooty Tern (including parents attending a baby on Bush Key – aw!)
Brown Noddy
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Gray Kingbird (best looks on Loggerhead Key)
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Black-whiskered Vireo
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Bank Swallow
Cave Swallow (an individual of the Caribbean race *fulva* flew by the boat)
Barn Swallow
Swainson's Thrush
Gray Catbird
European Starling (unusual here!)
Tennessee Warbler
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler

Prairie Warbler
Palm Warbler
Cerulean Warbler (the most unexpected of our 17 warbler species)
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Prothonotary Warbler
Worm-eating Warbler
Northern Waterthrush
Kentucky Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler
Summer Tanager
Indigo Bunting
Painted Bunting
Shiny Cowbird (female carefully IDed, photographed & later compared with Brown-headed photos)
Orchard Oriole

ALSO SEEN (P = pelagic, M = evening moat walk w/Christian):

Bottle-nosed Dolphin (P)
Spotted Dolphin (P)

Green Sea Turtle (P)

Brown Anole

Nurse Shark
Goliath Grouper
Spanish Mackerel (P)
Flying Fish (P)
Gray Snapper (M)
Needle Guard (M)
Yellow-spotted Stingray (M)
Hardhead Minnow (M)

Hermit Crab (M)
Florida Crawfish (Spiny Lobster) (M)

Bahamian Star (M)
Sea Cucumber (M)
Sea Anemone (M)
Long-spined Urchin (M)
Short-spined Urchin (M)
Upside-down Jellyfish (M)
Conch (M)

Portuguese Man O'War (P)