

SOUTH FLORIDA

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SUMMARY

Coming from northern Minnesota, I am always somewhat apprehensive about this spring tour to South Florida, wondering just how hot and humid it's going to be this year. You see, 70 degrees is plenty warm enough to suit me, considering that it hardly ever hits 90 where I live. Luckily, the weather both this year and last was relatively pleasant, with the humidity not reaching oppressive levels, and the thermometer never approaching 90. Sure, the mosquitoes were a bother on our day in the Everglades, but elsewhere they posed little difficulty (and, of course, they're nothing a Minnesotan can't handle). No, there aren't any alligators in the North Woods, nor is there any traffic in Duluth like there is in Miami. But the 'gators pretty much ignore you, and Miami's traffic isn't bad if you schedule your day to search for exotics on a Sunday.

So, I found myself again enjoying this year's tour, as Florida itself and its birds are certainly interesting, even fascinating at times. It helped, of course, that the birds we sought cooperated for the most part. Most of this tour's specialties are a challenge to find, with some of them possible at only one or two of the places on our itinerary. Consider, for example, such birds as Snail Kite, Short-tailed Hawk, Limpkin, Mangrove Cuckoo, Smooth-billed Ani, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Swainson's Warbler, Bachman's Sparrow, the Cape Sable race of the Seaside Sparrow, and Shiny Cowbird. All of these are specifically targeted on these tours, some of them being essentially exclusive to Florida, and we were successful with all of them. To be honest, though, I can envision any of these being missed.

Beginning in the fabled Florida Keys, thanks to a tip from fellow VENT leader Brennan Mulrooney, we had great looks at a responsive Mangrove Cuckoo, but only after missing it the day before at two places where I had found it in the past. We never did see another one. Then in the truly unique Everglades National Park, we finally had nice scope views of the "Cape Sable" Seaside Sparrow at the "usual spot," but it took a while before it sang, and I had no "Plan B" if none decided to sing. (And you can quote me on that!) Next, there were the usual Shiny Cowbirds at Flamingo, apparently the only consistent location for this Florida specialty of dubious morals. (They really are shiny, though!) On the way out of the park, two Limpkins luckily decided to walk across the road in front of the van, and we didn't see another until the last day of the tour.

The Miami area was next, where we had very close looks at a migrant Swainson's Warbler, a highly sought species that easily escapes detection (indeed, we saw no others). Then we headed west to the opposite coast via the Tamiami Trail, and as usual along this road it didn't take too long to find Snail Kites, one of Florida's truly trademark specialties; again, though, I couldn't confidently say I'd be able to find some elsewhere. Perhaps the most satisfying target bird was next on the agenda in Naples. I had last seen the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker in this particular stand of pines on the edge of town back in the 1980s. Much to my relief, despite relentless development all around, a pair of woodpeckers was still there both last year and this.

In the Lake Okechobee region of South Florida, this tour has two highly sought

specialties to find. Fortunately, the habitat is still favorable for Bachman's Sparrows at one (but only one) area not too distant from our Clewiston hotel. Far more of a challenge at this time of year is the Short-tailed Hawk, the only quintessential Florida specialty which is easier to find in winter. In spring and summer, it is almost never seen except in flight, usually at a distance, and most are relatively nondescript dark-morph individuals. Both last year and this, however, we have had excellent looks at low-circling Short-taileds, and both of them were handsome light-morph birds. Our tour ended the next day in Fort Lauderdale with the Smooth-billed Ani, a Florida specialty in serious decline which now no one seems to consistently find anywhere except at a small landscaped park by Lauderdale's busy airport.

But there was so much more to this year's tour than searching for specific and difficult target birds. There were spectacular Roseate Spoonbills, Wood Storks, and Swallow-tailed Kites. We found White-crowned Pigeons, Gray Kingbirds, Florida Scrub-Jays, and Black-whiskered Vireos, about the only Florida specialties which *aren't* hard to find (don't ask me about last year's silent vireos, though.) There was the challenge of all those parakeets, bulbuls, mynas, orioles, and other suburban exotics: some of which can be quite elusive, others whose "countability" is hard to figure out. And there were all those migrants which were just passing through the state: we had no fewer than 23 shorebird species and 22 species of warblers. The warblers were especially impressive, considering we had no weather to ground them into view, and, since all of this year's participants were also on the Tortugas tour, we actually saw a total of 26 species.

ITINERARY

April 13 - Early dinner in Key West with the Tortugas veterans.

April 14 - Unsuccessful cuckoo search on Sugarloaf/Saddlebunch Keys; afternoon at Key West's Botanical Gardens and Indigenous Park; early dinner and evening nighthawk search on Stock I. (Commons only; still too early for Antilleans).

April 15 - Return to Botanical Gardens and Indigenous Park, and successful cuckoo search on Geiger/Boca Chica Keys; afternoon drive to Florida City through the keys, with stops at Big Pine Key, Ohio Key, Key Colony Beach, and Key Largo's state botanical site.

April 16 - All day in Everglades National Park, including the "Cape Sable" Seaside Sparrow slough, Paurotis Pond, West Lake's boardwalk, the Flamingo area, Anhinga Trail, Lucky Hammock, and Long Pine Campground after dark (for Chuck-will's-widow and screech-owls).

April 17 - Miami and vicinity for migrants and exotics (parakeets, bulbuls, mynas, orioles), including Kendall, A. D. Barnes Park, Matheson Hammock, Miami Springs, and two Hialeah shopping centers (for mynas); return to Florida City via the Cutler Ridge Cave Swallow bridge.

April 18 - North to the Tamiami Trail, and west to Naples with stops for Snail Kites, at Shark Valley's visitors center, along the Loop Road, at Big Cypress Bend's boardwalk, Faka Union Canal (for manatees), and Eagle Lakes Park.

April 19 - Dawn at the Red-cockaded Woodpecker pine stand on the edge of Naples (still there!), followed by Marco Island's Tigertail Beach, return to Eagle Lakes Park, and Fort Meyers Beach/Estero Lagoon).

April 20 - Morning at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary; afternoon drive to Clewiston, via Co. Road 731, Rainy Slough, Sheppard Rd., Venus area, and Fisheating Creek WMA.

April 21 - Morning return to 731/Rainy Slough/Sheppard Rd./Fisheating Creek/Venus area; afternoon return to Clewiston via Lake Placid area, Co. Roads 621 & 721, and Hwy. 78.

April 22 - Drive to Fort Lauderdale, with stops at Clewiston's marina, John Stretch Park, South Haven, Belle Glade, Hwy. 880 (!), Wakotahatchee Wetlands (!), Fort Lauderdale Airport's ani park, and Pembroke Pines.

April 23 - Return home.

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

Fulvous Whistling-Duck (unexpected along Hwy. 880)

Muscovy Duck (FL birders consider these barnyard-like ducks "countable"!)

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Bobwhite (mostly heard)

Pied-billed Grebe

Northern Gannet (quite unexpected adult diving close to shore at Fort Meyers Beach)

American White Pelican (Flamingo only)

Brown Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

Anhinga (incl. babies at Wakotahatchee Wetlands)

Magnificent Frigatebird

American Bittern (Tamiami Trail fly-by)

Least Bittern (close looks at Wakotahatchee)

Great Blue Heron (incl. "Great White" Heron, possibly a distinct species, and a "Wurdemann's" hybrid)

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret
Cattle Egret
Green Heron (incl. a nest w/babies – aw!)
Black-crowned Night-Heron (Rainy Slough fly-by seen by Bron)
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
White Ibis
Glossy Ibis (incl. a big flock at the "fruit dump" south of Immokalee)
Roseate Spoonbill (only at Paurotis Pond in the Everglades)
Wood Stork (best look at Eagle Lakes Park)
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Osprey (abundant in S. Florida)
Swallow-tailed Kite
Snail Kite (along the Tamiami Trail)
Bald Eagle
Cooper's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk (also abundant)
Broad-winged Hawk
Short-tailed Hawk (a great view of a light-morph adult circling low over Fisheating Creek)
Red-tailed Hawk
Crested Caracara (west and north of Okechobee)
American Kestrel
Merlin
King Rail (heard-only at Rainy Slough)
Sora (Wakodahatchee)
Purple Gallinule (best views at Wakotahatchee)
Common Moorhen (incl. babies)
American Coot
Limpkin (Lucky Hammock road and Clewiston)
Sandhill Crane (incl. some with young)
Black-bellied Plover
Snowy Plover (Tigertail Beach)
Wilson's Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Piping Plover (many at Tigertail Beach)
Killdeer
Black-necked Stilt (incl. an adult on nest at Wakotahatchee)
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Solitary Sandpiper
Willet
Spotted Sandpiper
Whimbrel
Ruddy Turnstone
Red Knot (Tigertail Beach)

Sanderling
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper (many along Hwy. 880)
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher (= 23 shorebird species)
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Sandwich Tern
Least Tern
Black Skimmer
Rock Pigeon
White-crowned Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Common Ground-Dove
Monk Parakeet ("countable"; Miami Springs and Fort Lauderdale)
White-winged Parakeet ("countable"; Kendall)
Yellow-chevroned Parakeet (Kendall; not "countable" – yet)
Black-hooded Parakeet (Fort Lauderdale; not "countable")
Mired/Red-faced Parakeet (unidentified fly-bys in Kendall; not "countable")
Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Mangrove Cuckoo (great view of a responsive bird at the Geiger/Boca Chica Keys creek)
Smooth-billed Ani (now reliable only at Fort Lauderdale's airport)
Eastern Screech-Owl (in the spotlight at Long Pine Campground)
Great Horned Owl (heard-only)
Burrowing Owl (best look on Marco I.)
Barred Owl (very responsive on the loop road in the Big Cypress!)
Common Nighthawk
Chuck-will's-widow (with the screech-owls!)
Chimney Swift
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Red-headed Woodpecker (Eagle Lakes Park)
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Red-cockaded Woodpecker (that Naples pine stand is still intact)
Northern Flicker
Pileated Woodpecker

Acadian Flycatcher (Key West Botanical Gardens)
Great Crested Flycatcher
Eastern Kingbird
Gray Kingbird
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (Key West)
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Yellow-throated Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo (A. D. Barnes Park)
Red-eyed Vireo
Black-whiskered Vireo (much easier than in 2004)
Blue Jay
Florida Scrub-Jay
American Crow
Fish Crow
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Cave Swallow (individuals of the West Indies race under the "usual" bridge in Cutler Ridge)
Barn Swallow
Tufted Titmouse
Brown-headed Nuthatch (with the Red-cockaded in Naples)
Red-whiskered Bulbul (at our first stop in Kendall)
Carolina Wren
Marsh Wren (Rainy Slough)
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Eastern Bluebird
Veery (A. D. Barnes Park)
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher
European Starling
Common Myna (not "countable" – yet)
Hill Myna (pairs in Kendall and Matheson Hammock Co Park; not "countable")
Cedar Waxwing
Blue-winged Warbler (Key West Botanical Gardens)
Tennessee Warbler
Northern Parula
Magnolia Warbler
Cape May Warbler (incl. one singing a spindalis-like song!)
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler (Indigenous Park)
Pine Warbler (singing in the Red-cockaded pines)
Prairie Warbler

Palm Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Prothonotary Warbler
Worm-eating Warbler
Swainson's Warbler (A.D. Barnes Park)
Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush (heard-only)
Kentucky Warbler (Indigenous Park)
Common Yellowthroat (= 22 warbler species + 4 others in the Tortugas!)
Summer Tanager
Scarlet Tanager
Eastern Towhee
Bachman's Sparrow (shy singing male finally seen near Rainy Slough)
Savannah Sparrow
Seaside Sparrow (the highly local "Cape Sable" race in the Everglades)
Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Blue Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting
Painted Bunting
Bobolink (fly-by seen by Marie)
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Common Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle
Shiny Cowbird (2 males at Flamingo)
Bronzed Cowbird (2 females at a Red-wing nest at Eagle Lakes Park)
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole
Spot-breasted Oriole (in the same tree with the bulbul in Kendall)
House Sparrow

ALSO SEEN:

Manatee (Faka Union Canal)
White-tailed Deer
Feral/Wild Hog
River Otter (Big Cypress Loop Road)
Raccoon
Marsh Rabbit
Gray Squirrel

American Alligator
Green Anole

Brown Anole
Florida Red-bellied Turtle
Florida Soft-shell Turtle