

# **SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND**

**JANUARY 12-16, 2006**

**LEADER: BRENNAN MULROONEY**

**COMPILED BY: BRENNAN MULROONEY**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.  
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003**

**AUSTIN, TX 78746  
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

TOUR REPORT  
SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND  
January 12-16, 2006

By Brennan Mulrooney

On our 2005 South Florida Winter Weekend tour we saw a fantastic assortment of South Florida specialties including Snail Kite, Short-tailed Hawk, Limpkin, Smooth-billed Ani, and West Indian Cave Swallow, and wintering Neotropical migrants including 14 species of warblers, all the while enjoying the warm winter temperatures for which the area is justly famous (despite the challenges presented by birding in the aftermath of one of the worst hurricane seasons in Florida's history).

On our first morning, after enjoying scope views of Smooth-billed Ani just minutes from our hotel, we visited Wakodahatchee Wetlands. This spot has gained quite a reputation among bird photographers as a spot where you can get remarkably close to some spectacular birds. Purple Gallinule may be the star of the show, and they certainly put on a show for us; we had several that were almost too close to focus on. Others that vied for our attention were Mottled Ducks, Blue-winged and Green-winged teal, Tricolored and Green herons, and White and Glossy ibis—all seemingly at arm's reach. A Wilson's Snipe allowed us to marvel at its wonderfully camouflaged plumage; then somebody noticed that there was a second snipe right next to it, practically invisible until it moved.

Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge provided repeated knockout views of a headliner target bird. It seemed like there were Limpkins around every corner! And all of them seem to be posing for us; in fact, my camera is still a bit warm to the touch. A Great Horned Owl lying down low on its nest was the icing on the cake for our first day, and soon we were headed south toward Everglades.

Our two days in and around Everglades National Park had numerous highlights and memorable moments. For starters, there were the pink birds of Paurotis Pond. As we watched the flaming pink of Roseate Spoonbills flying to and from their nests in the mangroves, a small flycatcher with a pink belly zipped by in front of us. After it settled on a twig to have a look around, we all enjoyed close-up scope views of a female Vermilion Flycatcher, a rarity in Florida. Then, in the afternoon up on the Tamiami Trail, we followed a pair of Snail Kites as they quickly traveled west, forcing us to repeatedly get in and out of the van just to keep up with them. After a couple of miles we found out where they were heading, as suddenly there were Snail Kites everywhere coming in to roost for the night.

Just outside the park, at Lucky Hammock, we were treated to some fantastic raptor watching. The birds seemed to be traveling in twos: we enjoyed a male and female Swainson's Hawk sparring just above the hammock, we scoped two adult Peregrine Falcons out in the farm field, and then the climax—two dark morph Short-tailed Hawks circling low over our heads. We would later see a light morph Short-tailed there as well.

The 2005 hurricane season was none too kind to South Florida. Dennis, Katrina, Rita, and Wilma all did their share of damage. Everglades National Park was especially hard hit, and portions of the park were still closed for repairs while we were there. Even nearly three months after Wilma had passed through, the damage was clearly evident. Trees were stripped of their foliage, fences were blown over, roofs were covered with blue tarps and, in Flamingo, a 30-ft. park tour boat sat on its pontoons in the parking lot, right where the storm surge had presumably left it.

South Florida has evolved with hurricanes, and the damage done by this year's storms will soon be just a memory. Even this year we could see that most of the damaged trees were starting to regenerate, their leaves sprouting directly from the limbs. Soon the wet season will return and the scars of this year will be covered up by lush new growth. This year's tour provided a rare opportunity to see the incredible destructive power of these storms and, while it was a fascinating experience, it's one that I (and the rest of South Florida) hope not to repeat next year!

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**Leader: Brennan Mulrooney**

**ITINERARY:**

**January 12:** Tour orientation and dinner at Sal's Italian Restaurant, we liked it so much we decided to have Italian for the rest of the tour...

**January 13:** Breakfast at the Moonlight Diner then an early departure to points north: first we headed for the airport for anis, then to Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Green Cay Wetlands, and Loxahatchee NWR before heading down the turnpike to Florida City. Dinner at The Mutineer.

**January 14:** Talk about windy! Morning birding at Lucky Hammock and the Annex, otherwise known as Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area and Southern Glades Wildlife and Environmental Area; the rest of the morning's birding was in Everglades National Park where we visited the Coe Visitor Center, Pahayokee Overlook, Paurotis Pond, Flamingo (still mostly closed due to Hurricane Wilma), and West Lake (for one seriously windy picnic). Afternoon drive out the Tamiami Trail for Snail Kites and a quick visit to the Shark Valley entrance to Everglades NP. Dinner at Capri Italian Restaurant.

**January 15:** Merely breezy today and a cool morning gave way to a quite pleasant day. We started in the ag. lands west of Homestead, then back to Lucky Hammock before returning to Everglades where we visited Mahogany Hammock then had lunch at the Farmer's Market in Florida City. Afternoon return to the park to visit Long Pine Key followed by a delightful evening walk at Anhinga Trail. Dinner at The Mutineer was followed by an optional owling outing.

**January 16:** Morning departure from Florida City. We spent most of the morning looking for exotics in and around Kendall before heading north to Fort Lauderdale for the tour conclusion.

## **BIRDLIST**

Note: Species that are underlined are birds of special note that are either rare, local specialties, or are otherwise generally hard to find. Bird List order is according to the 45<sup>th</sup> Supplement to the AOU Check-list as published in *The Auk* 121:985-995 (2004).

Abbreviations:

WW: Wakodahatchee Wetlands

GC: Green Cay Wetlands

LNWR: Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge

LH: Lucky Hammock and/or the Annex

ENP: Everglades National Park

### **SWANS, GEESE, AND DUCKS**

**(Muscovy Duck)** - accepted to the Florida state check-list as an established exotic, but they bear little resemblance to the wild birds found in Central America and rarely in Texas along the lower Rio Grande. The American Birding Association considers these Florida birds to be “non-countable.”

**Mottled Duck** - good views at WW, GC, and LNWR

**Blue-winged Teal** - same as above

**Green-winged Teal** - same as above

**Ring-necked Duck** - a large flock in a turnpike mitigation pond we seen well.

### **GREBES**

**Pied-billed Grebe** - seen daily

### **PELICANS, CORMORANTS, AND DARTERS**

**American White Pelican** - seen only distantly in flight

**Brown Pelican** - several seen well

**Double-crested Cormorant** - probably outnumbered by the following

**Anhinga** - several fantastic views at WW, LNWR, and ENP including newly hatched begging chicks on Anhinga Trail.

### **BITTERNES AND HERONS**

**Least Bittern** - heard only on Anhinga Trail

**Great Blue Heron** - many great close up views including birds on nests at WW

**Great Egret** - many seen well and close daily

**Snowy Egret** - repeated close views allowing comparison with the similarly plumaged immature of the following species

**Little Blue Heron** - many adults and immatures seen well

**Tricolored Heron** - close enough to touch at WW, seen daily

**Reddish Egret** - a distant bird on the flats off Flamingo would have been unidentifiable if not for their distinctive feeding behavior

**Cattle Egret** - very common in the ag. lands of South Florida

**Green Heron** - stunning views of this superb little heron

**Black-crowned Night-Heron** - we saw several adults and immatures coming out for their night's activities at Anhinga Trail

**Yellow-crowned Night-Heron** - apparently these guys are later sleepers as the three we saw at Anhinga Trail were still on their roost

## **IBISES AND SPOONBILLS**

**White Ibis** - very common in South Florida, we had daily views of adults and immatures including ultra close scope views of their striking white eyes

**Glossy Ibis** - fairly common, we saw them especially well at WW

**Roseate Spoonbill** - we saw several in flight as well as perched allowing us scope views of their remarkable bills and tangerine tails. All pink birds get underlined.

## **STORKS**

**Wood Stork** - remarkably close views at Anhinga Trail allowed great studies of the grotesque details of these birds' featherless heads

## **NEW WORLD VULTURES**

**Black Vulture** - Close scope views allowed detailed comparison of this species bill structure with the following

**Turkey Vulture** - hundreds seen daily

## **HAWKS, EAGLES AND KITES**

**Osprey** - the default large raptor of South Florida, seen daily, in fact it seemed as if there was just about always one in view

**Snail Kite** - the definitive bird of the Everglades ecosystem, we had fantastic views of a pair in flight on the Tamiami Trail followed by scope views of about 10 birds gone to roost

**Bald Eagle** - an adult obligingly flew right over us on the ENP road

**Northern Harrier** - fairly common around LH where we saw a gorgeous adult male

**Sharp-shinned Hawk** - just one outside ENP

**Cooper's Hawk** - only a couple of these accipiters which seem to be increasing with the booming Eurasian Collared-Dove population

**Red-shouldered Hawk** - common in ENP, we had an exquisite look at a pair of the South Florida endemic *extimus* subspecies at the park entrance

**Short-tailed Hawk** - much easier to see in winter than in the breeding season, we saw at least 5 including both light and dark color morphs

**Swainson's Hawk** - a male and female put on quite a show for us at LH

**Red-tailed Hawk** - uncommon in South Florida we saw one very pale adult bird

## **FALCONS**

**American Kestrel** - seen daily

**Merlin** - streaking by us at the Homestead Airport, showing its best field mark, the brown streak

**Peregrine Falcon** - nice scope views of a pair sitting in a field at LH

## **RAILS, COOTS, LIMPKIN, AND CRANES**

**Purple Gallinule** - what a knock-out bird, we had great looks at WW

**Common Moorhen** - common

**American Coot** - not to be confused with Florida Cooter

**Limpkin** - after much searching for our first one, they instantly became ubiquitous. We were treated to superb scope views at both GC and LNWR

**Sandhill Crane** - up to 8 birds in the fields at LH

## **PLOVERS AND SANDPIPERS**

**Killdeer** - seen daily

**Wilson's Snipe** - great scope views at WW, formerly known as Common Snipe

## **GULLS**

**Laughing Gull** - the common gull in South Florida

**Ring-billed Gull** - a parking lot specialist

## **PIGEONS AND DOVES**

**Rock Pigeon** - it's safe to call them pigeons again

**Eurasian Collared-Dove** - ubiquitous in South Florida and spreading to a parking lot near you soon

**Mourning Dove** - still common, though perhaps not as common as the former

**Common Ground-Dove** - several in the fields at LH

## **PARROTS AND PARAKEETS**

**Monk Parakeet** - a thriving species in many parts of the country, we saw several small flocks

**(Yellow-chevroned Parakeet)** - a small group flying overhead were seen by some in Kendall, not considered a countable species at this time

## **CUCKOOS AND ANIS**

**Smooth-billed Ani** - These birds used to be fairly common in South Florida, now there are just a couple of spots where they can be regularly found. We were able to get the scope on one cooperative bird just in time...

## **OWLS**

**Eastern Screech-Owl** - we were surrounded by calling birds at Long Pine Key

**Great-Horned Owl** - scope views of a bird on its nest at LNWR were quite a treat

**Burrowing Owl** - great scope views of these charismatic little guys in Homestead

**Barred Owl** - we chased a hooting pair up and down the road at LH, but never saw them

## **HUMMINGBIRDS**

**Ruby-throated Hummingbird** - one at LNWR and one in Kendall

## **KINGFISHERS**

**Belted Kingfisher** - seen daily

## **WOODPECKERS**

**Red-bellied Woodpecker** - seen daily

**Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** - one at LNWR and another in Kendall

**Downy Woodpecker** - a few seen here and there

**Northern Flicker** - surprisingly heard only

**Pileated Woodpecker** - great views at LNWR then again at Anhinga Trail

## **TYRANT FLYCATCHERS**

**Least Flycatcher** - a rare bird anywhere in North America in winter, one was at Lucky Hammock

**Eastern Phoebe** - more common than usual, seen daily

**Vermilion Flycatcher** - a female at Paurotis Pond was a treat, and a worthy quiz bird, this species is very rare in the east

**Scissor-tailed Flycatcher** - local and uncommon in South Florida in winter, we enjoyed scope views a single bird west of Homestead

## **SHRIKES**

**Loggerhead Shrike** - common in South Florida, seen almost daily

## **VIREOS**

**White-eyed Vireo** - a couple seen at LH

**Blue-headed Vireo** - wintering in small numbers in South Florida, we finally tracked down a couple in Kendall

## **CROWS AND JAYS**

**Blue Jay** - seen daily

**American Crow** - common inland and at ENP

**Fish Crow** - the crow of the Atlantic coast, the voice is the key

## **SWALLOWS**

**Tree Swallow** - seen daily

**Northern Rough-winged Swallow** - fair numbers seen at WW, GC, and ENP

**Cave Swallow** - The West Indies race (a possible future split) breeds in South Florida and the Mexican race is a rare fall vagrant, but may winter as well. We may have had both in a large flock of swallows at the Homestead Airport.

**Barn Swallow** - at least one in the swallow flock at the Homestead Airport

## **NUTHATCHES**

**Brown-headed Nuthatch** - several in a small flock in the pinelands in ENP

## **BULBULS**

**Red-whiskered Bulbul** - we found several individuals of this established exotic in Kendall, apparently their last stronghold

## **WRENS**

**House Wren** - heard only at Long Pine Key

## **GNATCATCHERS**

**Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** - we saw numbers of them daily, they fill the shoes of chickadees or Bushtits in South Florida as the leaders of the mixed songbird flocks

## **MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS**

**Gray Catbird** - much reduced from last year, probably due to the reduced fruit crop due to hurricanes

**Northern Mockingbird** - seen daily

## **STARLINGS**

European Starling

**WARBLERS:** One of the main attractions of birding South Florida in the winter is all of the warblers that can be found. Though numbers of most species were down due to the hurricanes, we still did well, finding the following 14 species:

**Orange-crowned Warbler** - we found a couple of these confusingly drab little guys

**Northern Parula** - fairly common most winters, we found just a couple

**Yellow-rumped Warbler** - seen almost daily

**Black-throated Green Warbler** - we finally tracked down a couple in ENP and Kendall

**Yellow-throated Warbler** - a regular winter resident, we had superb views in Kendall

**Pine Warbler** - common in pine habitat, we saw them at WW, GC, ENP, and Kendall

**Prairie Warbler** - usually a common winter warbler, we had to work for the few we saw

**Palm Warbler** - the "western" subspecies is a common South Florida winter bird and apparently not as affected by the storm damage as some of the other warblers

**Black-and-white Warbler** - we found these striking little guys at LH and Kendall

**American Redstart** - usually fairly common, we just managed a brief look at one at LH

**Northern Waterthrush** - heard only in ENP and at LH

**Louisiana Waterthrush** - very rare in Florida in winter, we had fantastic scope views of a very cooperative bird at West Lake (the only bird at West Lake!)

**Common Yellowthroat** - another common winter warbler, seemingly less affected by the hurricanes

**Yellow-breasted Chat** - another surprise, always hard to see away from the breeding grounds, and not expected in winter, we found one at LH

## **SPARROWS AND ALLIES**

**Clay-colored Sparrow** - a rare winter bird in South Florida, we found at least one in a sparrow flock west of Homestead

**Vesper Sparrow** - another rare winter species, cooperated for scope views at LH

**Savannah Sparrow** - several seen in the flock west of Homestead

## **CARDINALS AND ALLIES**

**Northern Cardinal** - seen daily

## **BLACKBIRDS AND ALLIES**

**Red-winged Blackbird** - seen daily

**Eastern Meadowlark** - singing at the Homestead Airport

**Common Grackle** - the name says it all

**Boat-tailed Grackle** - seen daily

House Sparrow

**TOTAL:** 110 (including unestablished exotics)

## **BUTTERFLIES**

Between the wind and all of the hurricane damage, butterflies were in rather short supply.

We managed to see the following:

Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)

Zebra Heliconian (*Heliconius charithonius*)

Mangrove Buckeye (*Junonia evarete*)

White Peacock (*Anartia jatrophae*)

Long-tailed Skipper (*Urbanus proteus*)

## **OTHER CRITTERS**

Green anole (*Anolis carolinensis*)

Florida softshell (*Apalone ferox*)

Florida cooter (*Pseudemys floridana*)

Florida redbelly turtle (*Pseudemys nelsoni*)

American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*)

Eastern Gray Squirrel