

DRY TORTUGAS

MAY 3 – 6, 2006

**LEADERS:
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Leader: Kim Eckert

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

SUMMARY

Unique. I can think of no better word to describe the Dry Tortugas. It's simply a place like no other—a place every birder should see at least once.

Consider, for starters, that four species nest there and nowhere else in the United States: Masked Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, Sooty Tern, and Brown Noddy. The boobies are on that tiny sand bar known as Hospital Key, a barren spot that looks anything but hospitable. (But they don't call them boobies for nothing!) Frigatebirds from their Long Key rookery silently hang in the air all day above the brick walls of Fort Jefferson on Garden Key, apparently waiting for something to happen. (It never does while I'm watching.) Tens of thousands of Sooty Terns nest on nearby Bush Key, their underparts transformed from white to blue-green as they fly low and reflect the water's colors. The noddies nest on Bush Key too, but many hang out on the old rusted coal docks on Garden Key, challenging birders to pick out a Black Noddy from their midst.

Consider as well Fort Jefferson itself. Eighteen million bricks make it just about the largest brick structure in the hemisphere, and for what? They worked on it for three decades in the 1800s, it never was finished, and the only use it ever had was as a prison during and after the Civil War. Ridiculous! In a way, though, it still houses prisoners, as Cattle Egrets quietly march around the parade grounds, stalking essentially nonexistent insects. Some starve. Others hang out by the fort's percolating fountain and survive on birds attracted to the water. This year one of them was seen as it snatched a redstart, another caught something we never did identify, and a third egret dunked a Barn Swallow in the fountain before consuming it.

You never know what migrant, desperate for a place to land, will show up at the fountain, in the trees within and around the fort, or by the lighthouse on nearby Loggerhead Key. Or even on the boat we take to get there from Key West: on this tour, both a Black-throated Green Warbler and a Magnolia Warbler attempted to land on our boat while we were far from shore, but shied away from our presence. And how did that Broad-winged Hawk ever make it to Loggerhead Key, and could it ever manage to leave? (If possible, this species always avoids migrating over large bodies of water.)

This year's tour presented us with fewer reasons to fret over the survival of migrants, since there were no weather fronts to produce a fallout. We managed a modest total of 14 warbler species, but the birding at the fort did not disappoint. There were sightings of a Shiny Cowbird or two, a Short-eared Owl of the Antillean race (or species?), a *fulva* Cave Swallow (another possible split), and a Black Noddy finally scoped out at Bush Key from the roof of Fort Jefferson, with

just enough time for all to see before dark. All four of these birds are probably annual here; can that be said of any other site in the U.S.?

I almost forgot. There were buoys with Brown Boobies and Roseate Terns, and both Audubon's Shearwaters and Bridled Terns crossing our boat's bow as we returned to Key West. But I'll stop there. Again, this is a unique place and a unique tour, and if I say any more you'll think I'm exaggerating.

ITINERARY

May 3 - Meet at the Holiday Inn in Key West for transfer to the *Playmate*, where we have an evening orientation session; before turning in for the night, part of the group heads to the airport at dusk to see/hear Antillean Nighthawk, and others join the mainland Florida tour group for dinner at the Hickory House.

May 4 - Pre-dawn departure for the Tortugas via a detour through deep waters of the Gulf Stream and some booby buoys; afternoon arrival at Hospital Key and Garden Key/Fort Jefferson.

May 5 - Garden Key, Loggerhead Key, return to Hospital Key, skiff runs to Bush and Long Keys, and pre-dusk rush to see Black Noddy on Bush Key.

May 6 - return to Key West via another Gulf Stream detour (better pelagic birding this time) and some Roseate Tern buoys; post-docking option to relocate (unsuccessfully) a flamingo and cuckoo.

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

Audubon's Shearwater (total of 4, including 2 closely crossing the bow)

Masked Booby (more than ever on Hospital Key)

Brown Booby (a few on various buoys)

Northern Gannet (pelagic fly-bys)

Brown Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

Magnificent Frigatebird (including a few males on Long Key showing red gular sacs)

Cattle Egret (including some eating passerines!)

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (immature by the fort)

Osprey

Broad-winged Hawk (immature on Loggerhead Key)

Merlin

Peregrine Falcon (2-3 on Loggerhead Key)

Black-bellied Plover

Semipalmated Plover

Spotted Sandpiper

Whimbrel (Garden Key)

Ruddy Turnstone (begging by the picnic tables)
Red-necked Phalarope (unexpected pelagic fly-by)
Laughing Gull
Royal Tern
Sandwich Tern (2 with the Roseates)
Roseate Tern (close views on a buoy en route home)
Least Tern
Bridled Tern (at least 4 on return pelagic run)
Sooty Tern (with many young on Bush Key)
Brown Noddy (closest looks on the old coal dock pilings)
Black Noddy (finally spotted on Bush Key, just before it got too dark)
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Short-eared Owl (an “Antillean” individual in the fort)
(Antillean Nighthawk / seen by a few at dusk after orientation)
Eastern Wood-Pewee
Gray Kingbird (Loggerhead Key)
Cave Swallow (a fort fly-by; probably an individual of the Caribbean race *fulva*)
Barn Swallow
Veery
Gray Catbird (including 1 without a tail)
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler
Magnolia Warbler (tried to land on the boat out at sea!)
Cape May Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler (Loggerhead Key)
Black-throated Green Warbler (also tried to land on the boat!)
Palm Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush
Common Yellowthroat (= 14 warbler species)
Indigo Bunting (male on Loggerhead Key)
Bobolink
Shiny Cowbird (females carefully identified in the fort)

ALSO SEEN:

Bottle-nosed Dolphin
Loggerhead Turtle
Hawkbill Turtle

Green Sea Turtle
Brown Anole
Hermit Crab
Florida Crawfish (Spiny Lobster)
Nurse Shark
Barracuda
Goliath Grouper
Tarpon
Remora
Flying Fish
Gray Snapper