

SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND

JANUARY 11 - 15, 2007

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Leaders: Brennan Mulrooney and Brian Gibbons

When Victor first told me about VENT's new "Relaxed and Easy" tour program, our South Florida Winter Weekend tour immediately came to mind as a great candidate. It's a nice short tour that doesn't require any super early morning departures or any vigorous hiking. There is only one change of hotel, and the birding is, well...relaxed and easy. Not that this tour doesn't offer any exciting opportunities! Here is a sample of some of the highlights from this year's tour.

We began with a leisurely (some might say relaxed and easy) walk along the boardwalk of Wakodahatchee Wetlands. Of course with the profusion of wildlife to view, it would have been hard to move any faster! It probably took us 15 minutes to walk the first 100 feet! Tricolored and Green herons hunted right at our feet, while Blue-winged Teal paddled around under the boardwalk. Wood Storks stalked around at close range giving us unbelievable views of their ghastly heads and necks. These close views also allowed us to observe their distinctive feeding behavior, methodically shuffling a foot next to their open bill in hopes of flushing a fish into it. Closer inspection soon revealed some of the more secretive inhabitants of the marsh. First was a cooperative Sora scurrying around right next to us, and then Purple Gallinules so close we had to back up to focus on them. But the stars of the show had to be the Limpkins. Most years this bird makes us work a little bit, but not this year. We figured that we probably had about eight, including one sitting quietly within 20 feet of us, but with so many flying back and forth past us and several calling from out of sight, it was hard to be sure.

Wakodahatchee was a hard act to follow, but Everglades National Park was up to the challenge. Having nicely recovered from the hurricanes of two years ago, all of the good birding areas were open again and we took advantage. Anhinga Trail is always a memorable stop and this year it didn't disappoint. We saw alligators large and small alongside the trail, Double-crested Cormorants perched close enough to touch (literally), and Anhingas on nests, some with big fluffy white chicks. Perhaps the most memorable sight at Anhinga Trail was the disappearing bittern. We watched in amazement as an American Bittern seemed to appear and then disappear right before our eyes. Though it sat just 15 feet from the trail, its camouflage was so effective that if we took our eyes off it for a second, it would melt back into its surroundings as if it were never there at all. Eventually we had a crowd gathered around us, all admiring this fantastic bird, except for those who were never able to see it!

Last year, with all of the damage from Hurricane Wilma, we weren't able to bird the Flamingo area, and the famous Eco Pond was closed. This year we found Flamingo open and full of birds. At one spot we stood and watched an amazing mixed passerine flock

that became active after a brief shower. In the span of about 10 minutes we spotted multiple Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and Western Kingbirds, Great Crested Flycatcher, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Gray Catbird, Northern Parula, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Palm Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Cardinal, Indigo Bunting, Painted Bunting, Orchard Oriole, and Baltimore Oriole. Talk about a whirlwind of activity!

On our last morning we visited the suburbs of Miami in search of introduced species. We had great luck with both Spot-breasted Oriole (giving us three oriole species for the trip) and Red-whiskered Bulbuls. Both of these species have been found in Florida for a long time and are considered to be established and countable. We had great looks at Monk Parakeets and their enormous stick nests. We also saw two introduced, but not countable, species of myna. The Hill Myna has been seen in Miami for years, but is not an expanding population. The Common Myna is a different story. This species seems to be rapidly increasing and expanding its range. It seems like only a matter of time before this bird will be just as countable as European Starlings and House Sparrows.

Other bird highlights included Great White Heron (the white morph of Great Blue Heron), Roseate Spoonbills, Snail Kite, and both light and dark morph Short-tailed Hawks. All in all it was a fantastic trip. We had a wonderful group and fantastic weather (temperatures in the 70s). We saw over 130 species of birds, a new trip record, and we did it relaxed and easy...

ITINERARY:

January 11 - Tour orientation and dinner at nearby restaurant

January 12 - We started our trip with a spectacular visit to Wakodahatchee Wetlands where there seemed to be Limpkins around every corner; after lunch we started working our way south visiting the pond at the Southeast Regional Library in Pembroke Pines, "Dump Marsh", and "Cutler Wetlands"; dinner at the Mutineer

January 13 - Morning birding around rural Homestead and Florida City with visits to "Flynn's", the Homestead Regional Airport, and Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area, A.K.A. Lucky Hammock and the Annex; the rest of our morning was spent at the justly famous Anhinga Trail in Everglades National Park; late afternoon drive out the Tamiami Trail (US 41) in search of Snail Kite

January 14 - Early return to Flynn's and Frog Pond, and then the rest of the day enjoying Everglades National Park; we visited Long Pine Key, Flamingo (including Eco Pond), West Lake, Nine Mile Pond, Paurotis Pond, and the wonderful park Visitor Center

January 15 - It was back into the big city in search of those flashy exotics; we visited the city of Kendall and Matheson Hammock County Park before making the drive back up to Fort Lauderdale for departures

BIRDLIST

Note: Species appearing in underlined 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.).

Abbreviations:

FP: Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area, including Lucky Hammock and the Annex

ENP: Everglades National Park

WW: Wakodahatchee Wetlands

WATERFOWL

(Muscovy Duck) - This species is considered to be an established exotic in Florida, but does not count for your ABA list. These birds bear little resemblance to their wild ancestors

Mottled Duck - we had great looks at WW and Dump Marsh

Blue-winged Teal - great looks at WW and scattered other locations

Northern Shoveler - seen well at Dump Marsh and ENP

Green-winged Teal - distant birds at WW

Ring-necked Duck - a nice close flock in a pond by the side of the Turnpike near WW

Greater Scaup - a rarity in South Florida, this bird was sharing a log with 5 or 6 Pied-billed Grebes in Eco Pond

Hooded Merganser - a small group of males and females at WW was a nice find, it has been a good winter for this bird in South Florida

Red-breasted Merganser - two females in Eco Pond provided great views

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe - the group of birds on the log was quite an unusual sight, this was the first time I've seen this bird's feet!

PELICANS

American White Pelican - We saw several of these giants at Dump Marsh and Flamingo

Brown Pelican - one over the Turnpike was odd so far inland, the birds around Flamingo were in their expected location

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant - seen daily

DARTERS

Anhinga - many fantastic looks, birds in high breeding colors, birds on nests, and big, white, fluffy, awkward chicks

BITTERN & HERONS

American Bittern - what a stunner! this bird appeared then disappeared right before our eyes on Anhinga Trail, so close we couldn't get the whole thing in the scope!

Least Bittern - heard only along the Tamiami Trail

Great Blue Heron - many close looks, including nesting birds at WW

(Great White Heron) - two birds in ENP, this used to be considered a separate species, but is now considered to be a subspecies that only has a white morph

Great Egret - seen daily

Snowy Egret - fairly common and widespread

Little Blue Heron - several seen at scattered locations

Tricolored Heron - great close looks at WW and elsewhere

Reddish Egret - a distant flying bird at Flamingo exhibited the distinctive "pied" plumage that so many Florida Bay breeding Reddish Egrets show

Cattle Egret - seen daily

Green Heron - many fantastic close views

Black-crowned Night-Heron - a couple of flybys and one cooperative perched juvenile

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis - many seen daily

Glossy Ibis - good looks at WW

Roseate Spoonbill - flybys at Eco Pond and good looks at nesting birds at Paurotis Pond

STORKS

Wood Stork - spectacular looks at WW, Pembroke Pines and ENP; we enjoyed observing their distinctive feeding behavior, using their feet to flush prey into their open, waiting bills

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture - seen daily

Turkey Vulture - seen daily in direct comparison with the former species

HAWKS, EAGLES, & KITES

Osprey - we saw a few...hundred! quite common in South Florida

Snail Kite - it took some work, but we finally tracked down an adult male on the Tamiami Trail, first in flight, low over the sawgrass, then perched providing scope views for all

Bald Eagle - great looks at a young bird sitting right by the main road in ENP

Northern Harrier - many good looks including a couple adult males

Sharp-shinned Hawk - several flybys and one perched bird at Matheson Hammock

Cooper's Hawk - also many flybys

Red-shouldered Hawk - the most common hawk in South Florida, the resident race is distinctively pale

Broad-winged Hawk - great looks at an adult perched over the road in Florida City

Short-tailed Hawk - at least one adult light morph, and 2 or 3 dark morph birds performed quite well for us in FP

Swainson's Hawk - good looks at a sitting bird in the field next to Lucky Hammock
Red-tailed Hawk - 2 immature birds around Miami

FALCONS & CARACARAS

American Kestrel - seen daily

Merlin - seen a couple of times in flight, but the perched bird on a wire near Lucky Hammock was particularly nice

Peregrine Falcon - a nice adult perched near Lucky Hammock

RAILS & COOTS

Sora - we couldn't have had better views, a bird at WW walked around in the open practically at our feet!

Purple Gallinule - the same story here, point blank looks at this stunner at WW

Common Moorhen - we saw the red bands around the tops of their legs at WW

American Coot - seen daily

LIMPKIN

Limpkin - unbelievable luck and unbeatable looks, I'd never seen *one* of these at WW and we saw eight! some seemingly almost within arms reach!

CRANES

Sandhill Crane - a small flock in the field at FP

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS

Killdeer - several scattered about

STILTS & AVOCETS

Black-necked Stilt - both at Dump Marsh and Eco Pond

SANDPIPERS

Greater Yellowlegs - Eco Pond in direct comparison with the following

Lesser Yellowlegs - several in Eco Pond

Least Sandpiper - a flyby at Eco Pond

Dunlin - great close looks at Eco Pond

Short-billed Dowitcher - same as the former

Wilson's Snipe - knockout looks at WW after seeing several flying overhead

GULLS, TERNS, & SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull - hundreds at Flamingo

Ring-billed Gull - seen most days

Herring Gull - a few flying over WW

Caspian Tern - good looks with the following at Flamingo

Royal Tern - the more slender carrot colored bill helped distinguish it from the former

Forster's Tern - at WW and again in Flamingo

Black Skimmer - hundreds on the sand bar at Flamingo

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon - seen daily

Eurasian Collared-Dove - ubiquitous in South Florida, the origin of their U.S. invasion

White-winged Dove - seen daily, the origin of these birds is not exactly clear; it has been speculated that escaped birds have become establish, but certainly this species is expanding in the core of its U.S. range and could have spread to FL on its own

Mourning Dove - seen daily, much daintier than the two former doves

Common Ground-Dove - little toy doves, we saw a few at Flynn's with White-wingeds

PARROTS

Monk Parakeet - their huge bulky stick nests were quite impressive, we had excellent looks in Kendall

(Black-hooded Parakeet (Nanday Parakeet)) - a couple of flyovers at WW

(Yellow-chevroned Parakeet) - a flock showed well for some at Matheson

OWLS

Barred Owl - after much searching and hooting, we had a response at FP, but it never came in

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird - around flowing trees in Kendall

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher - seen daily

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker - quite common in South Florida

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - good looks at two in Kendall

Downy Woodpecker - only one in ENP

Northern Flicker - good looks at a few different individuals in ENP

Pileated Woodpecker - a responsive pair at FP drew yelps of excitement from the group

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

(Least Flycatcher) - leader only in Flamingo

Eastern Phoebe - seen daily

Great Crested Flycatcher - a few seen and heard, seen year round in South Florida

Western Kingbird - these guys are regular in small numbers in South Florida in the winter time, often found in small flocks like we found with the following

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher - often found with the former in small flocks in South Florida in winter

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike - quite common in South Florida, especially compared to the Northeast where they have almost disappeared

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo - these guys sing just about year-round down here and we heard more than we saw

Blue-headed Vireo - we saw a few of these handsome vireos, it seemed like Lois found most of them for us

CROWS & JAYS

Blue Jay - seen daily

American Crow - only in ENP on this tour

Fish Crow - only outside of the Everglades system, these guys stay along the coasts

SWALLOWS

Tree Swallow - we saw large numbers, especially over the Tamiami Trail

Cave Swallow - only seen distantly at Dump Marsh, we couldn't tell if these were the Caribbean or Mexican birds or both

NUTHATCHES

Brown-headed Nuthatch - heard only in ENP at Long Pine Key, these birds were reintroduced to the park and are doing quite well

WRENS

House Wren - having a big year in South Florida, we saw and heard many

BULBULS

Red-whiskered Bulbul - it took a little searching, but we were rewarded with fine views of a couple of these fancy countable exotics in Kendall

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet - another bird having a big year in South Florida, we found a few, which is a few more than we usually find

GNATCATCHERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher - common year-round in South Florida we saw many

THRUSHES

American Robin - not a big Robin year, but we ran into a couple large flocks

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird - a common winter bird in South Florida, seen daily

Northern Mockingbird - seen daily

MYNAS & STARLINGS

(Hill Myna) - not countable and not as common as in former days, but a neat bird none-the-less, we saw a pair at Matheson Hammock

(Common Myna) - probably the next countable exotic for Florida, they are getting more common each year; we saw them in Florida City
European Starling - seen daily

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing - another irruptive winter bird, we had a couple of flocks in Miami

WOOD WARBLERS

(Orange-crowned Warbler) - leader only at FP

Northern Parula - seen daily, a common winter warbler

Magnolia Warbler - uncommon in winter in South Florida, we had two

Yellow-rumped Warbler - quite common this year, seen daily

Yellow-throated Warbler - they love coconut palms, but our best look was in a Gumbo Limbo in Flamingo

Pine Warbler - several seen well at WW and in ENP

Prairie Warbler - common year round in FL we found several

Palm Warbler - “Western Palm Warbler” is the form that winters in South Florida, and they sure are common, many seen daily

Ovenbird - heard only at Matheson Hammock

Common Yellowthroat - seen daily

Yellow-breasted Chat - good scope views of one in Flamingo, this is a rare bird in winter and usually quite hard to see well, we were very lucky

SPARROWS & ALLIES

Eastern Towhee - we had good looks at a singing bird of the “white-eyed” race of the southeastern US at Long Pine Key in ENP

Savannah Sparrow - our most common winter sparrow, we had several around FP

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal - seen daily

Indigo Bunting - a couple in “the flock” at Flamingo

Painted Bunting - one at FP and a couple in “the flock”

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird - seen daily

Eastern Meadowlark - great looks at singing birds at the Homestead Airport

Common Grackle - seen daily

Boat-tailed Grackle - seen daily

Brown-headed Cowbird - a big flock near Mt. Trashmore and some in Homestead

Orchard Oriole - a very rare bird in winter, we had a female type in “the flock”

Spot-breasted Oriole - we had great luck with a pair in Kendall that gave us breath taking views as they fed in flowing trees

Baltimore Oriole - at least three in “the flock”, an uncommon winter bird

FINCHES

American Goldfinch - not a big finch year, but we found one(!) at WW

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow

BUTTERFLIES

Great Southern White (*Ascia monuste*)

Cloudless Sulphur (*Phoebis sennae*)

Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)

Julia Heliconian (*Dryas julia*)

Zebra Heliconian (*Heliconius charitonia*)

Mangrove Buckeye (*Junonia evarete*)

White Peacock (*Anartia jatrophae*)

Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*)

Queen (*Danaus gilippus*)

OTHER CRITTERS

REPTILES

American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) an endangered species, we were lucky to see three in the Flamingo Marina

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) we saw some big'uns

Florida Cooter (*Pseudemys floridana*)

Florida Redbelly Turtle (*Pseudemys nelsoni*)

Florida Softshell (*Apalone ferox*)

Green Anole (*Anolis carolinensis*) the pet store chameleon, a native that is being out competed by the following

Brown Anole (*Anolis sagrei*) an exotic that is becoming abundant

Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) fairly common in South Florida, an exotic

MAMMALS

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Brynne's Olive Tapanade