

DRY TORTUGAS

MAY 2 - 5, 2007

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Leader: Brennan Mulrooney

The Dry Tortugas are one of those locations that every birder has to visit at least once. These islands are on par with areas like Southeast Arizona, South Texas, High Island, Point Pelee, or Cape May—areas that you can always talk about with other birders, because chances are they've either already been there, or they are planning to go. Birders want to come here for three main reasons: Masked Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, Sooty Tern, and Brown Noddy all have their only North American nesting colonies here; it can be a fantastic spot to witness concentrations of migrant birds; and it also has quite a reputation for turning up rarities. While the breeding birds are somewhat of a sure thing, we were very fortunate on this year's trip to experience great success on the other two counts, plus we had fantastic pelagic birding on the way there!

As we were dragging ourselves out of our bunks on the first morning, Capt. Jo Jo already had us in the birds. We stepped out onto the deck to see an offshore light tower next to the boat that was covered in birds, including four gorgeous Roseate Terns. These endangered terns are very localized in their distribution along the east coast and spend much of their time far offshore. After that, we headed for deeper water and soon hit the jackpot...a weed line! When two different masses of water come together they concentrate all sorts of floating vegetation and debris in a line along their convergence. This provides cover for smaller fish, which attract larger fish, and all of these fish attract birds! It's often hard work to get a good look at a Bridled Tern on this crossing, but on this day we saw at least 50 and had outstanding looks at many of them. Another species that we hope for is Audubon's Shearwater and by working the weeds we found at least ten. Our best find, however, was a small flock of Red-necked Phalaropes that allowed us to creep up on them as they sat on the water giving us great looks. Further on we stopped by a buoy that had several Brown Boobies sitting on it; we had already had a great trip, and we hadn't even reached the Tortugas yet! Finally we saw Fort Jefferson on the horizon and soon we were surrounded by Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies. Before we pulled up to Garden Key, we made a quick detour to Hospital Key where we saw over 50 Masked Boobies sitting on the shore.

After a delicious lunch, we piled out onto Garden Key and started looking for migrants. Though we had been experiencing depressingly mild weather, there were a surprising number of birds around. There seemed to be an American Redstart in every tree, Blackpoll Warblers were everywhere, and Palm Warblers littered the ground. Sitting by the famous fountain inside the fort we saw Northern Parula, and Yellow, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Magnolia, Prairie, Black-and-white, and Kentucky warblers. Elsewhere on the grounds we tracked down Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, and Common Yellowthroat, not to mention such surprises as Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, and White-throated Sparrow. Bobolink, Blue Grosbeaks, and Indigo Buntings foraged on the lawn and Yellow-billed Cuckoos lurked in the trees. That evening, as the sun lowered and the temperatures fell, we got up on top of the fort to scan Bush Key.

Though the task seemed impossible, we soon were able to pick out one immature Black Noddy roosting among the thousands of Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns. Its smaller size, whiter cap, and long thin bill all helped it stand out from the prodigious crowd. After snacks and refreshments several people took dinghy rides out to Bush and Long Keys to get up-close and personal looks at the terns and see the male frigatebirds displaying bright red balloon-like gular sacs, hoping to impress a mate. Nearby we could see females sitting at nests with big fluffy white chicks in them.

Early the next morning we were up and back in the fort. Carefully working our way through the parade grounds we were able to flush a Short-eared Owl. The birds found here in spring and summer are of the Caribbean subspecies sometimes known as Antillean Short-eared Owl or Arawak Owl. Shortly after we finished with our crippling scope views of the owl, an odd call note caught my ear and soon I was able to track down the culprit, a Bahama Mockingbird! We knew one had been reported, but it hadn't been seen in two days. Needless to say, we were thrilled to find that it had decided to stick around. After a little bit of chasing it around, it finally settled down and allowed us to watch it forage in the open for a good 20 minutes! At times it was so close we could almost touch it! After that excitement, two pairs of Shiny Cowbirds were just icing on the cake.

All of this, and I didn't even mention the fantastic sunsets, the great snorkeling, the delicious meals, the 400+ lb. goliath grouper, the schools of flyingfish, and the largest masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere. It's no wonder this trip is so popular!

ITINERARY:

May 2 - after a quick meet and greet we headed for the marina to load onto the *Playmate*, our home for the next 3 nights

May 3 - pre-dawn departure from Stock Island, heading west; we made stops at several bouys and markers and worked an incredibly productive weed line en route to Dry Tortugas National Park; we stopped by Hospital Key, birded Garden Key, and some took skiff rides along Bush and Long Keys

May 4 - early birding on Garden Key, then the rest of the morning on Loggerhead Key; afternoon return to Garden Key and more skiff rides out to Bush and Long Keys

May 5 - pre-dawn departure for Key West in hopes of maximizing our pelagic possibilities, but we were never able to refind our magical weed line

BIRDLIST

Note: Species appearing in **bold 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.).

WATERFOWL

Red-breasted Merganser - a single female type in the anchorage

SHEARWATERS AND PETRELS

Audubon's Shearwater - about ten birds on the crossing, the first Jo Jo had seen all year!

GANNETS AND BOOBIES

Masked Booby - about 60 birds, most on Hospital Key, their only NA breeding site

Brown Booby - 12 total, seen on both crossings

Northern Gannet - great views of feeding birds on the return to Key West, and a gorgeous adult on the way to Loggerhead

PELICANS

Brown Pelican

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant

FRIGATEBIRDS

Magnificent Frigatebird - spectacular views, especially displaying males on Long Key with their gular sacs inflated

HERONS, EGRETS AND BITTERNs

Great Blue Heron

Little Blue Heron

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Turkey Vulture

HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES

Osprey

FALCONS AND CARACARAS

American Kestrel

Merlin

Peregrine Falcon

RAILS, GALLINULES AND COOTS

Sora - it's always strange to find these birds there, so far away from their preferred freshwater marsh habitat, but they are a fairly common migrant

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover

AVOCETS AND STILTS

Black-necked Stilt

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Spotted Sandpiper

Ruddy Turnstone

Sanderling

Red-necked Phalarope - we were very lucky to find a small flock of these pelagic shorebirds on our first crossing, an uncommon migrant that is rarely seen

GULLS & TERNS

Laughing Gull

Herring Gull

Brown Noddy - we saw the only nesting colony in NA, where thousands of birds were constantly present, we had our best views on the north coaling docks

Black Noddy - the proverbial needle in the haystack, we found one immature roosting among thousands of its congeners on Bush Key. It surely helped that I had found this bird two weeks earlier, using the same perch in cactus out in the colony.

Sooty Tern - the nesting colony on Bush Key has as many as 80,000 birds, the number was probably less than that this year, but it was still an amazing sight, and sound! (wide-awake!)

Bridled Tern - We were very lucky to find a nice weed line on our first crossing. By following it for a few miles we found about 50 of these small pelagic terns that are often hard to come by on these trips. We had great looks at several perched on debris close to the boat, including one sitting on a lost sandal!

Least Tern

Roseate Tern - an endangered species that is very local in its distribution, we had great looks at birds roosting on offshore buoys on our crossings

Royal Tern

Sandwich Tern

PIGEONS AND DOVES

Mourning Dove

White-winged Dove

CUCKOOS

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

TYPICAL OWLS

Short-eared Owl - the birds that show up at the Tortugas are “Antillean Short-eared Owls”, we had fantastic looks in the fort and had another at Loggerhead

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Gray Kingbird - one in the fort

VIREOS AND ALLIES

Black-whiskered Vireo - one in the fort

SWALLOWS

Bank Swallow

Barn Swallow

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet - there were far more Ruby-crowned Kinglets than normal in South Florida this winter, perhaps this one had wintered in Cuba, this is possibly a first spring record for the Tortugas

THRUSHES

“Gray-cheeked type” Thrush - a single bird on Loggerhead, that could very well have been, a Bicknell’s Thrush, but it’s probably best to leave it unidentified

Hermit Thrush - another very unusual bird for the Tortugas, especially in spring, perhaps only one previous spring record

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird

Bahama Mockingbird - we were very lucky that this bird, found two days prior to our observation, hung around for us to see it, and boy did we see it! At one point it was actually running around on the ground between members of the group! An ABA lifer for me and a great bird to add to one’s life list as it only occurs in the Bahamas, Jamaica and less than annually in coastal South Florida.

Northern Mockingbird

WOOD WARBLERS

Northern Parula

Yellow Warbler

Magnolia Warbler

Cape May Warbler

Black-throated Blue Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler - very late for this bird
Prairie Warbler
Palm Warbler - very late for these to be so common, we probably had 30+
Blackpoll Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush
Kentucky Warbler
Common Yellowthroat

SPARROWS & ALLIES

Lincoln's Sparrow - a rare bird on the Tortugas, usually seen in Fall
White-throated Sparrow - an extreme rarity for the Tortugas, perhaps only two previous records, and possibly unrecorded in the West Indies

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Blue Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Bobolink - two walking around in the grass inside the fort have good views
Shiny Cowbird - great looks at four birds (2 males, 2 females) inside the fort on our second morning
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole

OTHER CRITTERS

Great Barracuda
Goliath Grouper (AKA Jewfish)
Dolphin (AKA Dolphin Fish, Mahi Mahi, or Dorado, not Flipper)
Cero Mackerel
Yellowfin Tuna (most of one anyway, the first fish we caught)
Little Tunny (AKA Bonita, most of the little fish we caught trolling)
Flyingfish sp.
Houndfish
Spotted Eagle Ray
Nurse Shark
Bottle-nosed Dolphin (Flipper)
Loggerhead Turtle