

DRY TORTUGAS

APRIL 30 - MAY 3, 2008

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Leader: Brennan Mulrooney

A spring trip to Dry Tortugas National Park is a pilgrimage made by hundreds of North American birders every year. The Tortugas experience is truly unique, and can be downright magical. Most birders have heard the horror stories of the old days when 40 birders were packed into one boat that just had one room full of bunks and no showers, but believe me, we've come a long way since then. Our boat for this adventure is very comfortable. There are no more than four people in each of the four semi-private staterooms and there are two showers on board. Throw in three delicious hot meals per day and it is downright luxury compared to 10 years ago. And the reason that birders have always been willing to make this voyage? Well, for starters there are the four species that breed here and nowhere else in North America: Masked Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, Brown Noddy, and Sooty Tern. Then you have the migrant birds that can pile in to these tiny little islands during inclement weather, often giving unusually good looks. And on top of that you have the chance for some pretty great rarities on every visit, and a pelagic trip thrown in to boot!

This year we had everything a birder expects from the Tortugas and more. The thousands of Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies were an awesome spectacle as always. The constant din coming from the colony adjacent to our anchorage would periodically explode in volume as a Peregrine Falcon would go ripping through looking for an easy meal. And among the thousands of Brown Noddies we were able to pick out the proverbial needle in the haystack, a Black Noddy. They are *just a bit* smaller and *just a bit* darker, with a bill that's *just a bit* skinnier and longer, but after you've scrutinized 3,547 Brown Noddies, it pretty well jumps out at you! Almost every year at least one of these rarities is found here, and we were very pleased to have relatively quick success finding one this year.

The frigatebird colony is another highlight of this trip. We were able to get quite close to the birds, allowing us fantastic views of the gaudy males with their bright red gular pouches inflated to impress their mates. We also saw large gangly chicks still in the nests, and there was always a squadron of adults and immatures hanging over the fort. But this year the frigates were overshadowed by a smaller, browner bird perched in their midst, an immature Red-footed Booby! This species is only casual here and certainly not expected in any given year. Our close approach allowed us to see its orangey feet and the pink and blue tints to the bill and face. Joe, the ship's mate, did a great job of making sure we all got great looks as he ferried us in small groups by dinghy to see this fantastic rarity.

While we didn't experience any weather conducive to fallout, the migrant show was certainly no disappointment by any means. We saw 17 species of warblers and a very nice diversity of migrants in general. Standouts included Yellow-breasted Chat, a male Bay-breasted Warbler, great views of a perched Common Nighthawk, Black-whiskered Vireo, several Gray-cheeked Thrushes, and a very cooperative pair of Painted Buntings on our last morning that really put the icing on the cake. One species that isn't your

typical migrant, but does usually show up each year, is “Antillean” Short-eared Owl. This subspecies of Short-eared Owl is restricted to the Greater Antilles, and we were lucky to get good looks at one just before we called off our search on Loggerhead Key.

The windy weather that we experienced throughout the trip made our pelagic birding a bit of a challenge, but we still managed to see several good birds and actually got rather good looks at a couple of them. While the distant flocks of phalaropes and scattered Audubon’s Shearwaters and Roseate Terns really tested our abilities, our experiences with Bridled Tern and Pomarine Jaeger more than made up for it. Both species gave us great looks, sitting on the water near the boat and also flying around us at very close range. Brown Booby was also seen well, and Northern Gannets put on a remarkable show as they dove for their prey, hitting the water like missiles. Flying fish were constantly grabbing our attention as they shot out from under our boat and glided off to safety, and we saw at least eight loggerhead turtles on our return to Key West.

Our trip to the Dry Tortugas was everything we could have hoped for, and I’m already looking forward to my next visit to this unique destination.

ITINERARY:

Apr 30 - after a quick meet and greet we headed to the marina to load onto the *Playmate* (no not that one), our home for the next 3 nights

May 1 - pre-dawn departure from Stock Island, heading west; we made stops at several buoys and markers en route to Dry Tortugas National Park; we stopped by Hospital Key for Masked Boobies and birded Garden Key (where the fort is)

May 2 - early birding on Garden Key, then the rest of the morning on Loggerhead Key; afternoon return to Garden Key and skiff rides out to Bush and Long Keys for views of Frigatebirds and the Red-footed Booby!

May 3 - early birding on Garden Key one last time before we had to batten down the hatches and head for Key West; it got a little sloppy, but we faired pretty well and saw a whole bunch of sea turtles along the way

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.).

SHEARWATERS AND PETRELS

Audubon's Shearwater - just a few seen on our crossing and all of them were rather distant; identified by the characteristic shearwater style flight and combination of

very dark upperparts and very white underparts; too small and fast for Greater or Cory's Shearwater and Manx would be extremely rare

GANNETS AND BOOBIES

Masked Booby - about 50 birds, most on Hospital Key, their only NA breeding site; we had a couple of good looks at young birds that could easily be passed off for Northern Gannets if we hadn't noticed a few key features

Brown Booby - all immature birds this year, but we had some great looks

Red-footed Booby - we were very lucky to see this rare bird on Long Key roosting with the frigatebirds; this bird is less than annual in FL (or anywhere in the ABA area); this individual was an immature brown morph which is typically what is seen here

Northern Gannet - great views of feeding birds on our crossings

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 - a single bird in flight from Loggerhead

Cattle Egret

HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES

Northern Harrier - a single bird heading north, not worried about flying over the water, which is typical of this species

Sharp-shinned Hawk - at least a couple of them zipping around the fort

Broad-winged Hawk - quite a surprise to some folks, but this species is seen annually in small numbers out there, some winter in Cuba; we had at least 5

FALCONS AND CARACARAS

American Kestrel - a couple of handsome males at the fort

Merlin - a couple screaming around the fort wreaking havoc

Peregrine Falcon - at least two were out there terrorizing the tern colony

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, a few of us saw one cowering in a dark corner in the fort

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover - a small flock

Semipalmated Plover

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Ruddy Turnstone - they were elusive, but most of us managed decent looks...

Least Sandpiper - just one

Phalarope sp. - we had two distant flocks of small shorebirds on our crossings that were probably phalaropes, one closer flock actually looked like Red Phalarope rather than the expected Red-necked, but the views weren't good enough to be sure

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, it's estimated that about 4500 nest annually

Black Noddy - as we were arriving we got word that there was one on the coaling docks, but we just weren't able to see it from the boat, so we quickly headed to shore and after just a short while David spotted one amongst the hundreds of Brown Noddies and we all got good looks; this species is seen annually here, but it's always a challenge to find it in the noddy swarm

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 - it took us a while to get satisfactory looks, but eventually we got some very close birds that allowed us to see the extensively white outer tail, the white nape and the long thin white stripe above the eye, we don't see these guys at the fort so it's always a target for the crossing and we did well this year

Least Tern - a few around Key West on our return

Roseate Tern - they didn't cooperate by sitting on any of the buoys or markers, so we had to settle for distant views of a few flying by on our crossing; their very pale upperparts and long tails were distinctive

Royal Tern

JAEGERS AND SKUAS

Pomarine Jaeger - a nice adult with full tail was a little distant, but then a subadult bird stayed with us for quite some time giving us amazing views

PIGEONS AND DOVES

White-winged Dove - one singing bird in the fort

CUCKOOS

Yellow-billed Cuckoo - only one or two

TYPICAL OWLS

Short-eared Owl - the birds that show up at the Tortugas are of the Caribbean subspecies known as “Antillean Short-eared Owl” or “Arawak Owl”; we had to work at it, but we finally had good views of one sitting and in flight at Loggerhead

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Common Nighthawk - a single bird seen repeatedly during our stay gave us great views as it perched in the open, though never made a sound; it was definitely not a Lesser Nighthawk, and had some plumage characters inconsistent with Antillean

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird - good looks at males and females

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Kingbird - one on Garden Key on the second day

Gray Kingbird - three at Loggerhead Key

VIREOS AND ALLIES

Yellow-throated Vireo - seen by Stan only

Red-eyed Vireo - seen by a few on day two

Black-whiskered Vireo - one in the fort on our last morning had peach fuzz more than whiskers, the whiskers were just barely visible

SWALLOWS

Barn Swallow

THRUSHES

Veery - several on Garden Key

Gray-cheeked-Thrush - several on Garden Key

Wood Thrush - just one lurking on Garden Key

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird - a few scattered about

WOOD WARBLERS

Tennessee Warbler - just one or two

Northern Parula - fairly common

Yellow Warbler - two or three including one male of the Cuban race

Magnolia Warbler - at least two or three of these handsome warblers

Cape May Warbler - only a couple, but at least one stunning male

Black-throated Blue Warbler - males and females

Black-throated Green Warbler - a stunning male made a few appearances

Prairie Warbler - several

Palm Warbler - getting late for this species, only a few left

Bay-breasted Warbler - a rare spring migrant in FL, we had one handsome male
Blackpoll Warbler - a common spring migrant in FL
Black-and-white Warbler - just a few
American Redstart - lots of males and females, one landed on Craig's foot!
Ovenbird - a couple of these little chicken-like warblers strutting around the fort
Northern Waterthrush - at least one actually in the fort
Common Yellowthroat - several of these guys
Yellow-breasted Chat - very rare out here, we had fantastic looks at this often difficult to observe species

TANAGERS & ALLIES

Summer Tanager - males and females
Scarlet Tanager - same as above, always nice to see these brilliant birds

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Rose-breasted Grosbeak - great looks at several males
Indigo Bunting - lots of females, but a few brilliant males
Painted Bunting - what a send off! we had a pair of these fancy birds on our last morning

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Bobolink - a group of 5 at Loggerhead was reduced to four by the time we left

OTHER CRITTERS

Ghost Crab
Hermit Crab
Long-spined Sea Urchin - lots of them in the moat
Great Barracuda
Goliath Grouper (AKA Jewfish)
Flyingfish sp.
Needlefish
Houndfish
Bottle-nosed Dolphin (Flipper)
Loggerhead Turtle - we saw at least 8 on our return trip including a copulating pair and we saw a freshly made nest on Loggerhead Key that was probably made by this species