

DRY TORTUGAS

APRIL 30 - MAY 3, 2009

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Leader: Brennan Mulrooney

Dry Tortugas National Park is unique. Cliché? Maybe. Accurate? Absolutely! The park contains the only breeding colonies of Masked Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, Sooty Tern, and Brown Noddy in North America. It is home to historic Fort Jefferson, the largest masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere. Every spring, scores of migrant birds stop to rest there, affording birders unmatched opportunities for close study and photography. In addition to all that, it is only reachable by boat or seaplane, so we basically have this incredible area to ourselves each morning and evening of our stay. This year's trip to Dry Tortugas had everything one could hope for: exciting pelagic birds and sea life on our crossing to the island, the awesome spectacle of breeding terns on Bush Key, a staked-out rarity, and a great assortment of migrants.

Strong winds made pelagic birding a bit of a challenge, but we did well with our main targets and had a bonus rarity to boot. While Sooty Terns breed by the tens of thousands on Bush Key, the similar Bridled Tern can only be expected on the crossing in deep water. Our first few sightings left much to be desired, but eventually we found two sitting on the water that gave us fantastic views and even called for us. We were also treated to a great show of feeding Northern Gannets that were joined by a Brown Booby, providing nice comparisons of the immature plumages of both species. The surprise of the trip was a juvenile tropicbird that gave us a distant fly-by, but we were unable to chase it due to the rough weather. White-tailed is the more common (though still rare) species in this area, but this bird looked more like a Red-billed Tropicbird. Unfortunately it never gave us a good enough view to be sure. Whichever species it was, it certainly gave us a thrill, and the brief chase gave us a refreshing shower.

Each morning we woke to the incredible sight and sound of tens of thousands of Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies in a cloud over Bush Key where they nest. In the evenings we took rides in the skiff out to Bush and Long Keys to get closer looks at the nesting terns, as well as the colony of Magnificent Frigatebirds. In the frigatebird colony we enjoyed views of big, gangly, down-covered chicks, as well as adult males with their huge red gular pouches inflated in courtship display. Several groups were treated to views of small loggerhead turtles and huge nurse sharks on these skiff trips.

In our time on Garden Key we turned up a nice variety of migrant birds. Our 12 species of warblers included Black-throated Blue, Cape May, Magnolia, Ovenbird, Blackpoll, and Hooded among others. A flock of Indigo Buntings that included several stunning males provided wonderful photographic opportunities. A pair of Orchard Orioles fed in flowering sea grape trees, while two very sneaky Yellow-billed Cuckoos ran us in circles inside the fort. Perhaps our most unexpected migrant was a Glossy Ibis that obviously was not happy to be there, but was equally unhappy about the prospect of leaving sight of land.

ITINERARY:

Apr 30 - after a quick meet and greet we headed to the marina to load onto the *Playmate*, 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 (Tail End, Park Boundary, Iowa Rock) en route to Dry Tortugas National Park; we stopped by Middle Key for boobies and birded Garden Key (where the fort is); some folks took dinghy tours to Bush and Long Keys

May 2 - early birding on Garden Key, then the rest of the morning on Loggerhead Key; afternoon return to Garden Key and dinghy tours out to Bush and Long Keys for views of terns and frigatebirds

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; we capped the trip with great looks at a group of Roseate Terns on the "C" Buoy in Northwest Channel near Key West

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.).

GANNETS AND BOOBIES

Masked Booby - about 85 birds on Middle Key, their only NA breeding site; normally this colony is located on nearby Hospital Key

Brown Booby - all immature birds this year, but we had some great looks on Middle Key (about 20 birds) and on channel markers

Northern Gannet - great views of feeding birds on our way to the Tortugas, provided a good size comparison to the smaller Brown Booby

PELICANS

Brown Pelican – many scattered about, some diving on snorklers!

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant

FRIGATEBIRDS

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

TROPICBIRDS

Tropicbird sp. – a juvenile bird seen on our first crossing never came close enough for us to discern the key field marks that separate the more expected (though still rare) White-tailed from the exceedingly rare Red-billed

HERONS, EGRETS AND BITTERNs

Great Blue Heron - a single bird seen mostly on Bush Key

Cattle Egret – several stalking Garden Key

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

Glossy Ibis – not a rare migrant, but rarely seen at the Tortugas, a single bird stayed all three days, but never seemed to settle down

HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES

(Northern Harrier) - a single bird heading north over the fort never stopped and was seen only by me

Sharp-shinned Hawk - at least three of them were zipping around the fort

FALCONS AND CARACARAS

American Kestrel – at least one male and maybe two

Merlin – at least one seen both at Loggerhead and Garden Key

Peregrine Falcon - at least one seen both at Loggerhead and Garden Key

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover - a small flock moved between the pilings and the beaches

STILTS & AVOCETS

Black-necked Stilt – a single male on Loggerhead looked very lost walking through the weeds

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Ruddy Turnstone – they take the place of the city pigeon on Garden Key, begging for crumbs around the picnic tables

Sanderling – one on Middle Key

GULLS & TERNS

Laughing Gull

Ring-billed Gull – just one seen by some

Herring Gull – at least one immature and a surprisingly late adult on Bush Key

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 – it took a bit of work, but we finally located one immature bird perched out in the tern colony on Bush Key; compared to the nearby Brown Noddies it

was noticeably smaller, with and especially skinny neck, small head, and slender bill, the white on the head formed a distinct cap

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!

Bridled Tern – two adults sitting on a log allowed very close approach and even called for us, this species is rarely seen at the Tortugas so we were fortunate to find these on our otherwise rather quiet crossing

Least Tern - a few around Key West on our return

Roseate Tern – it came right down to the wire, but on our last buoy check we hit pay dirt, about 10 adults that gave us great looks both perched and in flight and giving their croaking calls

Royal Tern – several at various locations

Sandwich Tern – three sitting with the Roseates on that last buoy were a nice bonus

PIGEONS AND DOVES

Rock Pigeon – three escaped racing pigeons from Cuba (sporting their identifying bands) were an odd sight at the fort

White-winged Dove - one singing bird in the fort

CUCKOOS

Yellow-billed Cuckoo – two found on our last morning were *very* skittish

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher – one late migrant was buzzing around on day two

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Gray Kingbird - one at Loggerhead Key

VIREOS AND ALLIES

White-eyed Vireo – one adult at Garden Key was elusive for most of our stay

SWALLOWS

Cliff Swallow – one with the Barn Swallow flock

Barn Swallow – several around the fort each day

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – a very late female was on Loggerhead Key

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – one bird was hanging out in the campground

Northern Mockingbird – at least two in the fort; these birds, like the mockers seen in the keys seem to be intermediate between Northern Mockingbirds from further north and Bahama Mockingbirds; they are quite brown and lightly streaked on the flanks, but have white patches in the wings and white outer tail feathers

WOOD WARBLERS

Magnolia Warbler - at least two or three of these handsome warblers
Cape May Warbler – we had a few including a couple striking adult males
Black-throated Blue Warbler – at least one of each sex
Prairie Warbler – a few, including at least one adult male
Palm Warbler – our most common migrant, several were well into breeding plumage causing confusion as to which subspecies was being seen. We only saw “Western” Palm Warblers.
Blackpoll Warbler – only a couple, but at least one of each sex
Black-and-white Warbler – only one or two
American Redstart - lots of males and females, they provided great views and photo ops
Ovenbird – only one that gave us great views at the campground drip
Northern Waterthrush – one seen on the last morning skulking in the weeds by the fort
Common Yellowthroat - several of these guys
Hooded Warbler – one female was seen well in the campground

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Indigo Bunting – several gorgeous males enlivened our stay

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Bobolink – one seen by Ginny in the fort either left or became hawk food before the rest of us got to see it
Orchard Oriole – usually a fairly early migrant, we were lucky to have at least one of each sex on Garden Key

OTHER CRITTERS

Moon Jelly
Ghost Crab
Long-spined Sea Urchin - lots of them in the moat
Great Barracuda
Goliath Grouper (AKA Jewfish) – giants of several hundred pounds right behind the boat!
Flyingfish sp. – big ones and small ones and maybe some in between ones
Needlefish
Houndfish
Mangrove Snapper
Sergeant Major
Yellowtail Snapper
Midnight Parrotfish
Parrotfish sp.
Grunt
Blue Tang
Bluehead
Bottle-nosed Dolphin (Flipper)
Loggerhead Turtle – This is the most common sea turtle in the area and probably accounts for most or all of our turtle sightings.

Mediterranean Gecko – this is probably the species that was hiding under the benches in the fort