

SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND

A RELAXED & EASY DEPARTURE WITH BRENNAN MULROONEY

DECEMBER 9-13, 2009

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The mild, sub-tropical climate of South Florida is an ideal winter destination for not only North American birders, anxious to escape the cold, but also for many North American birds. Dozens of species of Neotropical migrants find it necessary to fly no further south than the southern tip of the Florida Peninsula. In fact, South Florida Christmas Bird Counts regularly record 15 or more warbler species. In addition to these wintering species, participants on this tour will have the opportunity to see almost all of the resident specialties of this unique environment, including Great White Heron (currently considered a white morph of the Great Blue Heron), Snail Kite, Short-tailed Hawk, Limpkin, White-crowned Pigeon, and the increasingly scarce Smooth-billed Ani. Also on our target list will be a few of the established exotic species that can be found in the suburbs of Miami such as Monk Parakeet, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Common Myna, and Spot-breasted Oriole. This short weekend tour will focus on the incomparable Everglades National Park, as well as a couple of relatively newly discovered gems, Wakodahatchee Wetlands and Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area.

This tour is one in our series of Relaxed & Easy tours. These tours are appropriate for participants who want a slower paced tour, with somewhat fewer hours in the field and lighter physical activity. They are ideal for persons who prefer a somewhat later start in the morning (typically 7:00 a.m.), a break after lunch and a shorter afternoon outing. They typically involve shorter walks, usually less than a mile, and avoid difficult terrain.

December 9, Day 1: Arrival in Fort Lauderdale. Upon arrival in Fort Lauderdale, please transfer to our nearby hotel where a room will be reserved in your name. We'll meet in the hotel lobby at 6:00 p.m. for a tour greeting followed by dinner at a local restaurant.

NIGHT: Days Inn Fort Lauderdale Airport South, Hollywood

December 10, Day 2: Wakodahatchee Wetlands and the Tamiami Trail. The newly created Wakodahatchee Wetlands will be our first stop of the day. These wetlands are one of the great conservation stories to come out of South Florida recently. The name "Wakodahatchee" is taken from the Seminole Indian language, meaning "created waters." The wetlands originally were 50 acres of unused utility land, but the Palm Beach County Water Utilities Department's Southern Region Water Reclamation Facility created an artificial wetland here. Every day, the facility pumps two million gallons of highly treated water through the wetland, which acts as a natural filter to clean the water further. The result is a marsh in the middle of a city that attracts numerous birds and other wildlife.

A three-quarter mile boardwalk through the marsh will take us delightfully close to a wide variety of birds that are truly wild. Least Bitterns may be calling from the cattails while White Ibis and the dazzling Purple Gallinule

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stride through the vegetation just feet away! Mottled Ducks as well as Blue-winged and Green-winged teal paddle around cattail ponds. Anhingas perch unconcerned all around us, while a watchful eye on the cattails may spot a Sora scurrying about at our feet. We'll also want to be listening for the wild strident calls of Limpkins which can sometimes be seen lurking along the shoreline here.

The Wakodahatchee Wetlands are an example of progressive thinking in conservation. Not only do they provide suitable habitat for wildlife in an urban setting, but the wetlands have also been designed with public access in mind.

After lunch we'll start heading south toward Florida City. To break up the scenery and get out of the sprawl of suburban South Florida, we'll take a westward tack on US 41, the Tamiami Trail. This highway was long the only major east/west road crossing the Everglades system and the fact that it connected Tampa and Miami gave it its name. While we'll appreciate the chance to escape suburbia, the real reason for our peregrination is to seek the definitive bird of the Everglades, the Snail Kite. The marshes bordering the Tamiami Trail probably offer the most consistent Snail Kite viewing opportunity in South Florida. From here we will continue south to Florida City and our hotel for the next three nights.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn Express, Florida City

December 11 & 12, Days 3 & 4: The Everglades and "Lucky Hammock".

There are no other Everglades in the world.

They are, they have always been, one of the unique regions of the Earth, remote, never wholly known. Nothing anywhere else is like them: their vast glittering openness, wider than the enormous visible round of the horizon, the racing free saltiness and sweetness of their massive winds, under the dazzling blue heights of space...The miracle of the light pours over the green and brown expanse of saw grass and of water, shining and slow-moving below, the grass and water that is the meaning and the central fact of the Everglades of Florida. It is a river of grass.

*Marjory Stoneman Douglas, **The Everglades: River of Grass***

When Marjory Douglas's book appeared in 1947, it brought to center stage the one-of-a-kind nature that is the Everglades. Perhaps for the first time, people all over the country—not just Floridians—became aware of this unique biological treasure tucked away in the far southern part of the United States. The name "Everglades" evokes images of wildness and untamable land. For many, the Everglades *is* Florida. As children we hear the name and we hear *where* it is long before we learn *what* it is.

The east coast of Florida is slightly elevated. The Everglades, lying to the west on almost flat land, act like a trough for tremendous amounts of water flowing south. Because the limestone substrate declines in elevation so gradually, the flow of water is almost imperceptible. Water must travel 12 miles to lose a foot of elevation. In its natural state, water supplies to the Everglades were sustained by torrential thunderstorms that occurred in the rainy season over central Florida and Lake Okeechobee. As the water slowly made its way south, it spread out in a great swath, forming a broad, shallow, grass-clogged river to the sea. Marjory Douglas coined the term, "river of grass," and that is exactly what it is: miles and miles of sawgrass prairie broken only by cypress swamps and hardwood hammocks (tree islands).

The pristine Everglades that Marjory Douglas wrote about is largely gone now. Massive projects to drain south Florida, which began in the late 1800s and continued throughout the 1900s, have proven so effective that the natural flow of water has been severely disrupted. The construction of the Hoover dike around Lake Okeechobee, the channeling of the Kissimmee River, and the crisscrossing of canals north of the park have literally separated the northern and southern parts of the Everglades. Some say the park is on life support. There is room for optimism, however, with the new \$7.8 billion Everglades Restoration Plan, which is intended to restore some of the natural water flow over the next 38 years.

Despite the flat, uniform appearance of the Everglades, it holds a variety of natural communities, each showing distinctive plant and animal life. These communities are produced by differences in the soil and rock structure and by small differences in elevation, perhaps only a foot or two. The ocean determines the type of shore or beach, and as it penetrates inland, it also determines the saltiness of the water available to plants and animals. Grass and forest fires eliminate some plants, and newly burnt-over land favors others. Trade winds from the southeast give the region a more tropical climate. These winds, along with the frequent hurricanes, bring seeds of plants and even some animals from the West Indies. Torrential rains produced by hurricanes flood the Everglades, recharging the fresh water supply, opening new channels, and altering coastal vegetation. All of these factors bring variety to the region.

We will work along the length of the park, exploring West Indian hardwood hammocks, sawgrass prairie, pinelands, and mangrove swamp. Among the many possibilities here are White-crowned Pigeon, Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, Bald Eagle and the “Great White” form of Great Blue Heron. There are excellent photographic opportunities along some of the boardwalks, especially the famous Anhinga Trail. If water levels are right, a leisurely walk along this trail will be a highlight of one of our days in the Park.

In addition to the National Park, we will also spend time birding on some newly acquired state land that has become quite popular with local birders. The official names for this area are Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area and Southern Glades Wildlife and Environmental Area, but birders just call it “Lucky Hammock” and the “Annex.” This area usually harbors a good variety of wintering songbirds, and can be great for raptors. It often has wintering Western Kingbird and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and has recently held rarities like Cassin’s Kingbird, Vermilion Flycatcher and Bell’s Vireo.

NIGHTS: Holiday Inn Express, Florida City

December 13, Day 5: Greater Miami Birding and Departure for Home. Where cities have increasingly replaced natural habitats in South Florida, there are numerous free-flying, exotic birds, species that fall along a spectrum ranging from widely established to marginally established. To one degree or another, all the exotics have been introduced, some intentionally, others as escaped cagebirds.

This morning we’ll search the Greater Miami area for some of the many exotic species that occur in suburban parks and yards. We will naturally pursue those species considered “countable,” but almost anything is possible! In the morning we’ll focus on Red-whiskered Bulbul (established since the 1960s) and Spot-breasted Oriole (present since the 1940s). Our searches should also turn up Monk Parakeet and Yellow-chevroned or White-winged parakeets (the latter two formerly comprising the “Canary-Winged” Parakeet), along with Eurasian Collared-Dove. Common Myna has just recently been declared an established species in Florida and has now been added to the ABA Checklist as a countable species. If we haven’t seen them elsewhere already, we will make an effort to see them this morning. Other interesting surprises might include Hill Mynas; Muscovy Duck; Red-masked, Mitred, Blue-crowned and Dusky-headed parakeets; as well as a variety of other parrot species.

As we explore suburban Miami, we may find a number of native species, including White-crowned Pigeon, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Prairie Warbler, and Boat-tailed Grackle.

We’ll plan on arriving at the Fort Lauderdale International Airport by noon. Flights should be scheduled for departure no earlier than 2:00 p.m.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 7 participants.

TOUR LEADER: Brennan Mulrooney

Brennan Mulrooney was born and raised in San Diego, California. Growing up, his heart and mind were captured by the ocean. He split his summer days between helping out behind the scenes at southern California’s

leading aquarium and working on sport fishing vessels off the coast. As a wildlife and fisheries biology major at UC Davis, he developed his fascination with birds and love of birding while taking a required ornithology course. Since graduating from UC Davis, Brennan has traveled throughout the United States working on wide-spread ornithological field studies. His work has taken him from the mountains of northern California to the Salton Sea in southern California, and from Cape May, New Jersey to Key Largo, Florida. Currently Brennan lives in San Diego with his wife Brynne and their son Declan. Participants often comment that Brennan's sharp eyes, sharper wit, and easygoing attitude make it a pleasure to bird with him.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$1695** per person in double occupancy from Fort Lauderdale. This includes all food from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 5, all lodging for 4 nights during the tour, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leader. It does not include airfare from your home to Fort Lauderdale and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$280**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$300** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Cancellation Penalties and Refunds are based on the following schedule: If cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less **\$150** per person is refundable. If cancellation is made between 120 and 90 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 90 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions, as well as any transfers from one tour to another. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.***

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$150.
Between 120 and 90 days before departure	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded.
Fewer than 90 days before departure date	No refund available.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TRIP CANCELLATION INSURANCE: Application forms for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. We **strongly recommend** that you purchase trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering. Contact the VENT office prior to registration for details.**

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements to Fort Lauderdale from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

RELAXED AND EASY TOUR INFORMATION AND CONDITIONS: Relaxed & Easy (R&E) tours are similar to “regular” VENT tours, but set to a slower pace, with somewhat fewer hours in the field and lighter physical activity. They are ideal for participants who prefer a somewhat later start in the morning, a little lengthier afternoon break, and a shorter afternoon outing. Walking is limited to short walks of usually not more than a half mile one-way, avoiding difficult terrain.

Designed as a Relaxed & Easy tour, this trip will require a low level of physical activity from participants, with most birding being in open area situations and on level ground. A typical day will begin with breakfast at approximately 7:00 a.m., followed by birding until about noon. We will attempt to have lunch every day between 12:00 and 1:00, followed by an afternoon break. Be advised that an afternoon break may not be possible every day. We will resume birding for a couple of hours in the late afternoon. On most days we will attempt to provide forty-five minutes to an hour of down time before dinner. Such trips will similarly not require any lengthy walks. Most walks will be for short distances, usually less than a quarter mile, and avoid difficult terrain. The boardwalk at Wakodahatchee Wetland is approximately three-quarters of a mile. Participants have the option of going as far as they like. Benches are located at various points along the walk. This walk is an easy one and the pace is slow, for the purpose of spending time watching wildlife.

Relaxed & Easy (R&E) refers only to the slower pace of a tour, not to a participant’s birding skills or ability. Accordingly, birders of all levels of ability are welcome, as they are on typical VENT tours; R&E tours should not be mistaken as tours for beginning birders. All birders are welcome, regardless of skill level, as they are on regular VENT tours.

GENERAL INFORMATION ON SOUTH FLORIDA: Wintertime in South Florida offers generally delightful weather. There is usually quite a bit of sunshine; however, rain is always a possibility. Your main considerations when choosing clothes should be avoiding overexposure to the sun (even in winter!). Please note that the Florida sun can be intense. Participants who are especially sensitive to sun should take all necessary precautions. A good basic uniform for all Florida trips is a light-weight, long-sleeve shirt and some cool field trousers. Shorts and T-shirts are acceptable, although they do offer less sun protection. A light windbreaker and perhaps a sweatshirt or sweater may come in handy for early morning or nighttime excursions. If we get a cold front, morning temperatures could get down into the 40s, but this is pretty uncommon. You should also bring sunglasses and a sun hat, preferably one that will not easily blow off.

Sneakers or light hiking boots are good footgear. Bring a good raincoat or poncho, just in case. If you wish, bring a bathing suit; the hotel in Florida City has a pool. A small travel alarm clock may be useful.

Please limit your luggage to one suitcase or duffel and a small carry-on bag.

Biting insects and similar pests should not be much of a problem, although some habitats, especially mangroves, have lots of mosquitoes. Chiggers are present, but in much smaller numbers than in Texas or the tropics. Your best defense is a good repellent such as Cutter's, OFF, Muskol, etc.

Poisonous snakes do occur in the area; however, we will probably not encounter any. There is no need to bring a snake-bite kit.

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There will be excellent opportunities to photograph a variety of natural subjects, so bring plenty of film/memory, batteries, and the like.

HEALTH: If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour, recorded Travelers' Information Line (877) FYI-TRIP. You can check the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING: Our website at www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. The online bookstore can be found by following the link on our homepage. A portion of the sales from the store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You might also want to visit such other online stores as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print and hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com, or www.buteobooks.com, which specializes in ornithology books.

Audubon (July-August, 2001). Entire issue dedicated to South Florida and restoration of the Everglades. You can order a back copy of the magazine from Audubon itself: The website is www.magazine.audubon.org/content/content.html/. Also see "Marjorie Stoneman Douglas and the Glades Crusade," *Audubon* (March 1983).

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TIPPING: Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, local guides, and boat crew) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its Agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on April 24, 2009 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.