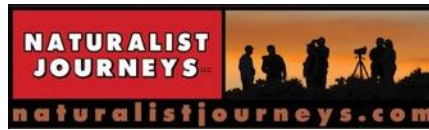


# Seeking the Tropics: Photography Workshop | Nov. 29 – Dec. 5, 2023 | Trip Report | by Kirsten Hines



With guide **Kirsten Hines** and participants: **Amy, Annie and Jeff, Claudia and Ed, and Linda.**



**Wed., Nov 29**

**Coconut Grove | Key Biscayne**

With varying arrival times and modes, our group converged upon the Hotel Arya in Coconut Grove, our home base for most of the workshop. After everyone checked in and bags were stowed, we made our way through the village center and into a neighboring residential area where Kirsten's Kottage Studio Gallery is nestled in a century-old limestone and wood cottage tucked within a forest of wildlife-friendly native plants. The workshop and tour began here with classic Miami mojitos and snacks as Kirsten introduced the group to Florida's natural history, discussed trip details and provided a few photography pointers. We then made our way to Bill Baggs



Cape Florida State Park on Key Biscayne for our first photographic outing. A Great Blue Heron and a rather gregarious racoon posed for the group, but the star was the historic Cape Florida Lighthouse – the oldest unmoved structure in Miami-Dade County.

## **Thurs., Nov 30                      Northern Everglades | Airboat Tour | Big Cypress Swamp**

We began our photographic adventures as the sun's first golden rays spread across the vast sawgrass marshes of the northern Everglades at the Everglades and Francis S. Taylor Wildlife Management Area. Double-crested Cormorants posed on posts in the adjacent canal, and we saw our first wading birds as we drove along the shore including Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret and a Little Blue Heron. As soon as the gates opened, we went to the Shark Valley Visitor Center in Everglades National Park for a breakfast picnic and brief session photographing Anhingas and a Little Blue Heron. We could have stayed much longer, but the best way to experience the Everglades is to get out into it and our immersion experience with Tigertail Airboat Tours beckoned.

We arrived just as our driver and guide, Humberto, steered his flat-bottomed, airplane-propellor-driven vessel to the dock. We donned the provided ear protection and found ourselves gliding across the grass-studded waters of the Everglades, swerving around tree islands, and maneuvering through a maze of cypress domes along the western edge of Water Conservation Area 3A. Humberto expertly paused for us to photograph alligators, a variety of wading birds, Belted Kingfisher, Red-shouldered Hawk and even a Bald Eagle that soared above. He then took us to explore a couple of tree islands that have been in the Tigertail family for many generations, providing a glimpse into the traditional Miccosukee lifestyle, as well as introducing us to wild alligators that have become his friends. Several captive animals were being held on one of the islands – some natives being rehabilitated for release, and some non-natives that were being removed from the habitat.

We drove into the historic town of Everglades City for a pleasant lunch on the water, then worked our way back through the Big Cypress National Preserve for better views of Wood Stork, Anhinga, White Ibis and other birds we'd seen roosting and flying alongside the road. We stopped at the Kirby Storter Boardwalk to hike into the interior of a cypress dome and were rewarded with close views of an osprey eating a fish. We then proceeded to the historic, unpaved Loop Road where we encountered several more wading birds in good evening light, heard a Barred Owl hooting from a nearby patch of trees, saw a few more alligators and stood in silence as flocks of White Ibises and Turkey Vultures streamed across the sky to settle in the cypress trees around us for the night.



## **Fri., Dec 1                    Southern Biscayne Bay | Key Largo | Black Point Marina**

We captured the sun rising over Biscayne Bay from the shoreline of Homestead Bayfront Park as a Spotted Sandpiper worked the lagoon behind us and a Bald Eagle unexpectedly crossed above. A bold pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers diverted our attention on our way back toward the vehicle, entertaining us with antics that included feeding from an opened coconut laying on the beach. When we finally pulled ourselves away, we headed next door to the Biscayne National Park Visitor Center to walk its shoreline nature trail where highlights included a White-crowned Pigeon, Black-and-white and Palm Warblers, a female Common Yellowthroat, a Spotted Sandpiper feasting on a piece of castoff sandwich meat, non-native agama lizards and dolphins swimming just off-shore. As we continued south into the Florida Keys, we were able to see the matrix of mangrove islands that help make Biscayne Bay such a productive estuary, as well as a Magnificent Frigatebird flying above. We stopped at John Pennecamp Coral Reef State Park for our breakfast picnic and were joined by White Ibises. The mangrove boardwalk we had intended to walk at the park lay in rubble from a recent hurricane, so instead we drove to Harry Harris Park where shoreline access allowed us to photograph Ruddy Turnstones, Black-bellied Plovers, Killdeer, Laughing Gulls and a Brown Pelican. A white-morph Short-tailed Hawk flew low overhead as we made our way across Key Largo for lunch.

After lunch we visited the Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park for a taste of South Florida's tropical forest habitat. We found several of the expected residents, including colorfully-patterned Liguus snails that occur only in South Florida and Cuba. We returned north for our last stop of the day at the Black Point Marina in Homestead where we found a congregation of Black Vultures, another gregarious raccoon, a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron eating a mangrove root crab and thousands of Common Grackles, Laughing Gulls and European Starlings streaming across the sky in the last light of the day.

## **Sat., Dec 2                    Matheson Hammock | Kendall | Key Biscayne**

Staying in Miami, we got to sleep in slightly, making it to Matheson Hammock Park just as the first flocks of Yellow-chevrons Parakeets began to squawk across the sky. It wasn't long before Orange-winged Parrots descended into the palms before us, and a Pileated Woodpecker emerged from its cavity for the day. There were several other species that occupied our time, but the other highlight for Matheson Hammock was a juvenile Red-headed Woodpecker whose head was still largely dark. A local rarity, only the 138<sup>th</sup> all-time eBird record for Miami-Dade County, it was indeed an exciting find. After fully photo-documenting this anomaly, we continued to Pine Woods Park in Kendall where several species of non-native birds are regularly observed. We stalked a flock of Asian Scaly-breasted Munia in tall grasses until one finally posed long enough to be



photographed. We picked up lunch along the way and headed to Kirsten's Kottage Studio Gallery for a picnic followed by a photographic instruction session. The afternoon seemed to fly by as Kirsten's short presentation morphed into a longer demonstration and Q&A session that ran right up to the return of good light. Everyone grabbed their gear and piled back into the SUV for an evening at Crandon Park on Key Biscayne. The endangered Piping Plovers did not disappoint, and were joined by several other shorebirds, gulls and terns on the beach. The American crocodile and Sandhill Crane were not in their usual spots nearby, but we were able to find them in the golf course portion of the park in the final light of the day.

### **Sun., Dec 3                      Palm Beach | Jonathan Dickinson State Park | Broward**

We met at sunrise this morning at the Wakodahatchee Wetlands in Delray Beach. Designed to utilize the inherent water-cleansing abilities of Florida's natural wetlands, this 50-acre park managed by the Palm Beach County Water Utilities Department is an oasis of wildlife and a true treat for photographers. Moments after arriving, we had the opportunity to photograph a Great Blue Heron in courtship display on its intended nest site. Several other Great Blue Herons were in various stages of courtship and nest-building, all within easy camera range. Other highlights included Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Glossy Ibis, a stealthy but visible Wilson's Snipe, clusters of non-native green iguanas including several large males in orange breeding colors, alligators, a Florida red-bellied cooter, and a group of Wood Storks that arrived to settle in the surrounding cypress trees. We stopped at neighboring Green Cay, another impressive water treatment wetland, long enough for our breakfast picnic and to glimpse female Painted Buntings, and photograph Atala butterflies, Northern Cardinals and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

After a drive north and lunch in the Jupiter area, we headed into Jonathan Dickinson State Park. As we waited for better lighting and wildlife activity, we visited one of the park's attractions – Hobe Mountain. At nearly 90 feet above sea level, it's an ancient sand dune that overlooks the surrounding scrub habitat and serves as the highest natural point south of Lake Okeechobee. As the lighting softened, we ventured into this unique scrub habitat where Florida's only endemic species of bird, the Florida Scrub-Jay, is found. We didn't have to look long before we found a family group with members willing to pose within range of our cameras. Despite the temptation to stick with these charismatic birds, we forced ourselves to head back south to end the day in Brian Piccolo Park with another of Florida's charismatic birds: Burrowing Owl. Several pairs of owls stood outside their burrows as we arrived, reminiscent of old Florida porch days when entire neighborhoods finished their days talking in their rocking chairs.



**Mon., Dec 4**

### **Everglades National Park | Anhinga Trail Long Pine Key | Flamingo**

We checked out of the Hotel Arya in early morning darkness, arriving in Everglades National Park just as the sun peeked through a heavy layer of fog to illuminate a silver blanket of spider webs strung between silhouetted palms and marsh grasses. Several herons, egrets, Anhingas and Purple Gallinules entertained us at Anhinga Trail. After completing this wetland boardwalk, we headed to Long Pine Key for a breakfast picnic surrounded by South Florida's unique pine rockland habitat. We took a short hike to further experience these pinelands and were rewarded with views of a bolete mushroom, a rare-for-the-region rainbow scarab beetle, and glimpses of a pair of Eastern Towhees. As we drove to the Ernest Coe Visitor Center for a pre-lunch visit, Kirsten spotted a Great Blue Heron lifting from the marsh with a snake dangling from its beak. Knowing this would make a wonderful photographic moment, Kirsten attempted a U-turn to follow the bird but water levels were so high that even the grassy margin at the edge of the road proved part of the wetlands and sucked the vehicle straight into the marsh. Fortunately, this unplanned secondary Everglades immersion proved brief as one of the park biologists, a good friend of Kirsten's from graduate school, stumbled upon them and orchestrated a speedy recovery by the park's fire crew!

After a delayed visit to the Ernest Coe Center and longer than anticipated lunch quest in Homestead, a Northern Harrier caught our attention as it soared above the agricultural fields on our way back into Everglades National Park. We paused in the adjacent Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area in hopes of better views but settled instead for a Red-shouldered Hawk and a distant White-tailed Kite. From here, we headed south toward Flamingo, pausing at various ponds and wetlands to look for specialty birds. We checked into the newly re-built and recently opened Flamingo Lodge, then drove to the beach to escape a cloud of mosquitoes, arriving in time to catch a spectacular sunset, along with a few shorebirds, dolphins, a horseshoe crab exoskeleton and a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.

**Tues., Dec 5**

### **Flamingo | Frog Pond Area | Coconut Grove**

The pinks and purples of pre-sunrise seeped into our waterfront windows as we prepared for one last morning of photography together. We arranged ourselves in front of the newly renovated Flamingo Visitor Center in time to watch the sun rise above Florida Bay, illuminating the pink building behind us as West Indian Manatee, tarpon and ballyhoo milled about the cove before us. We worked our way from here into the marina area where we were treated to more manatees, an American crocodile and a pair of Ospreys building a Spanish-moss-festooned



nest near eye-level. We pulled ourselves away from this idyllic scene to leave time to search for Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and a visiting pair of Vermilion Flycatchers in the Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area just beyond the entrance to Everglades National Park. Our first walk in this area yielded a Prairie Warbler, but the true payoff came at our second stop. We hadn't walked far before spotting a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and a Tropical Kingbird in a bush. As if on cue, with little time to spare, an entire flock of these birds took to the sky. And as we were about to get back in the car once and for all, the male Vermilion Flycatcher posed in a tree just across the road. It was the perfect finale to a wonderful week!

*Photo Credits: Workshop Participants at Flamingo, Everglades National Park (Kirsten Hines, KH); Airboat Ride (KH); Amy with alligator (KH); Annie with alligator (KH); Participants meeting guide Humberto's friend alligator (KH); Yellow-crowned Night-Heron with mangrove root crab (KH); Red-bellied Woodpecker (KH); Participants at Key Biscayne (courtesy Amy Rangel); Orange-crowned Parrot (KH); Great Blue Herons (KH); Participants at Hobe Mountain (KH); Rescue-in-progress, Everglades National Park (KH); Sunrise in Flamingo, Everglades National Park (KH), Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (NJ Stock)*