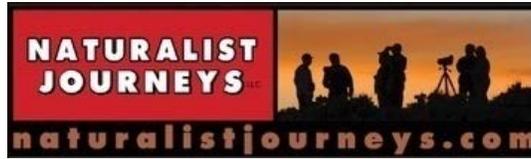


Florida's Winter Warblers & Hidden Wonders

January 13 – 20, 2026 | Trip Report

by Chris Newton



With Naturalist Journeys tour host Tina Greenawalt and local guide Chris Newton. Our 11 clients included Nancy, Arvella, Charlotte, Sandy, Sara, Margie, Bob, Nick, Leigh, Ann, and Karen



Tues., Jan. 13 Arrivals in Orlando

We met up with most of the group in the morning and early afternoon at the airport or nearby hotels. In the early afternoon, most of the group headed to Mead Botanical Gardens, a little migrant trap in downtown Orlando. We started our warbler round up with Yellow-rumped, American Redstart, Northern Parula, and several Palm Warblers. A big surprise was a Western Flycatcher. This bird, a rarity for this area, was last seen over a month ago and thought to be gone, but we got great looks at it. We also had great looks at a Pileated



Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, and had a couple of Fish Crows fly overhead. After a couple hours of birding, we headed to the hotel and walked around Lake Eola toward dinner, adding calling Limpkin along the way. Everyone enjoyed our first of many good meals together.

Wed., Jan. 14 Blue Spring State Park

Today we visited Blue Spring State Park, known for its wintering manatees. There was



no shortage with over 200 in the springs today. After arriving, we met up with Chuck Honaker, a Master Naturalist and volunteer at Blue Springs. Chuck led us around a trail known for the only Florida endemic bird, the Florida Scrub-Jay. Right off the bat, we saw one adult ‘sentinel’ in a tree and this was the first of many lifers the group had during the trip. We continued on the trail and saw another Florida Scrub-Jay, Gray Catbird, White-eyed Vireo, Hermit Thrush, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and heard a Barred Owl several times.

The group then walked around the boardwalk a bit to see some of the many manatees in the spring. Some volunteers even had a listening station with headphones hooked up to an underwater microphone to hear the manatees! After some time enjoying the manatees, we had a picnic lunch in the park before embarking on our next adventure.

After lunch, we took an informative boat trip on the north-flowing St. Johns River. We had great views of our first Snail Kite, which perched in a tree right next to the boat. We also saw many Limpkins, a Bald Eagle, Purple Gallinule, and Wood Storks. Chris also spotted not one, but two American Bittern! We got great views at one of them, which was sitting in the grass along the boat. We also saw a few more Manatees and our first looks at American Alligator, including some babies! After our boat tour, we headed back to the hotel in Orlando and walked to an Italian restaurant for dinner.



Thurs., Jan. 15

Merritt Island NWR | Kennedy Space Center

Off again, this time an early start to the Space Coast. We stopped off at Parrish Park, along the causeway, and some of us got to see a few distant Bottlenose Dolphins and Manatees splashing around in the channel. We started seeing Brown Pelicans and many Laughing Gulls. A couple of Bonaparte's Gulls flew by as well and a group of Ruddy Turnstone hung out on some rocks under the bridge. A Common Loon repeatedly dove a ways out and we had some nice scope views. Next stop was the coast and the Cape Canaveral Seashore. We were first greeted by a family flock of Florida Scrub-Jays right at the entrance. Several of these jays use the scrub in this area as home. It was a chilly day with a bit of wind, but luckily the north winds had pushed Northern Gannets in and several were plunge feeding close to shore for all to see. On the beach we had Greater and Lesser Black-backed Gulls that were hanging out and it was good to compare these dark mantled gulls. Around 50 Red Knots were a good find along with Sanderling, Willet, and three tern species—Royal, Sandwich, and Forster's.



After a quick stop to see the Space X launch site, we made a stop in the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center. Nick, Leigh, and Nancy found three male Painted Buntings at the feeders and alerted the rest of the group. Leaving the Visitor Center, we headed into the Refuge, which boasts many marsh species. Black Point Wildlife Drive was our destination and we added several new species here, including a rare Eurasian Wigeon and rare "storm" Wigeon and morph of the American Wigeon. We had a variety of waterfowl including Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Mottled Duck, Northern Pintail, and Hooded Merganser. Long-billed Dowitchers were plentiful and we also found a couple of Greater Yellowlegs, some Least Sandpiper, and a flock of Dunlin. One Roseate Spoonbill flew overhead but unfortunately did not land nearby. After birding, we had lunch at the local Dixie Crossroads and most of us enjoyed their famous Rock Shrimp. In the afternoon, we visited the famous Kennedy Space Center. Unfortunately, we did not have nearly enough time to explore all that is offered here, but most of us got to see the Atlantis and a few other exhibits. We headed back to Orlando and then drove downtown to enjoy our final night here at a Thai restaurant.



Fri., Jan. 16 Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area

We headed out early to go south, and although it was unusually cold this morning, we were heading toward warmer weather. We arrived at the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area in hopes of seeing the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, a bird that would be new for many in the group. We headed down the trail in temperatures just above 30 degrees with a slight frost on the wire grass that covers the pinewoods. It took a few minutes and few extra rays of sun, but finally the pinewoods awoke and everyone enjoyed great views of Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Pine Warblers. We drove around a bit, adding Eastern Meadowlark, Red-headed Woodpecker, and two Yellow-throated Warbler. Visiting Lake Jackson got us more Purple Gallinules and Gray-headed Swamphens. Wading birds were not to out done with: Tri-colored, Green, and Little Blue Heron and Snowy and Great Egret all showing well. We headed to a picnic lunch at a nearby marina where two Red-shouldered Hawks kept a watchful eye on us. Many Palm Warblers flitted around as we watched a few airboats go by on the lake. We finished this region with a couple of Crested Caracara flying by as we drove out.

This was our longest drive, heading south to Palm Beach County. We stopped into Paul Rardin Park, a local county park where we tracked down a flock of kingbirds. Most were able to see the rare Cassin's Kingbird associating with a flock of Western. A stunning male Vermilion Flycatcher put on a show for all as well. We headed to our hotel in Boca Raton and ended the day with a fabulous Mexican meal at a popular restaurant. Some people even indulged in margaritas!

Sat., Jan. 17 Palm Beach County | Local Wetlands

Now in the Boca Raton area, we started to see a more south Florida look with tropical plants and Parrots. Our first stop was Peaceful Waters Sanctuary, a small park with wonderful trail system nestled in the middle of a recreational area. While soccer matches played on around us, our little sanctuary seemed to be a haven to many species. Sandhill Cranes and all the gallinules, along with a flyby Least Bittern and Roseate Spoonbill made the morning. We saw our first parrots with Monk and Nanday Parakeets.



Afterward, we headed to Green Cay Wetlands, where everyone enjoyed easy afternoon of birding. We had close up views of Sora, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and Blue-winged Teal. Both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons were seen. We also had a wonderful small flock of warblers that included Ovenbird, American Redstart, Cape May Warbler,

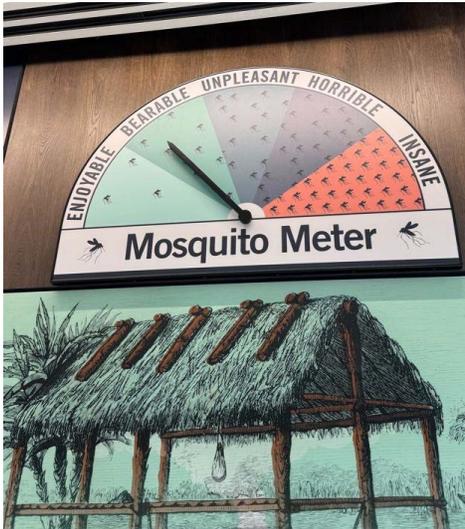
Northern Parula, and Magnolia Warbler. The group then enjoyed a lunch experience at Wawa, which was a quick solution to getting to additional birding spots. After getting our food at Wawa, we stopped at Tall Cypress Preserve and quickly found a Prairie Warbler to add to our list. Chris also spotted a raccoon in a tree that was quite photogenic. We finished our day in the field at a recreational park to see Burrowing Owl. We weren't disappointed and had great views of several owls. Their burrows are roped off to protect them, though they are right off the walking path. We then headed for south Miami to our last hotel of the journey. Everyone enjoyed delicious meals at Doc B's Restaurant as some people enjoyed watching the football game on TV.

Sun., Jan. 18 Miami Area Birding

Today was our Miami exotics day! We headed to Pine Woods Park, an unassuming swath of land under powerlines that is known for exotic birds. We located several Scaly-breasted Munia flocks and 4 Red-whiskered Bulbul gave a nice show. For native birds, Indigo and Painted Buntings were nice to find along with a Brown Thrasher that had a lot of caffeine gave us a chuckle. Our next stop was to Coral Reef Park, where rain cut our time short, but we still picked up Egyptian Geese, Muscovy Ducks, Blue and Gold Macaws, Mitered and Red-masked Parakeets, along with many White Ibis. Rain showers had come in, so we headed to the hotel where we had Cuban pies (pizza) delivered. Everyone full and dry, we headed out in the late afternoon to try for some for parrots. We got to a local Yellow-chevroned Parakeet roost, where upwards of 400 parakeets come in. Bronzed cowbirds, Starlings and Boat-tailed Grackles also use this area to roost. We got treated to about 100 or so parakeets, and Chris, Nick, Leigh, Arvella, Sara, and Nancy stayed a little longer and got White-winged Parakeet, which is a countable species in the US. Our dinner plans got derailed, but we had a nice meal at the hotel to end the day.

Mon., Jan. 19 Everglades National Park

We reached our final full day of the tour and it was time for the Everglades, a day that many had been anticipating. Driving through Florida City, a flock of Common Myna kicked up and we also added White-wing Dove. Stopping north of the Everglades, we stopped at a local spot where the unseasonable morning chill made the birds a bit quiet. A White-tailed Kite made a fly by along with a Merlin. Finally, the local Vermilion Flycatcher showed herself and a few Scissor-tailed Flycatchers appeared up in the wires. Moving south we entered the



Everglades National Park, 1.5 million acres of moving grass. After a stop at the Visitor Center, we headed to the southern tip to Flamingo. We stopped along the way for Seaside Sparrow, but it was too cold and windy for them to make an appearance. It was also too cold for American Crocodile, but there was some Manatees hanging around the marina and we got very close views. We scanned for Flamingos, but they did not make an appearance. A flock of 1,000 Black Skimmers was impressive, especially as they took off and then resettled several times. Huge numbers of Willets and handful of Marbled Godwits, but the star was a rare Long-billed Curlew. This was a first for the area since 2003.

Lunch was at the local restaurant in Flamingo. We checked for Flamingo and Crocodile one more time before we headed north, stopping to enjoy the scenery. We made a stop at a few ponds, one that yielded a large American Alligator and a few Black Vulture nearby. Our last stop was at the Royal Palm/Anhinga Trail where we ended our warbler round up with Louisiana and Northern Waterthrush. We treated everyone to milkshakes and smoothies at Robert is Here and everyone seemed to agree that they lived up to the hype. Dinner was at the famous Cuban restaurant Versailles, which everyone thoroughly enjoyed.

Tues., Jan 20 Departures

On our last day, we had a couple hours in the morning, so we headed to Crandon Park along the eastern side of Miami and the famous South Beach area. Famous for us, as it yielded several Piping Plovers along the beach. We wrapped up the tour with 170 species, including 15 species of warblers.

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