



Naturalist Journeys, LLC

FLORIDA April 16-27, 2012

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TRIP REPORT

*April
Arrival*



*Monday,
16 -
in Fort*

Lauderdale, FL

Everyone arrived in Fort Lauderdale with no problem, so we hopped in the van and headed north to Juno Beach. After checking into our hotel we headed off to the Ke'e Grill for dinner, a very nice restaurant that used outstanding cooking and flavoring techniques on their fresh fish. A definite recommendation when any of us return to this area!

Tuesday, April 17 – Juno Beach to Fort Meyers

We started our morning off at Jonathon Dickinson State Park searching for the Florida Scrub Jay. This species has had its share of bad luck with habitat loss and West Nile virus, but this park was supposed to be one where the jay was relatively “easy” to find. Unfortunately that was not the case.

We got our first look at a Wood Stork that was foraging with a Great Blue Heron and Great Egret. This isolated pool of water was characteristic of shrinking pools these birds favored at this time of year. Next, a gorgeous American Swallow-tailed Kite careened through the sky alongside our vans.

We gave one more location along the Loxahatchee River (Florida's first river designated under the "Wild & Scenic" law) a try for the jay but were unsuccessful. We decided to head back to our lodging to pack up and then head west.



put in an appearance.

The way we found the Limpkin was a bit of a surprise. We stopped alongside the road to take a look at well-colored Common Gallinule. All of a sudden a Limpkin popped its head up and then decided to take flight. Not necessarily the longest look, but easily identified!

It was time to settle into our lodging as we had reservations at Two Meatballs in the Kitchen!

We were heading to Fort Myers and along the way wanted to find Crested Caracara, Short-tailed Hawk, Snail Kite and Limpkin, four Central Florida specialties. We crossed to the south of Lake Okeechobee and took back roads towards Immokalee. Our first of the four was a female (based on the white in the chin) Snail Kite flying overhead.

Next was a Crested Caracara that had joined a group of Black Vultures feeding on a road-killed American Alligator. It was the beginning of five caracaras we saw today, with most just roosting. It was while watching a perched caracara that our third specialty, a Short-tailed Hawk,

Wednesday, April 18 – Babcock-Webb WMA & Venice

We started off early in the morning heading north to the Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area and along certain road where the Red-cockaded Woodpecker regularly nests in pine cavities.

We parked the vans and walked down the road towards the first of a number of locations where the woodpecker uses natural and man-made cavities.

First off we heard Bachman's Sparrow calling on both sides of the road. But as soon as we keyed in on the bird, it decided to drop out of sight. In the meantime a Red-cockaded Woodpecker landed in the middle of the road and another lit in a tree right above the road. We got to watch the bird in the tree through the scope for as long as we wanted; great views for everyone.

Back to the sparrow... We kept hearing them and finally found one that stayed put long enough for all of us to get a look. Very non-descript, but very countable!

We toured the rest of the WMA and got to experience a piece of Florida's wildlands that looked relatively intact.



After lunch we headed to the Venice Rookery where the colonial nesters were busy incubating eggs and raising young. Anhinga, egrets, herons and alligators were all busy with their respective responsibilities. It was wonderful to sit in the shade and watch life happening in front of us!

Now for the Florida Scrub-Jay. We headed in to Caspersen Park in Venice where we had had luck finding the jay during last year's journey. We parked and then headed out to the trails. It took a while, but then one of us saw some blue in a shrub,

barely moving. Odd; we couldn't get it to move, but we caught glimpses of it. Then we saw the nest, and then the male flew in! We backed off and watched as the male landed in the tree above us. We enjoyed great looks as a second adult bird flew in. Given that these birds have extended family members raise the young, we weren't surprised when we looked through the scope and saw young pop their heads up! Very cool and a great way to end the day!!!

Thursday, April 19 – Corkscrew Swamp & Tigertail

Off to Corkscrew, where we saw a Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher in the final stages of building a nest. It's a great-looking little bird, but not quite the same as the Swallow-tailed Kites we saw a short time later. Amazingly, we saw this pair, and by the end of the day, we had seen many more!



The pond and bald cypress in the preserve are just remarkable. Cloaked with Spanish moss and festooned with other Tillandsia, the trees looked graceful with shields of air plants, truly a magnificent plant community.

We did happen upon a small feeding group of storks, egrets, ibis' and other waders. What was so wonderful was that most of the birds were within fifty feet of everyone standing on the boardwalk and none of the birds seemed to care. This allowed picture-taking

opportunities for everyone, even those with only their phones!



After lunch we were off to Tigertail Beach. But on the way, we looked for Burrowing Owl on vacant lots in suburban Marco Island. And we found them, at least eight different birds.

The other find on the way to the beach was an active Bald Eagle nest with one fully grown chick. We stopped and took a look. When we left the beach and stopped and took another look, the bird was gone; we suppose it fledged!



We arrived at Tigertail and walked out to the beach. Reddish Egrets, Ruddy Turnstones, Wilson Plover and more were on the beach. So were lots of people; it was a gorgeous day!

Friday, April 20 – Sanibel Island & Shark Valley

We started the day birding the beach along the causeway to Sanibel Island. Magnificent Frigatebird, Ruddy Turnstone

and Black-bellied Plover were just a few of the species we saw as we headed to the Ding Darling Bailey Tract.

The Bailey Tract is adjacent to the Sanibel Garden Trail and that is where we found different pools of water loaded with Little Blue Herons, Great Egrets and Roseate Spoonbills foraging in large groups. It was a mass of pastels bringing terror to any fish that thought about moving from one end of the pond to the next. The ensuing battles whenever one fish was caught always created a small flurry of exchanges. We had come to see waders and they were here!

It was lunchtime as we rolled into Everglades City and alligator was on the list for lunch. The Oysterhouse provided us with both sautéed and fried ‘gator, with the sautéed easily being one of the best! After trying their key lime pie (this place had been rated the best by last year’s group) we headed to the docks. The Purple Martin colony was in full swing as a Pileated Woodpecker called from the upper reaches of a palm tree. Numerous Osprey were circling overhead as we headed out of town to Shark Valley.

As we drove east we saw the first of the storm clouds that had been predicted to arrive this afternoon. A little rain was all we got on our drive, so we were hopeful.



As we boarded the tram it really started to come down, but as with most isolated clouds, it was a short ten-minute downpour. By the time we got the observation tower the skies were dry and view was spectacular.

The highlight of the drive back was the Purple Gallinule feeding within ten feet of the tram. That, along with the numerous Green Heron and Anhinga, seemed to provide the backdrop for the next shower that hit as we disembarked from the

tram to drive to Florida City.

Saturday, April 21 – Eastern Everglades National Park

We had hoped for better weather, but at four AM we knew it was not going to be an uneventful day. Thunder and lightning was all around us as we experienced a spectacular light show.

It was apparent that the wildlife enjoyed the respite as much as we did given the activity level. Our first encounter was with a seven-foot American Alligator that had a unique hunting technique. It would swim

backwards (albeit slowly) up the narrow channel that parallels the trail and push its tail into little pools while moving it vigorously from side to side. It seems that caused a number of the fish to jump over its back and straight into its waiting jaws...

Family groups of Green Heron and lots of Anhinga were foraging or drying out along the trail. A pair of Eastern Kingbirds allowed us to approach within ten feet, creating some great photo opportunities. The clouds were parting and it made for a great sunset as Barred Owls barked in the background.

Sunday, April 22 – Western Everglades National Park

We headed out west to see the other side of the Everglades with Flamingo on our minds. Our first stop was to try for Brown-headed Nuthatch that a few of us still hadn't seen. The second and third birds we saw when we stepped out of the van were just what we were looking for. That was easy, so we birded more of Long Pine Key and found more nuthatches.

Then we were off to try for the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow. The acres of sawgrass where we had been lucky enough to see three of this endangered race last year was now flooded from that storm we had yesterday. No birds and not a peep out of anything but frogs and waders. Not sure where the sparrows went to; maybe higher ground.

Our next stop was Paurotis Pond where we found a surprising spectacle – Wood Storks building nests. Wood Storks usually nest in winter and fledge their young in early spring. But here in Florida it was definitely a wet spring, and that was not conducive to a normal, successful nesting. Maybe a second try?



So we watched as the storks and Roseate Spoonbills took turns visiting their nesting colonies. The spoonbills were just finishing their nesting, so the sky was very busy, especially when you throw in a few White Ibis that felt they had to do the same thing. We were watching nature do her best to make sure these species would be around in later years.



Our last stop of the day was at Flamingo where we boarded inland waters tour boat. Our first sighting was two American Crocodile along side the edge of the channel. This is the furthest north that this species occurs, so within a couple of hours we saw the two largest reptile residents in North America.

After the only sixty-second lunch of the trip we birded the marina and the parking lot. That was when we started to realize that yesterday's storm had pushed some birds to the ground. A nice flock of mixed

shorebirds in the picnic area, a flock of over 50 Indigo Buntings feeding in the grass with a Scarlet Tanager, while Gray and Eastern Kingbirds duked it out for the best perches. Not a huge fallout, but then there were a number of Keys to the south that might hold something. Did I mention the female manatee with two young in the marina?

Monday, April 23 – Greater Miami

Before we headed to Miami to look for some of the escaped exotics we took a drive down to Dagby Preserve in Key Largo. This was a place that seemed to regularly have Mangrove Cuckoo. We saw Ovenbird, Magnolia and other warblers, but nothing really big in the way of numbers. We did have a Mangrove Cuckoo call, but couldn't entice it into the open.



Off we drove to Miami to search for a number of the introduced bird species that reside in the neighborhoods of this semi-tropical city. We spent the afternoon at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Gardens. No exotic birds, but there were certainly a number of introduced reptiles wandering the grounds. Great examples of plants from around the world could not work their magic on the birds. But it was still a wonderful opportunity to explore this world-renowned garden!



Tuesday, April 24 – The Keys

We started the morning outside our hotel looking for Red-whiskered Bulbuls; this is the neighborhood in which this declining species should be found. We walked numerous neighborhoods but to no avail. People on the street said they have seen them, but we didn't even hear a call note. But what we did hear was a raucous group of Mitered Parakeets down the street. They were feeding on palm seeds and making quite the racket. We got great looks at about 20 birds as they fed and then just hung out.

Next we headed to another neighborhood looking for Monk Parakeet. We found their nests, but no parakeets.



So we headed down to the Keys and after lunch we stopped at Long Key State Park. And that was where we found the birds! Lots of passerines, Kentucky Warbler, Golden-winged Warbler (20 species of warbler), Black-Whiskered Vireo, five species of thrush; there were birds everywhere.

Saturday's storm just brushed the edge of the Keys and all of the birds must have just dropped to the first piece of ground they could find. An absolutely spectacular fallout!

After checking into our lodging at Parmer's, we finished the day with an excellent meal at Parrot paradise restaurant.

Wednesday, April 25 – Middle Keys

We started the day at the Northeastern side of Key Deer National Wildlife Refuge to look for Mangrove Cuckoo and any other migrants after yesterday's feast. No luck on the cuckoo, but we saw a number of the deer and finally got good looks at White-crowned Pigeon, one of those secretive mangrove denizens. Two perched on some dead snags and waited long enough for all of us to get good looks. There were more Black-whiskered Vireos in there, but that was about it.

We walked the road for about a half-mile and found a smattering of the species we had seen yesterday afternoon, including lots of nesting Red-bellied Woodpeckers and more warblers and thrushes.

Next we went to Bahia Honda where we still had the great weather and the same cast of bird characters, although much fewer in number. We did see five different species of butterflies, but the numbers were down – maybe due to Saturday's storm?

It was after lunch and we went to the Key Deer NWR before calling it a day. We had been pushing it pretty hard and a little break before tomorrow's day on the boat seemed like a very good idea...

Thursday, April 26 – Dry Tortugas

We arrived in Key West by 7:30 and spent little time waiting for the Yankee Freedom II to leave the dock. Once underway, it took us about 2.5 hours to arrive at Fort Jefferson. Along the way we saw Roseate Tern, Masked Booby and Brown Booby. The sky had a few billowy cumulus clouds which just made everything look stunning. And when we stepped off the boat, it was time to bird. Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Ovenbird, American Redstart, Chuck-Will's Widow were just the start. We also saw Yellow-bellied Cuckoo, Painted Bunting, Worm-eating Warbler, White-rumped Sandpiper and that strange looking, partially leucistic Hood Warbler. Lots of birds and great scenery to fill our time ashore! And everything was in its finest alternate plumage -- stunning!



We had a very good farewell dinner at Boondocks before heading off to our rooms to pack.

Friday, April 27 - Departures

It took us a few hours to get to the Fort Lauderdale airport, but with little traffic we arrived in time for everyone's flight and a little to spare. We said our goodbyes and off we flew after another great journey!

