

Florida 31 Jan - 11 Feb 2005

Monday 31st January

Flew to Orlando, hired car and drove to St Petersburg on the Gulf Coast. Getting dark as we left airport so no birds seen. Hotel where causeway to 'Sunshine Skyway' across Tampa Bay starts.

Tuesday 1st February

From Hotel room could see beach with **Laughing Gull, Ring-Billed Gull, Snowy egret and Brown Pelican**. Inlet led to little Marina where **Double-crested Cormorant, Anhinga, Green Heron, and Belted Kingfisher**. A yard at the back of the hotel (where they put the trash) yielded **Red-bellied woodpecker and Boat-tailed Grackles**, and an **Osprey** on their communication tower. The car park had a couple of **White Ibis**, and, to make us feel at home, **House Sparrow, Starling and Collared Dove**. As we left a flock of about 50 **Turkey Vultures** drifted over.



Went to a local country park at Fort de Soto, on an island at north entrance to Tampa Bay. On way passed Pinellas County Duck ponds, where lots of **Redheads**, and a few **Pied-Billed Grebe, Shoveler, Ring-necked duck, Lesser Scaup, Moorhen, and American Coot**. Also **Little Blue Heron, Mockingbird**, several **Yellow-rumped warblers** (known locally at 'Butterbutts'), and **Tree Swallows** overhead.

On the island, first picnicked on the beach, where had **Willet, Dunlin, Sanderling, and Turnstone** at the waters edge, and **Sandwich and Forster's Terns** flying past. In the carpark had **Mourning Dove and Palm Warbler**.



Up at the tip of the island the tide was coming in, driving birds onto a patch of mud and grass. We needed a bit of assistance with identification from some of the local birders there, and first ran into language problems. There "Waders" means herons, egrets, storks and ibis; plovers and sandpipers are "Shorebirds". So our "what are those little waders there?" was met with incomprehension. A

great help with identification there was that waders and shorebirds, and also gulls and terns, generally take no notice of you until you get closer than about ten feet. A professional bird photographer from Essex who was there that day now understands how the Americans get such good pictures! On this patch were **Great Egret, Snowy Egret,**



Reddish egret, White Ibis, Little Blue Heron, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Willet, Knot, Grey Plover, Wilson's Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Sanderling, Dunlin, and the 'peeps' that we needed assistance with, **Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper and Least Sandpiper**. On a sandbar beside this patch were **Ring-billed Gulls, Forster's Terns, Royal Terns, Black Skimmers and American Oystercatchers**. In a nearby tree was **Loggerhead Shrike**. At dusk, back at the car park and

picnic area, not only raccoons and squirrels, but also a **White Ibis** and a **Wood Stork**, were carefully inspecting the left-overs. Drove to Sarasota in the dark.

Wednesday February 2nd

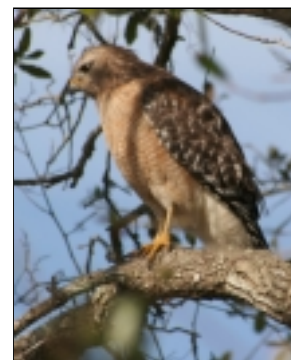
Spent most of the day at the Botanic Gardens in Sarasota. While mainly of plant interest, there were just a few birds around. These included **Gray Catbird, Blue Jay, Fish Crow, Northern Cardinal, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** (a woodpecker), **Mottled Duck** and **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher**.

Then visited Phillippi park, on the outskirts of Sarasota, recommended for birds in a local publicity leaflet. Don't believe them. We did see a single female **Red breasted Merganser**, but otherwise only **Gray Catbird, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Eastern Phoebe**, and a colony of **Turkey Vultures**.

Late in the day we went to nearby Venice, where the 'rookery' had been recommended to us (by a birder, not the leaflet). This is not easy to find, just off the main road between the county offices and the highway patrol. There is a pool, with an island about 50 yards in diameter covered in bushes and small trees. On it were several nesting **Anhinga, Great Blue Heron** and **Great Egret**. As dusk fell birds came in to roost in their hundreds – more of the above and also **Snowy Egret, Cattle Egret, Little Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, White Ibis**, and, most numerous of all, **Glossy Ibis**. A true spectacle, unfortunately just too dark to photograph well.

Thursday February 3rd

Visited Myakka River State Park. One of us had been here before (slipping out for an afternoon during a business visit to Sarasota in 1998) when it had been fantastic; this time the water level was about 6 feet higher, so the best places were covered and only about 10% of the birds there. On the way in saw **Eastern Phoebe, Common Yellowthroat** as well as various herons and some alligators. Huge flock of **Black Vultures** at visitor centre. Took airboat ride onto lake – this is run mainly for the alligator watchers. Saw plenty of them, also varied herons, plus **Double-crested cormorant** and **Anhinga**. Also **Red-shouldered hawk** in tree at edge, and **Osprey** fishing.



Shared picnic lunch with **Palm Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler**, and **American Crow**. After lunch short walk gave **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** and another woodpecker (either downy or hairy), **Common and Boat-tailed Grackles** and three of the local speciality – the **Limpkin**.

A walk on the 'Bird Walk' - a wooden jetty over the mudflats, was disappointing as the water level was too high for mud, but did get more herons, a **Bald Eagle** flying over and good views of an

Osprey fishing, then moving the fish to the aerodynamic position for flying.

We were advised to walk into the wood along a pylon line to see a **Bald Eagle** nest, which was distant but the eagle could probably see us a lot better than we could see her. Most of the pylons in the line had **Osprey** nests on top. Also had a first-year **Little Blue Heron**, which oddly has completely white plumage.



Further walking in the woods produced another **Red-shouldered Hawk**, some **Northern Cardinals** and a **Pileated Woodpecker**

To Fort Myers for the night.

Friday February 4th

This was the only bad weather day of the trip, cool and damp.

Started at 'Manatee Park' at Fort Myers – this is where a power plant discharges hot water into the river and Manatees come from miles around to enjoy it. The river was steaming well in the cold damp air, saw a few manatees but not many birds – **Cattle Egrets** beside the main road were the most interesting.

Then to the "J R 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge" on Sanibel Island. A bad day to go, the drive through the refuge is closed on Fridays, so we had to make do with the Indigo Trail, a short footpath. Immediately two **Ospreys**, both carrying fish, swooped just over our heads, the latter apparently being chased by a **Bald Eagle**. From then on not much but **Yellow-rumped warblers** and **White Ibis**, though did have difficult views of **Willetts** and **Lesser Yellowlegs** on a shallow lake almost hidden by the pathside bushes.



Outside the main refuge area, near the beach, is the Bailey Tract, a small satellite area where had **Pied-billed Grebe**, **Moorhen**, **American Coot**, **Mottled Duck**, **Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher**, **Black-and-white warbler**, and best of all, an otter.

At dusk drove to Everglades City.

Saturday February 5th

Bright but cold morning. Outside the hotel were **Common Grackles** and a **Rusty Blackbird** among all the **Starlings**. Set off for Shark Valley, the one accessible spot in the north of the Everglades National Park. It has nothing to do with Sharks and is not a Valley, but still worth a visit. Just before the entrance the road crosses an Indian Reservation, where we were tipped of to look out for Snail Kites, but no obvious sign.

Shark valley is a seven mile, dead straight, dead flat trail out into the swamp, with a roughly parallel but winding eight mile track back. We hired bikes rather than walk. Out on the straight path – open to left, ditch then hedge to the right. Plenty of the usual **Great Blue Heron**, **Little blue heron**, **Ticolored Heron**, **White Ibis**, **Great Egret** and **Snowy Egret** (and alligators), but also (in pools beyond hedge) glimpses of **Wood Stork**, **Glossy Ibis** and **Roseate Spoonbill**. Plenty of **Belted Kingfishers**, few **Green Herons** and also occasional **Purple Gallinule**. **Black** and **Turkey Vultures** constantly overhead.

At the end is an observation tower, showing the vastness and flatness of the Everglades. We got talking to a warden, and mentioned Snail Kites, he said there were some around.

On the way back (eight miles against the wind) through the open swamp, with occasional pools, mud and small thickets. **Laughing Gull** and **Caspian Tern** over the pools, **Killdeer**, **Least sandpiper**, **Greater** and **Lesser Yellowlegs** on the mud. **Tree swallows** overhead, few **Mockingbirds**, **Yellow-rumped warbler** and **Palm Warbler**. Back at base a different warden approached us saying "Are you the guys looking for the Snail Kites?" We were directed just half a mile back along US41 to a disused boat station, and there were two **Snail Kites** quartering the edge of a field. Then to Flamingo, at the southern tip of the National Park.

Sunday February 6th

Awoke to view over Florida Bay and the Ten Thousand Islands (well, about 7 of them). On the shoreline was a **Great White Heron** (which is a local colour variation of the Great Blue), and just offshore a few **White Pelicans** – much bigger than the brown.

Went on a guided walk at Eco Pool – this pool is the last stage of Flamingo's Sewage treatment plant, and a real magnet, with the usual Herons, Egrets and Ibis. Masses of **Tree Swallows** overhead, **Pied-billed Grebe** on the water, **Red-shouldered Hawk**, **Palm Warbler** and **Yellow-throated warbler** on the edge. **Roseate Spoonbill** flew over.



From Restaurant looking over sea, mud banks offshore had **Laughing Gulls**, **Royal Terns**, **Caspian Terns** and **Black Skimmers**. Also a lot of small shorebirds, far too distant to identify. Almost every navigation signpost in the sea, and communication tower on land, had its **Osprey** nest on top.

Took a couple of the local walks through the mangrove forest; lots of interesting plants and butterflies but almost bird-free, just a **Red-Bellied Woodpecker** and a pair of **Northern Cardinals**.

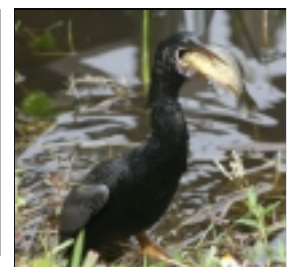
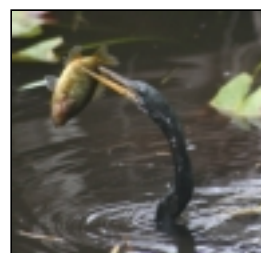
Back to Eco Pool for dusk. Huge roost of mainly **White Ibis**, with some **Snowy Egrets** and the odd **Cattle Egret**. Oddly just before it got dark most of these left for a roost on one of the little islands in the bay. Flock of **Red-winged blackbirds**. Watched **Ospreys** catching fish.



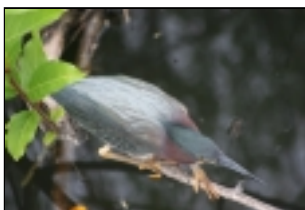
Monday February 7th

Beach outside hotel – in water 120+ **White Pelicans**, 3 **Great White Heron**, **Laughing gulls**, **Black skimmers**, **Killdeer** on beach, **Red-winged blackbirds** on bushes by beach, **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** on the grass.

To Royal Palm – a visitor centre just inside the National Park. Two trails here – the Anhinga trail alongside water in the swamp, and the Gumbo limbo trail through a 'Hardwood Hammock'. **Brown Thrasher** on the road in.



On Anhinga Trail lots of Double-crested cormorants, Great Egrets and Wood Storks. Anhinga nesting, and one obligingly caught and ate a fish just beside us.



Excellent views of some **Green Herons**, and a nice **Pileated Woodpecker**.

The Gumbo Limbo was only about half a mile, but felt deep in the woods. Plenty of birds – **Common Yellowthroat**, **Hermit Thrush**, **Gray Catbird**, **Carolina Wren**, **Eastern Phoebe**, **Yellow-throated warbler**,

Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, Northern Cardinal, Pine Warbler, Northern Parula Warbler, Prairie warbler, Worm-eating warbler, American Crow. A **Pine warbler** caught and ate a hawk-moth with wing-span at least as great as its own.

Out of the trail, among vultures overhead was **Red-Shouldered Hawk** and **Sharp-Tailed Hawk**.

Drove out of park and onto the Florida Keys, but saw no birds of note before dark.

Tuesday February 8th

Great White Heron and Collared Doves at hotel on Key Largo.

Drove back onto mainland, through Miami suburbs and across the drained part of the Everglades, now sugar cane country, to Lake Okeechobee, the original source of all the Everglades water. Now in 'Florida Birding Trail' country – a guide covering all the best sites in Florida – the parts already published cover the whole state except the bit we have been in so far. We took their advice for a picnic site beside the lake – Jaycee Park, where they advertise **Black Skimmers** on the parking lot. They were quite right. Also **Ring-billed Gulls**, and some **Herring Gulls**.



Plenty of **Boat-tailed Grackles**, a **White Pelican** and several brown ones.

Set off toward Atlantic coast taking in another Birding Trail spot, Pinelands Local Reserve. This is Manly woodland with some grassland. On way in had **American Kestrel**, 2 **Sandhill Cranes**, **American Robins**, several **Killdeer** and **Red-shouldered Hawks**. Around the wood saw more **American Robins**, **Northern Cardinal**, **Red-bellied woodpecker**, a **Snipe** and 3 **Wild Turkeys**.

Then off to Titusville, near the Space Centre.

Wednesday February 9th

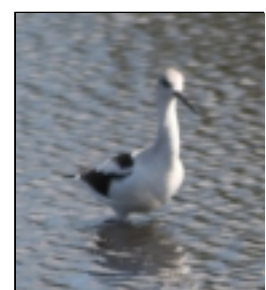
Went to Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. The Kennedy Space Centre takes up part of Merritt Island, but the rest of the island is the refuge.

Parrish Park is by the bridge onto the island, was quite foggy early in the morning but had **Loggerhead Shrike** and **Red Breasted Merganser**, and also a raccoon asleep curled up in a tree.

At the refuge centre saw **Red-winged Blackbird** and **Northern Cardinal**, as well as inevitable **Yellow-rumped** and **Palm warblers**.

A lagoon near the entrance to the Black Point visitor drive around the refuge contained a large flock of duck – **Blue-winged Teal**, **Pintail** and **Shoveler**, also **American Coot**, **Reddish Egret**, and a huge number of waders (sorry, shorebirds). These included **Willet**, **Knot**, **Dunlin**, **Western sandpiper**, **Least sandpiper**, **Short-billed Dowitcher**, **Greater Yellowlegs**, **Lesser Yellowlegs**, and, apart from the main flock, **Marbled Godwit** and **American Avocet**.

The drive went past a number of pools, plenty of the usual suspects (**Great Blue**, **Little Blue**, and **Tricolored Herons**, **Great** and **Snowy Egrets** and **White** and **Glossy Ibis**), also widespread were **Wood Storks**, **American Coots**, **Moorhen**, **Killdeer** and **Pintail**. One pool had several **Roseate Spoonbills**, another



had pairs of **Hooded Merganser** and **Mottled Duck**, and several pairs of **American Wigeon**, and another several **American Avocets** with **Greater** and **Lesser Yellowlegs**.



Next walked the Scrub Trail, a short walk with a good chance of seeing a local speciality, the **Florida Scrub Jay**. We were lucky, with good views of two of these striking birds. In a clump of trees beside the path saw some woodpeckers, including **Red-bellied Woodpecker** and **Northern Flicker**. Also had an armadillo cross the path.

Then drove out on a rather rough track to the Canaveral National Seashore, a huge dune (30 miles +) separating the lagoon containing Merritt Island from the Atlantic. Quite windy, a lot of surfers on the sea. Just a few birds, **Common Grackles** on the dunes, **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Laughing Gulls** and **Forster's Terns** (some in full summer plumage) on the beach, and an occasional **Gannet** over the sea.

Back through Merritt island at sunset, nothing new.

Thursday February 10th

Visited the Kennedy Space Centre. Plenty of Herons etc and Vultures – most interesting was a nesting **Bald Eagle**. Plenty of armadillos.

In afternoon to Orlando and thence to Gatwick and Birchington.

See Map Below

