



## Florida 2023 Trip Report

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Eagle-Eye Tours' South Florida 2023 avian adventure showcased Florida's unique mix of specialty birds, plant and animal communities and rare and endangered habitats. We started out in the Pineywoods, marshes and tidal flats of Fort Myers, birding across the south Florida peninsula to Everglades National Park and its varied habitats. We then headed south through the historic Florida Keys, birding our way to Key West and the Dry Tortugas National Park before heading back north to end in Miami.

#### **Day 1 - Tuesday, March 7: Tour Commences in Fort Myers**

We began the tour with some local pre-dinner birding, for our hotel parking lot and the adjacent lake made for interesting sightings. Shrieking Boat-tailed Grackles and singing Northern Mockingbirds, foraging Snowy and Great Egrets and a flyover Osprey were great resident birds to kick-off this South Florida birding adventure.



*Northern Mockingbird © Kyle Schanta*

**Day 2 - Wednesday, March 8: Fort Myers - Lakes Park, Cape Coral Specialties and Carlos Pointe**

On our way to wetland wonderland Lakes Park, we encountered our first Muscovy Ducks of the tour, patiently waiting for a gap in the morning rush hour. Upon arriving at Lakes Park, we were greeted with a hunting Loggerhead Shrike, Great Blue, Little Blue and Black-crowned Night-Herons and a flyover of our only Black-bellied Whistling Ducks of the tour.



*Loggerhead Shrike © Kyle Schanta*

As we walked the boardwalks and trails, a palm frond-carrying Bald Eagle flew diligently north, Cedar Waxwings fed together with the tour's first Palm and Yellow-Rumped Warblers in the Sabal Palms, and we heard a calling Virginia Rail in marshy tangles beneath a roosting Anhinga. Gray Catbirds were seemingly everywhere, and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker working its intricate Live Oak sapwells led us to the van as we piled in for Cape Coral.



*Black Vulture and America White Pelicans © Kyle Schanta*

Our first Cape Coral stop was the Pelican Boulevard Baseball Fields where we all had great views and experiences with Florida Burrowing Owls guarding their burrows and Monk Parakeets high up in their chaotic stick nests tucked in the field's light boxes.



*Burrowing Owl guarding its burrow © Kyle Schanta*

Next, we strolled the boardwalk of the Rotary Park Glover Bight Trail in an unsuccessful search for Mangrove Cuckoo, but an in-our-face singing Prairie Warbler was quite the consolation prize. Damage from Hurricane Ian was evident from a bird's-eye view provided by the observation tower. We admired a distant Caspian Tern and then headed back up the boardwalk.



*Fun at the Rotary Park Pollinator Garden © Kyle Schanta*

After our Rotary Park Pollinator Garden lunch surrounded by Monarch Butterflies, Mangrove Skippers and Common Ground Dove song, we headed south for Carlos Pointe, which was loaded with birds! However, the recent hurricane and red tide made for a surreal looking (and smelling!) landscape, but the bird-life was diverse and plentiful.



*Carlos Pointe © Kyle Schanta*

We had great looks at the hoards of overwintering Semipalmated Plovers and Western Sandpipers. American Oystercatcher and Willet freely fed alongside Lesser Black-backed, Laughing and Herring Gulls.



*Ring-billed Gull, Sanderling, Western Willet, pair of American Oystercatchers © Kyle Schanta*

Sandwich and Royal Terns loafed in the mudflats. We timed the tides perfectly, and our pinnacle moment was finding resting Wilson's Plovers, a scurrying Piping Plover and the ultra-cute Snowy Plovers along the flats and upper beach.



*Snowy Plover* © Kyle Schanta

### **Day 3 - Thursday, March 9: Babcock-Webb WMA, Florida Endemics and Harns Marsh**

A flyover Bald Eagle and roadside wading birds started our beautiful Pine Rockland morning out right on our drive into Babcock-Webb, Florida's oldest wildlife management area. We spent the morning roaming some of the 80,772 acres, relishing in South Florida's great sight and sound. A Bachman's Sparrow singing from a favored snag first caught our ears. Moments later, we had a single Red-cockaded Woodpecker tending a nest tree, while the resounding chorus of Eastern Meadowlark, Northern Bobwhite, Eastern Bluebird and white-eyed Eastern Towhee was heavy earcandy.. and that was just the first mile!



*Red-cockaded Woodpecker © Kyle Schanta*

As our cruise ensued, we had good looks at a Pineywoods specialty Hairy Woodpecker, Wood Stork and Purple Gallinule in the roadside bullrushes. A stately Great Horned Owl in a far wiregrass field was a true delight, as was a tucked-away oak grove teeming with goodies. White-eyed Vireos, Great Crested Flycatchers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were cooperatively feeding amongst Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-throated and Pine Warblers. After a lakeside lunch alongside Forster's Terns on Lake Babcock, we headed in search of Florida's only endemic bird, the threatened Florida Scrub-Jay. After a short walk, the Jay showed well, high above us on a telephone wire before retreating back into its scrubby suburban hideaway. We also had great looks at a roving Gopher Tortoise, an endangered keystone species here in Florida.



*Florida Scrub-Jay © Kyle Schanta*

We spent the rest of the afternoon at Harns Marsh, an ecological gem and preserve of sorts for the endangered Snail Kite and many other plants and animals. We had unbelievable looks at multiple Snail Kites, soaring, "snailing" and feeding on their catches. A pair of Swallowtail Kites swirled overhead as Mottled Ducks, Glossy Ibis and Least Sandpiper foraged close by. A weedy corner cove provided great forage habitat for hungry Tricolored Herons and Limpkin, and perfect cover for a pair of nesting Sandhill Cranes.



*Snail Kite © Kyle Scanta*

**Day 4 - Friday, March 10: Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, Big Cypress Preserve and Florida City**



*Ancient grassland and Cypress forest © Kyle Schanta*

We departed Fort Myers early toward Homestead, the gateway to the Everglades. A stunning male Hooded Merganser flew alongside us in the morning light on our way to Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, extensive old growth Cypress trees and a one-of-a-kind mix of endangered flora, fauna, and habitats along the way. As we birded the boardwalk, we couldn't help but feel like part of the

hammock itself, for the trees, mosses and countless Halloween Pennant dragonflies pulled us closer to the birds.



*Halloween Pennant* © Kyle Schanta

We had pairs of Swallow-tailed Kites overhead with nesting Red-Shouldered Hawks right below, and not too far from a nest filled with fuzzy Anhinga fledglings. Many warblers and other passerines made appearances amongst the Strangler Fig trees and Swamp Maples. Blue-headed Vireo, Tufted Titmice, Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart and a nonstop movement of Northern Parula sights and songs were just some of our highlights. We had a picnic with a bold Ovenbird and hungry Gray Catbirds, and then had a memorable encounter with a Crested Caracara upon our exit.



We headed east for Homestead through Big Cypress Preserve, working on our bird identification while in traffic. After dinner and a quick Common Myna sighting, we headed to the Portofino Plaza for hopeful looks at a Cave Swallow colony. We had one individual in sight, so we called it a day and were excited for the next.

**Day 5 - Saturday, March 11: Airports, Anis, Everglades National Park and Nightjar Aural Delights**

A calling Indian Peafowl started our early Everglades morning off to an interesting start as we headed north to the Homestead General Aviation Airport. Here we encountered great numbers of singing Loggerhead Shrikes and Savannah Sparrow, and many foraging Cattle Egrets in the taller grasses. Our luck continued when a Smooth-billed Ani AND a Groove-billed Ani flew up and landed side-by-side on a narrow, weedy fence! The Smooth-billed let out a series of loud calls, and the two flew off into the cane.



*Groove-billed Ani © Kyle Schanta*

We were elated and decided to make the trek down to Flamingo, where more birds awaited. The drive included great looks at Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, and many herons and egrets. We made a quick stop at Nine Mile Pond where a quartet of White-crowned Pigeons teed up very nicely in the early light. Flamingo was full of surprises, as both American Crocodile and West Indian Manatees put on a show in the Marina.



*West Indian Manatees © Kyle Schanta*

A male Painted Bunting also hanging around the marina gave us excellent views while the sky above was filled with kettling Brown and American White Pelicans, Turkey and Black Vultures and a seemingly endless stream of Osprey. We continued to Eco Pond where we had another rarity for the day. A bird working a live oak flew directly over us and into the open. As my binoculars focused, a Black-whiskered Vireo came into view. An early migrant perhaps, but this beautiful adult let us get a good study before heading deeper into the hammock. We hit the Anhinga Trail on the way out where we found nesting Swallow-tailed Kites and curiously hungry Purple Gallinules feet away along this famed boardwalk.



*Watching Swallow-tailed Kite on its nest along Anhinga Trail © Kyle Schanta*

We had big smiles heading out of the park, but a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher and Western Kingbird kept the birding party going. After shakes and Purple Martins at famous fruit stand Robert Is Here, and a restful dinner, we headed to L31W Canal, just outside of the Everglades entryway. We were sonically surrounded by the cosmic chorus of multiple Chuck-will's-widow the moment we stepped out of the van. They flew the length of the canal, foraging on the insects above. This cryptic nightjar was quite the bird to cap off an amazing day of birding South Florida.



*Enjoying tropical shakes with a curious hen © Kyle Schanta*

## **Day 6 - Sunday, March 12: The Florida Keys - Key Largo Hammocks, Key Deer and Keystone Species**

The fog was finally breaking as we pulled into Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock State Park, our first stop of our day heading to Key West. Here we had many warblers and other songsters, along with our first Short-tailed Hawk and only Black-throated Green Warbler of the tour. We continued down the highway, cruising Big Pine Key in hopes of seeing the endemic Key Deer, a regional subspecies of the White-tailed Deer. As we made a right turn onto Key Deer Boulevard, a one-antlered Key Deer Buck was standing in a parking lot, just basking in the sun.



*Key Deer © Kyle Schanta*

We made our way to the infamous Blue Hole, an old rock quarry site containing mostly freshwater that holds a wide diversity of plants and animals. Many keystone species live here, including slash pine, American Alligator, saltbush and Live oak, to name a few. These species help define the environment at Blue Hole, and South Florida as a whole.



*American Alligator © Kyle Schanta*

After a dockside lunch, we headed to Boca Chica Key where the shorebird numbers were impressive to say the least! Short-billed Dowitchers and Black-bellied Plovers congregated along the mudflats,

amongst Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone and Least Sandpiper. A hunting Northern Harrier and our first Great White Heron (the Florida Keys subspecies of the Great Blue Heron) of the trip gave us great looks. After checking into our rooms and having a nice seafood dinner in historic Key West, we walked the Key West Bight marina area for more White-crowned Pigeons, Brown Pelicans and West Indian Manatees.



*White-crowned Pigeon* © Kyle Schanta

**Day 7 - Monday, March 13: Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park, Key West Wildlife Center & Indigenous Park and the Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden**

We started our morning with delicious coffees and breakfast goods from Old Town Bakery, and first headed to Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park. This mid-19th century military fort is a great place for birds, and Blue-winged Teal, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and Wilson's Snipe took shelter along its moat.



*Yellow-crowned Night-Heron © Kyle Schanta*

American Kestrels and Peregrine Falcons dove into the fort courtyard, all while Northern Gannets and Lesser Black-backed Gulls fed offshore. In the late morning, we made our way to the Key West Wildlife Center and Sonny McCoy Indigenous Park to continue our adventure. A Northern Waterthrush worked the mucky shores in the back pond while White-winged doves sang overhead. We had lunch at Rest Beach, where Peregrine Falcon, Western Sandpiper and a suite of Terns were present.



*A restful lunch at Rest Beach © Kyle Schanta*

The Key West Tropical Forest and Botanical Garden was next, where the mix of native and showy non-native plants come together to create a truly unique bird and butterfly habitat. Palm Warblers were everywhere, and a Short-tailed and Broad-winged Hawk kettled high above with Magnificent Frigatebirds and Turkey Vultures. After dinner, we headed back out to the marina district for more birds and maybe a little pie, too.

**Day 8 - Tuesday, March 14: Dry Tortugas National Park - Rarities, Spectacles and Breeding Colonies**



*Fort Jefferson © Kyle Schanta*

The crowing Red Junglefowl was our alarm clock in Key West, and they were right on time with our departure for the Yankee Freedom III, heading for Dry Tortugas National Park. We filed in and were given a great history of all sorts of regional topics. We even had a migrating Palm Warbler circle the bow at one point!



*Distant birds on the Yankee Freedom III © Kyle Schanta*

As we started approaching the Rebecca Shoals Lighthouse, I set my scope up in the back and started looking earnestly for seabirds. We were surprised and delighted to have an early Audubon's Shearwater out by a buoy in view as we neared the Tortugas. We made our way by Hospital Key, where Masked Boobies all crowded the eastern shore. Eventually, Long, Bush and Garden Keys came into view, as did the ancient colonies of Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Noddy and Sooty Terns.



*Magnificent Frigatebird colony on Long Key © Kyle Schanta*

We docked and were immediately greeted with Ruddy Turnstones, Royal and Sandwich Terns, and a lone Brown Booby loafing with some Brown Pelicans. American Kestrels circled the perimeter of Fort Jefferson, diving for the plentiful Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers.



*Scanning from the top © Kyle Schanta*

We headed to the northside and got up close and personal with the Sooty Tern and Brown Noddy colonies. We all had a memorable experience watching them work their nests, Noddies in the mangroves and Sooties on the sand. We saw first-hand why the Dry Tortugas are one of the top birding destinations.



*Garden Key, Bush Key and Long Key in the distance © Kyle Schanta*

Yellow-crowned and Great White Herons were surprisingly abundant on our walk along the moat. As we entered the fort, an early Gray Kingbird, a rarity at this time of year, swooped low beside us and landed on a prominent snag, devouring its prey for all to see.



*Gray Kingbird © Kyle Schanta*

The rarities didn't stop there, with a lone Cliff Swallow swirling and feeding alongside Barn and Tree Swallows. Yellow-Throated, a beautiful Orange-crowned adult and a rare Tennessee Warbler were feasting on flies in the Sea Grape trees on our way back to the ship. We had an unforgettable birding experience aboard the Yankee Freedom III and Dry Tortugas. After yummy Mexican food from a popular roadside stand in Key West, we headed for Miami.



**Day 9 - Wednesday, March 15: Miami Exotics, Cuban Rarities and Feral Flocks**



*Red-whiskered Bulbuls at Pine Woods Park © Kyle Schanta*

On our final full day, we started at Pine Woods Park, a small, telephone clear-cut habitat tucked between two suburban neighborhoods. Though the habitat is smaller, it really packs the birds. Red-whiskered Bulbul, Nanday Parakeet and the adorable Scaly-breasted Munia were all seen. Cedar Waxwings were heading north, as were two large flocks of Herring Gulls in formation. An interesting sight!



*Scaly-breasted Munia* © Kyle Schanta

We made our way to Brewer Park, where Mitred and Red-masked Parakeets really put on a show for us. Crandon Park, our next stop, was also full of surprises.. Within minutes of our hike out on the trail we heard the ascending "Sweet!" of the La Sagra's Flycatcher, a West Indian vagrant. We located the bird feeding actively over a small pond, near dozens of Palm Warblers and a Great Crested Flycatcher.. A quick scan of the beach yielded Sanderling, Black-bellied and Wilson's Plover.



*Wilson's Plover* © Kyle Schanta

We broke for lunch, where the Fish Crows were respectfully distant despite their calls for food. We explored the old zoo grounds, where we had Sandhill Crane, Egyptian Goose and many White Ibis. After checking out the feral American Flamingo flock and finding a Canada Goose at the Hialeah Park Casino, we got caught in some interesting weather. We decided to try one last spot, and there we had Gray-headed Swamphens in the rain.



*Osprey © Kyle Schanta*

After an afternoon respite and dinner, we enjoyed our final Osprey and Muscovy Ducks of the tour. We all said our good-byes and shared our favorite birds, laughs and memories of the trip. A great group and tour indeed! Whether you enjoy beautiful birds, habitats or weather - or all three - our Florida trip is for you!



*Our great group inside the fort*