Eagle-Eye Tours



# Florida Trip Report (Mar 8 - 17, 2024)

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Written by Kyle Schanta The 2024 South Florida birding tour took us from the shores and pinewoods of Fort Myers, through the rare and endangered habitats and ancient cypress swamps of the Everglades south to the Florida Keys and Dry Tortugas National Park, and eventually back north to the birds of Miami. Our group encountered 160 species of birds, along with many other mammals, amphibians and reptiles. Some avian highlights included Black-whiskered Vireo, Mangrove Cuckoo, White-tailed and Swallow-tailed Kites, Painted Bunting and the birds of the Dry Tortugas - Sooty Tern, Brown Noddy, Magnificent Frigatebird and Masked and Brown Boobies. We headed out for our first full day of birding Fort Myers before dawn, making our way toward Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge. This region was devastated by Hurricane Ian in the fall of 2022, and Sanibel Island, home to Ding Darling, was inaccessible during last year's tour. Causeway Island Park, our first hopeful stop along the way, was still under construction, but we had our first light-morph Short-tailed Hawk of the tour fly right overhead as we were on the bridge to Sanibel.



*American White Pelicans © Todd Bethel*

We pulled up to the Refuge and were greeted with a variety of waders flying into the wetlands to work and feed for the day. We spent a few hours on the Wildlife Drive, and were delighted at the sights of feeding Reddish Egrets, Black-bellied and Piping Plovers, and fantastic looks at Red-breasted Mergansers who were feeding in the shallows amongst Snowy and Great Egrets.



*Reddish Egret © Todd Bethel*

We walked out to a few overlooks as the drive went on, and near mile marker 3.5 a few lucky ears in our group were graced with the guttural croak of the elusive Mangrove Cuckoo! After our picnic, we

made our way to Cape Coral, where we encountered family groups of raucous Monk Parakeets and territorial Burrowing Owls.



*Monk Parakeet © Todd Bethel*

One burrow had two juveniles, their darker eyes and shyness really brought out the emotions. We made our way to the wonderful rookery and wetlands of Lakes Park before our delicious Japanese dinner. We encountered Bald Eagles, Mottled Ducks and Common Gallinules at our feet to end a great first day.



*Burrowing Owl © Todd Bethel*

It was rainy and humid as we pulled into Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area, our first stop of our third day. The morning's clouds may have kept the dawn chorus sunrise at bay, but a 15-minute lift in the weather brought out the birds and their music. We were greeted almost immediately by the tapping and calls of the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker, our main target of the morning. We had an incredible show of at least six individuals working various nesting trees within a large cluster of long-leaf pines.



*Red-cockaded Woodpecker © Todd Bethel*

The intermixed saw palmetto understory held the songs of the Bachman's Sparrow, another specialty of these pineywoodlands. A distant Sandhill Crane chorus unfolded in the light rain, and the trilling Pine Warblers, Eastern Meadowlark, Northern Bobwhite and Common Ground doves filled the air in song and flight along the grade roads of this well-managed and expansive refuge. On our way out, a Loggerhead Shrike was feasting on a Halloween Pennant dragonfly directly above us… time for lunch!



*Loggerhead Shrike © Todd Bethel*

After a restful lunch stop on Lake Babcock, we had our first looks at Crested Caracara and Swallow-tailed Kites as we headed to Lehigh Acres, our next stop. We encountered another top tour target, the Florida Scrub-jay, and were treated to its calls and territorial defenses. This is Florida's only endemic bird species, and it was a great experience.



*Florida Scrub-jay © Todd Bethel*

As the gopher tortoises roamed the grasses and Northern Mockingbirds scolded, we made our way to the final stop of the day, Harns Marsh. We greeted by an onslaught of kettling raptors as we

stepped out of the vans. Black and Turkey Vultures, Swallow-tailed Kite, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Osprey and the wonderfully unique Snail Kite!



*Snail Kite © Todd Bethel*

We were elated to have multiple individuals, both adults and youngsters, work the snail beds and banks of the marsh. Another endangered bird species, the Snail Kite is happy at home here in the marsh. We had our first Limpkin, Northern Parula and Common Yellowthroats of the tour here, as well as a Sandhill Crane family with two colts which was a major highlight of the day!



*Northern Parula © Todd Bethel*

We woke early on day four to make our way to Corkscrew Swamp, a breath-taking old-growth preserve of dwarf, bald cypress and other rare plants.. perfect for birds! Within minutes we had unbelievable views of a skulking American Bittern along the winding, lichen-covered boardwalk.



*American Bittern © Todd Bethel*

A lone Black-bellied Whistling Duck was also nearby, and one male Painted Bunting was seen feeding. The hardwood trees provide habitat for Pileated Woodpecker, Tufted Titmice and the many insects which feed the migrant birds that this sanctuary holds. We found a Red-shouldered Hawk nest, with one individual calling while occupying it. As our walk wove through the ancient swamp, we encountered Blue-headed Vireo, Black-and-white, Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers, and many roosting Yellow-crowned Night-Herons.



*Yellow-crowned Night-Heron © Todd Bethel*

We had Gray Catbirds and a lone Ovenbird join our picnic, a perfect way to end our day at the Swamp. We were very happy to have a male Snail Kite fly over as we made the haul headed east through the Big Cypress Preserve on our way to Homestead and the Everglades.



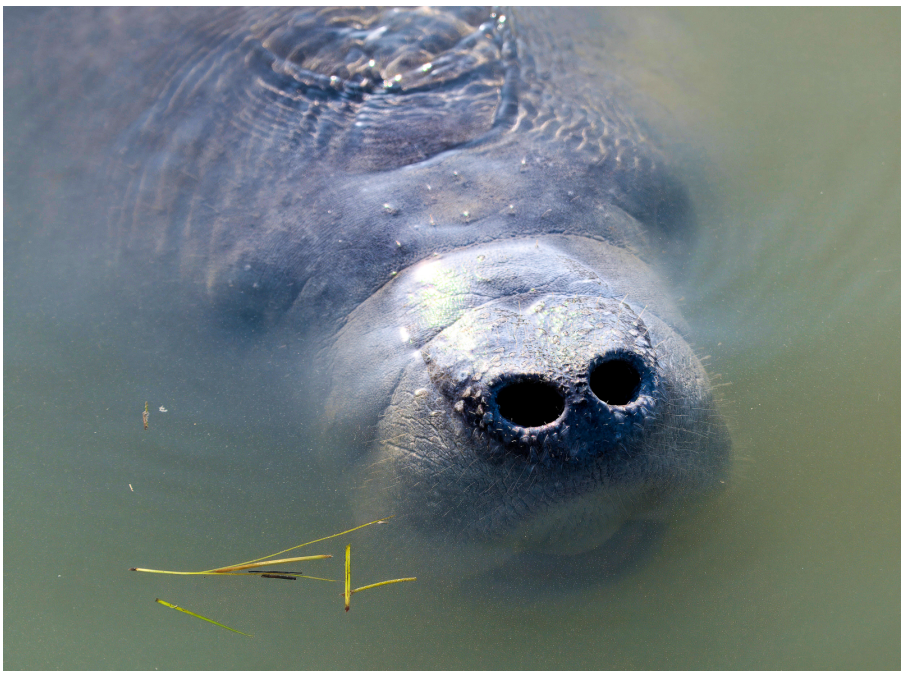
*Alligator © Todd Bethel*

We started day five, our Everglades day, at the Frog Pond just outside of the National Park gates. We had huge flocks of Glossy Ibis fly by, at least four White-tailed Kites and a Northern Harrier working the fields, and in-our-face views of a beautiful Prairie Warbler.



*Prairie Warbler © Todd Bethel*

We entered the park and drove straight to Flamingo. We stepped out of the vans to have point-blank views of fledgling Osprey, mating West Indian Manatee and hundreds and hundreds of Tree Swallows.



*West Indian Manatee © Todd Bethel*

A sandbar off the Marina held Great Black-backed Gull, Caspian Terns and Reddish and Great Egrets. Fishing American White and Brown Pelicans were a constant spectacle, and Savannah Sparrows were working the grasses, looking for seeds and small insects. Next we stopped at Eco

Pond, where we had stellar looks at White-eyed Vireo and Roseate Spoonbills kettling overhead. We also were lucky enough to spend a few minutes with a still female Painted Bunting.



*White-eye-Vireo © Todd Bethel*



*Painted Bunting (female) © Todd Bethel*

Our Picnic at West Lake yielded Gadwall, American Wigeon and American Coots. We stopped at the Anhinga Trail for our last Everglades experience of our day. The group found our first Green Heron,

Purple Gallinule and Least Bittern along the boardwalk, with the Gallinules eating the yellow Spadderdock lily blooms along the walk.



*Purple Gallinule © Todd Bethel*



*Swallow-tailed Kite © Todd Bethel*

We found Anhinga and Swallow-tailed kites on the nest which was quite the Everglades send-off. From the park we headed to Robert is Here, a popular fruit stand and home to an established Purple

Martin nesting colony. Our first Common Myna was on the wire while we sipped our smoothies.



*Yellow-bellied Sapsucker © Todd Bethel*

After a quick turnaround at the hotel and three soaring Short-tailed Hawks over the parking lot, we headed to a nice Italian restaurant for dinner. We went out birding after our meals, and we sure were happy we did. We returned to Frog Pond for quite the evening flight. White-tailed Kites, four individual American Bitterns and other egret and heron species were flying to their roosts for the evening. We were thrilled when a trio of Barn Owls came out to hunt over the field, with Northern Bobwhite and Eastern Meadowlark providing quite the evening soundtrack. The low glow of prescribed burns just over the canal in the national park was a very beautiful and interesting sight to bird the night alongside. As complete darkness took hold, Chuck-wills-widows, Lesser Nighthawks and Yellow-crowned Night-herons called into the smoky night to round out a fantastic day.



*Osprey defending lunch © Todd Bethel*

On the morning of day six, we said goodbye to Homestead and hit the road for Key West. As we drove over the bridges amongst mangrove forests and Lake Surprise, we had our own surprise Black-crowned Night-heron fly over on our way to Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammocks Botanical State Park, our first birding stop. We entered the park to the sounds of singing Northern Cardinals, White-eyed Vireos and a nesting Short-tailed Hawk. We also encountered a striking male Painted Bunting, male Black-throated Blue Warbler and had our trip's first White-crowned Pigeons fly over us. Our next stop was Big Pine Key, home of the Key Deer.



*White-crowned Pigeon © Todd Bethel*

Our group had lunch at a great local spot, Bagel Island, and were elated to find a Key Deer, the endemic subspecies of the white tailed deer, in the parking lot! Next, we birded Blue Hole, the largest freshwater deposit in the Keys. Here we had up-close views of a Key Deer and Great Crested Flycatcher, which was actively feeding in the hammock. We headed south to Boca Chica Beach, and found Western and Least Sandpipers, Wilson's Snipe and Sanderlings along the shore. A Royal Tern put on a great show, dipping and diving right before us, ultimately getting a meal and heading out to sea.



*Royal Tern © Todd Bethel*

As the sun rose high, we headed to our rooms in Key West, and soon after a delicious healthy dinner at The Cafe. A few of us headed out to bird after, ending up at the White Street Pier where we had great looks at White-crowned Pigeon, Willet and were shown Hawk Winged Conches by a local fisherman. We had distant looks at a Great White Heron, the endemic subspecies of the Great Blue Heron who calls the Keys home, and also an in-flight Black Scoter off of the pier. Another great day of South Florida birding was in the books, and we were all eager to get good rest for our next day's adventure!



*Bald Eagle © Todd Bethel*

On the morning of day seven, we were awoken by the surreal screaming song of the Red Junglefowl, an avian specialty here in Key West. It is widely theorized that migrating Cubans in the 1860s brought these birds along their journey for both food and sport.



*Red Junglefowl © Todd Bethel*

It was our day to head out on the Yankee Freedom III and set out for the Dry Tortugas National Park. 70-miles off of Key West, The Dry Tortugas National Park and the surrounding keys are home to breeding colonies of very special and important species of birds to the region. On the ride out, a

Great Blue Heron flew in front of the boat, and flying fish and green sea turtles were seen surfacing and dipping back down into the deep. We learned that the Rebecca Shoals Lighthouse, once a popular seabird roost, had been dismantled some months before. As we came closer to the park, we had a close flyby of an Audubon's Shearwater which was very exciting! The captain looped us around Hospital Key, where a colony of Masked Boobys and some individual Brown Boobys reside. As we docked on Garden Key, home of Fort Jefferson, we had Ruddy Turnstones on the railings, Willets on the docks, and Spotted Sandpipers working the shores.



*Sooty Tern © Todd Bethel*

The coaling docks off Garden Key are day roosts for many species, and we had Sandwich, Royal and Sooty terns perched together. A lone Ring-billed gull was in the mix, and a single Bonaparte's Gull was a pleasant surprise! As we looked up, Magnificent Frigatebirds were suspended in the air like dark, sinister kites, almost stopping time.



*Magnificent Frigatebird © Todd Bethel*

We worked our way up the coast toward Long Key, home of a 100-pair Frigatebird colony, the only one known in the continental United States, and the mangroves of Bush Key. It is here in these mangroves where some of the most interesting and sought-after species to some birders make their home. The Sooty Tern and Brown Noddy numbers are staggering, and only grow as spring rolls on. This is the only important breeding Sooty Tern colony in the continental United States as well.



*Brown Noddy © Todd Bethel*

The birds were seemingly everywhere, and the incessant calling and communication is quite the

sensory experience. After our lunch on the ship, we birded the inside and grounds of the historic fort, where we witnessed an American Kestrel successfully hunt dragonflies in the lawn, right near a lone Glossy Ibis who was feeding busily. The robust Barn Swallow flock provided some very fun moments, while picking out both Cave and Cliff swallows within. We went to the top to overlook all of the beautiful bird action, and what a view! We went back down, and quickly caught up with a passerine flock which provided amazing looks and study. As we were just about to head to the ship, another bird flew in the back of the Gumbo Limbo tree.. a Black-whiskered Vireo!



*Black-whiskered Vireo © Todd Bethel*

This Caribbean vireo is a South Florida specialty, and we were rewarded with unbelievable views and behavior. As we boarded the ship back to Key West, one last scan brought out a Northern Harrier that was soaring low over Bush Key. We all sat and talked about our favorite parts of the day, and going to the front of the ship was just as fulfilling. We had great looks at more green sea turtles, bottlenose dolphins and other fish of all sizes carelessly jumping out of the ocean before us.



*Back to Land © Kyle Schanta*

The trip's eighth and our final day in Key West started out at the Southernmost Point Park. Frigatebirds, Palm Warblers and Royal Terns joined us. We kept heading down the coast and birded White Street Pier, where we had a pair of Black Scoters, distant groups of Northern Gannet and Brown Pelicans galore!



*Black-throated Green-warbler © Todd Bethel*

Next stop was the Key West Botanical Gardens, where we would bird, butterfly and have our picnic. We worked the winding, lush trails, surrounded by exotic plants and floating butterflies, all kinds of

species!  Warblers soon started to materialize, and as we sifted through them we spotted Black-throated Green, Cape May, Tennessee, Prairie, Palm and Yellow-rumped! We headed out of Key West after lunch, and took a pitstop for some ice cream as traveling birders do in South Florida, and we were ecstatic to find a Western Kingbird, Cooper's Hawk and more Common Mynas right in the parking lot. On our way to our Miami hotel we had a spectacular view of an adult Bald Eagle and American Kestrels among many other heron and egret species.



*American Kestrel © Todd Bethel*

We started out our final full day of the tour birding a very interesting neighborhood park, Pine Woods Park, with its unique mix of native and ornamental flowering plants, grasses, trees, and also man-made structures which attract all sorts of birds and animals. Despite finding an active Cooper's Hawk nest with five individual hawks around, many smaller passerines were active and unfettered. We had Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, an Indigo Bunting, migrating Herring Gulls and three species of mimids in our faces as we entered the trail. Northern Mockingbird, Brown Thrasher and Gray Catbird were all singing away, and it was a great study of this group.



*Scaly-breasted Munias © Todd Bethel*

Miami is known in the birding world for its unique mix of exotic and introduced bird species, and they do not disappoint. Monk Parakeets were nesting in the electrical towers as a single Yellow-chevroned Parakeet flew over. We caught up with our three target exotic species at Pine Woods, a pair of distant Spot-breasted Orioles, a pair of Red-whiskered Bulbuls perching and collecting nesting material and dozens of Scaly-breasted Munias. It was a great stop!



*Red-whiskered Bulbul © Todd Bethel*

We then headed to Crandon Park, where we walked the woods, beach and had a fantastic final

picnic. After lunch, we walked the park side, where we had a lot of fun finding Egyptian Geese with fledglings, territorial Indian Peafowl, and a young family of Muscovy Ducks, among many other species of waders and passerines. We took a quick pass by the Dolphin Mall, where we caught up with Gray-headed Swamphen, Green Herons and Cattle Egrets.



*Gray-headed Swamphen © Todd Bethel*

Our final Salvadoran dinner was delicious, and we all went out after to Miller Park, a well-known parrot and parakeet roost. Three parakeets made a very brief appearance before continuing on, so we ended up traversing a block over where a local birder told us of a Blue-and-yellow Macaw nest in a broken royal palm tree. The parrots flew over us and the road and gave us quite a show. While one was on the tree’s top, its mate was in the nest, eventually using their bill and feet to maneuver and scale their home tree. A truly unforgettable experience, and one great way to end this fantastic group's South Florida birding adventure.



*Blue-and-yellow Macaw © Todd Bethel*




*Florida 2024 group*

[Florida 2024 species list ]