

Holiday Highlights

Florida - Winter Birds and a Watery Wonderland

3 – 14 November 2018

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Day 1: The Warmth of Orlando

We meet at the North Terminal of London's Gatwick Airport for the morning flight to Orlando and with little fuss and delay we are soon on our way. Those of us with window seats enjoy views over the west country before crossing the endless expanse of the Atlantic. Others opt for an entertainment filled flight – just how many films can you fit? Finally, we start our descent and we can see the coastline of Florida stretching in to the distance with Cape Canaveral and the Kennedy Space Centre below. We land at Orlando airport, where we are greeted with some Florida warmth and some traditional waiting in-line for immigration. Bags are picked up and our vehicle secured, we finally hit the highway eastbound for the Space Coast, checking in at the Hampton Inn at Titusville before a welcome meal at Local Beer and Tap Bistro.

Day 2: Blast Off: Cape Canaveral and Merritt Island

A few of us enjoy a stroll around the grounds before breakfast to kick-start the species list. Ospreys are flying around and perching on pine trees – destined to be the first of many. Likewise, we see our first Black Vultures, Great Egret, Collared Dove, Mourning Dove, Boat-tailed Grackles, Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers - Jean adds Northern Mockingbird and Cardinal.

After breakfast we walk to the minibus, but what's this? It's starting to rain! We are always nothing but flexible with our Speyside itineraries so we drive to the Kennedy Space Centre for plan B. Of course, there are lots to attract us and many spectacular indoor exhibits, so much so that when we meet for lunch we decide we might stay a little longer! We compare notes on the amazing Atlantis Shuttle centre and the Saturn V moonshot hub and tour of the launch pads. Jean tries her hand at docking the shuttle and Garry tries to operate the loading arm of after capturing a rogue satellite.

There remains some time to do some birding and although there is still rain in the air it soon peters out when we arrive at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Ospreys are fishing in the shallows, Belted Kingfishers are perched on posts and egrets wade along in channels. A large flock of Fish Crows are squawking as they fly over and land on wires and Tree Swallows pass by.

We drive around a track that skirts the edges of shallow pools and one is busy with birds: groups of Pied-billed Grebes, Blue-winged Teal, American Wigeon and

Garry finds an American Avocet. Further on we get scopes on a fantastic Anhinga, and glimpse a Marsh Wren that dives for cover after calling. Greater Yellowlegs are vocal too-too-too! As its getting dark we drive back but ahead on a tall dead tree is a large bird – a stunning Great Horned Owl that perches long enough for us all to fine looks at through telescopes – a wonderful end to the day.

Day 3: Tosohatchee and More Merritt Island

We meet for breakfast at 7am and are off forty-five minutes later, bound for some woodland birding. Just 10 miles west of Titusville is Tosohatchee Forest, an area designated as a Wildlife Management Area. It's an extensive region of slash pine and palmetto forest with some different birds on offer.

Close to the Park entrance we stop and look for birds along a quiet stretch of the road. Garry spots our first Loggerhead Shrike on wires, followed soon afterwards by a large group of Wild Turkeys in a field. Entering the Park, we can explore the area more fully and our first stop is when we see a handsome Red-shouldered Hawk perched in a tall tree. We can all admire its great markings in the telescope. We add Northern Mockingbird and American Kestrel as we drive slowly along.

We've had success here before with woodpeckers and the first bird we see is a target bird – a Red-headed Woodpecker – except it hasn't got a red head! Unlike the nearby Red-bellied Woodpecker that has a fine red head and nape – confusing eh? Anyway, we watch the Red-headed Woodpecker gather acorns from a live oak tree and take them away to work into the crevices of another tree. Again and again the bird repeats the route and we watch through the scope – fantastic views and a new bird for everyone. There are plenty of other birds flicking around with Eastern Phoebe, fantastic Eastern Bluebirds and both Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers. Then a Pileated Woodpecker flies across, calling and landing in a tree next to another Pileated. Fantastic! It's a woodpecker fest as we get more views of Red-headed Woodpeckers, all immature with some red coming through in places on the throat. At a second spot we stop when a small group of birds cross the track – within the warbler group are Yellow-rumped, Palm and Pine Warblers. At the furthest point in thicker woodland we see two Blue-gray Gnatcatchers so it's a good haul of species for the morning.

We drive back to Titusville and check the marina where we've enjoyed looks at curious Florida Manatees (a subspecies of West Indian Manatee) before. We have no luck today but at the nearby municipal park we commune with the very approachable White Ibises and Wood Storks. Red-bellied Woodpeckers are in the trees with Palm Warblers and there is a smart Loggerhead Shrike on show. At the waterfront we see Royal Terns, Laughing Gulls and lots of Ospreys, then Alison spots two Bottlenose Dolphins – it's fantastic to watch them using their tails to smack on the water as they chase fish. A nice way to end the morning!

After lunch we drive over the bridge to Merritt Island, noting Ruddy Turnstones on the causeway as we pass. We have to double back when we spot a friendly Raccoon by the roadside – fantastic! At the Visitor Centre there is a small trail that

weaves by two large pools and then through a hardwood hammock, or woodland. At the first pool is a large American Alligator lazing in the sun and on a wooden platform are Common Cooters and Florida Soft-shelled Turtles. A delightful Green Heron is skulking through the shallows below the boardwalk, but the walk through the hammock is largely quiet except for a Catbird and a smart Black Racer Snake. Back at the Centre there is some activity around the one bird feeder and we see Cardinal, Catbird, Black-throated Blue Warbler and a female Painted Bunting (sadly no sign of the male).

From the Centre we drive north, where there is a raised viewing deck in order to see some of Merritt Island's better-known residents – Florida Manatees. We watch Brown Pelicans and Ospreys fishing along the channel before we get progressively better looks at curious Manatees. Watching the disturbance in the water they produce as they move just below the surface is fascinating (and later will prove useful in pointing to their presence), though the highlight is when one animal starts stripping bark from a fallen palm tree in the shallows and we see its prehensile proboscis at work – we are reminded that their nearest cousin is the elephant! A contender for species of the trip.

The rest of the afternoon is spent working Black Point Drive and we pause at the entrance for our first Killdeer and Least Sandpipers. Little Blue and Tricolored Herons are stalking the shallows with Snowy Egrets. Nearby there are photo opportunities for capturing a white immature bird alongside an adult Little Blue Heron. The first big body of water holds two Roseate Spoonbills, Tricolored, Little Blue, Snowy Egrets, Mottled Duck, Grey Plover, Reddish Egret, Common Yellowthroat, Anhingas and a Caspian Tern – quite a variety!

More pools are busy with birds: there are big numbers of herons and egrets flying back and forth to roost sites; Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs are together in another pool; Garry finds our first Northern Harrier and we are captivated by a flight of twenty Roseate Spoonbills in the late afternoon light. Next we witness the noisy roost of Red-winged Blackbirds in the bushes, yet the highlight for the drive awaits further along - in the fading light, there are two Great Horned Owls in a tree top – two males or possibly a pair. Both birds are hooting – what a great end to the day.

Day 4: Kissimmee and Three Lakes

Today is our transfer day and we leave Titusville around 8.30am bound for Sebring, further south and inland. The route skirts around Tosohatchee Forest and we get some birds in fields adjacent to the road. Cattle Egrets forage within the herds livestock and we see our first Sandhill Cranes on the cropped lawn of a large house – nice for the garden list!

After picking up supplies we head south towards Lake Kissimmee and the access point of the delightfully named Joe Overstreet Road. Just before the junction we come to a halt when a pair of Sandhill Cranes are joined by a larger white bird – a rare Whooping Crane. It carries a number of leg rings and a larger device that

looks like a radio transmitter – one of the populations of hacked birds that have been re-introduced to Florida by following microlight aircraft from breeding grounds in Canada.

Turning off the main road we start to work the fields both sides of the quiet Joe Overstreet Road. To the right there is a large turf farm with irrigation booms in the distance and flocks of grackles. We stop for a better look, noting more Sandhill Cranes and some American Pipits in the field. Other small birds are in the palmetto scrub behind us, including Palm Warblers and Savannah Sparrows, plus Eastern Meadowlarks are singing and we get some looks of striking birds. The air is busy with lots of Turkey and Black Vultures and a few American Kestrels are dotted on wires. Dee spots a nice Loggerhead Shrike on the fence line too. We drive slowly further along, then Anne spots two large Bald Eagles in a tree close to the right. We get out without disturbing them and they look incredible in the telescopes – we can see each scaly feather. Another eagle flies across- this time a brown immature bird, and by now it's getting warm - even the Turkey Vultures are sat on the fenceposts with wings spread to lose heat.

Further roadside stops allow us some nice looks at American Kestrels perched and Red-shouldered Hawks, before we arrive at the water's edge at Lake Kissimmee. It's a favourite spot as it's a small car park with a few buildings that support a boat launch and ramp, and thankfully it's quiet today – so we can enjoy the birds on show. And what a show it is: no sooner are we out of the van we spot a target bird – one of the Florida specialties – a Snail Kite. A smart Northern Harrier drifts by before we can even get our telescopes out! We get to a position where we can scope the Snail Kite - one is perched on a post and a second bird is beating over the lily pads showing its nice white-banded tail. Garry then spots a large dark wading bird behind the kites – another specialty – a Limpkin. Lots of water birds mark the surface of the water around the reed and lily pads so we walk to the viewing platform (that has a nice shaded roof) and settle in to go through the many species on offer.

As soon as we get to the platform we flush an American Bittern that must have been working the reeds below – fortunately it only flies a short distance away and we get remarkable views at a striking bird. More Limpkins are preening in front of us and we can admire their streaked markings. Anhingas are contorting their necks and some are fishing in the shallows – we see one that has pierced a fish. More Snail Kites are to the right including a perched immature with buff scalloped-fringed feathers. We get nice fly-bys from an adult kite that drops down into the water and catches a large apple snail then takes it to its post to despatch – we can see that de-curved purpose-built beak in action!

What a place! There's so much to look at that we have a second session after taking lunch under the shade of a large live oak festooned with Spanish moss. The role call of species includes Tricoloured and Great Blue Heron, Snowy, Cattle and Great Egret, Belted Kingfisher, Bald Eagle, Pied-billed Grebe and Palm Warbler. Jean finds a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Alison finds a young Purple Gallinule.

We leave the lake shore and work along Joe Overstreet road stopping here and there to add Killdeer and view a nice pool with Sandhill Cranes, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. More kestrels, vultures and shrikes mark our exit, but we drive onwards in a southerly direction and into different habitat marked by pine forest. We take off down a gravel track to explore the slash pine and palmetto forest properly. Some trees are marked with white paint and these signify a small colony of rare Red-cockaded Woodpeckers but it is really hot and there's not a sound from any birds. A little further we can park and investigate a more damp and shaded woodland. There are plenty of birds moving around and we get a good list: Tufted Titmouse, Palm, Pine and Yellow-rumped Warblers, a star Black-and-white Warbler, and a striking Blue-headed Vireo.

We drive to where the forest is broken by large grassy clearings and stop to search for elusive sparrows – no luck with them but the Eastern Meadowlarks are singing and looking fine in the late afternoon light. We decide to have one last look at the pines now that it is cooler and it is very productive. Two Downy Woodpeckers are chasing each other and we see nice Red-bellied Woodpecker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker too. Lots of small birds are moving through with big numbers of Pine, Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers, and a few Eastern Bluebirds. The bird party is joined by noisy Brown-headed Nuthatches – beautiful.

After another spectacular sunset we finally arrive at The Inn on the Lake, Sebring.

Day 5: Archbold and Six Mile Cypress Slough

After a delicious breakfast at the Inn on the Lakes we board the bus and get on our way for the day. Our day's destination is our next hotel at Fort Myers Beach on the Gulf Coast but we've some birds to find before then. From our hotel at Sebring we hope to explore some of the pine and palmetto forest of the Florida interior – the 'highlands' no less.

We drive south past large fruit growing farms to an area of pristine wilderness and protected land at the Archbold Research Station, where we can walk some of the easy trails. Of course, the sun and temperatures are already up and some of the birds we hope to see are elusive but the walk is an informative one nevertheless and we do manage looks at Cardinal, Eastern Towhee and both Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers. There is no sign of the bird that Archbold is synonymous with – the Florida Scrub Jay – so we decide to look at an area next to the road along the perimeter of the preserve.

We park where we glimpse a long-tailed bird going for cover. It turns out to be a Northern Mockingbird but the stop proves worthwhile, we all scan the many dead trees that dot the landscape and Garry comes up trumps. An endemic Florida Scrub Jay and it waits long enough for us all to enjoy good looks at in the telescope. Result!

We drive to Lee where we grab some sandwiches and then drive to the picnic

tables at the local Manatee Park. It sounds like a good idea as the Orange River has a large channel that serves the local power station and the warm waters can be inviting for Manatees, particularly in cold spells. However, its 91F degrees and the Manatees have plenty of warm water elsewhere so it's a no-show.

We are now only twenty minutes' drive from one on the finest Reserves in the Fort Myers area – Six Mile Cypress Slough. A beautifully appointed Visitor Centre, with very friendly staff, gives us an indication of the potential riches of the place with exhibits of River Otter and Florida Panther but we set our sights a little more realistically – there's always hope I guess.

We start the boardwalk trail and are soon at the largest body of water, Gator Lake. Double-crested Cormorants, Anhingas, Pied-billed Grebe, White Ibis, Little Blue, Tricoloured and Green Herons are on show. The elevated boardwalk takes us through a fantastic flooded forest with tall cypress trees secured by flared buttresses in the water. Ferns and palmettos fill the lower storey and vines and epiphytes cling to upper branches – it's a lush wetland landscape like nothing we can encounter in Europe, with something of a primordial feel.

Birds are moving through the canopy and we get flurries of action from some winter migrants: Blue-gray Gnatcatchers seem to be the most numerous but there are Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers. Blue-headed Vireo and a Black-throated Green Warbler. Jean then finds a star bird – a Yellow-billed Cuckoo is half way up a tree and stops long enough to get fab looks through the telescope. At the next group of birds are spectacular Black-and-white and Yellow-throated Warblers alongside more gnatcatchers and a Tufted Titmouse. What a series of great birds!

The trail winds through more beautiful woodland and reaches the first secluded pool, Wood Duck Pond. A turtle is resting on a log and Garry finds a new bird – a Black-crowned Night Heron. It's difficult to view at first but then moves out into the open for a preen.

At the next pool, Otter Pond, there is no sign of any aquatic mammals but we get nice looks at Anhingas and Eastern Pheobe. The last pool, Pot Ash Pond has a marvellous Green Heron right in front of the blind – a great photo model for us all with its iridescent back. Finally, we complete the loop and arrive back at the largest body of water where the White Ibis numbers have swollen as birds start assembling for roost. Cattle, Snowy and Great Egrets and more Anhingas dot the trees – a lovely sight.

It's a thirty minute drive through rush hour traffic before we cross the bridge to the island community of Fort Myers Beach. We travel along the line of hotels and apartments that are situated right on the beach, finally arriving at our base for the next three nights, the Wyndham Gardens Hotel. There's even time for a stroll along the beach as the sun sets..

Day 6: Fort Myers and Sanibel Island

Our hotel at Fort Myers Beach is situated right on the beach and an early pre-breakfast walk has become something of a tradition. Some bushes and trees are adjacent to a lagoon and perched on a dead snag is a smart female Merlin – a nice bird to start the day! Above the hotels in the sky are five Magnificent Frigatebirds sailing along on huge wings and distinctive long forked tails – the most amazing flight profile. Walking to the water's edge we can see the surface broken here and there, by fins. Bottlenose Dolphins are feeding in the most shallow of water and are attracting early morning walkers. Close by on the lagoon edge are Roseate Spoonbill, Tricolored and Little Blue Heron too.

We decide to walk with the sun behind us to a shingle point where lots of birds are working the water's edge. Sanderling and Willets are the most obvious but we also see a few Turnstones and Grey Plovers walking through. Terns are landing on the sand and we get looks at Royal and American Sandwich or Cabot's Terns. Laughing Gulls are joined by a larger Lesser Black-backed Gull. All the while Brown Pelicans are passing by over the sea and at least nine Ospreys are fishing in the shallows – what a start to the day and just the way to prepare for breakfast. Talking of which, amongst all the eggs, pancakes and French toast ordered the waitress gets a fit of the giggles when our leader orders granola parfait – “Are you kidding?!” she exclaims.

After eating we drive to the beautiful Sanibel Island, crossing the causeway and bridge to a world away from the high-rise hotels and development of Fort Myers. As well as home to some exclusive hideaways Sanibel has one of the country's showcase Reserves, JN 'Ding' Darling National Wildlife Refuge. We spend a short time at the Visitor Centre, admiring the beautiful displays and crocodile skeleton, before starting our own tour of this watery wonderland. The road weaves around the mangroves and pools, some busy with birds: at the first stop are a few herons and egrets fishing including our first Yellow-crowned Night Heron. Two Spotted Sandpipers are foraging on the mud and an Osprey carries a freshly caught fish overhead. The next pool has more herons, egrets including Reddish Egret and our first groups of shorebirds: Black-bellied Plover, Willet and Greater Yellowlegs. The third large pool can be viewed from a large observation tower that offers shade and catches a breeze – comfortable conditions to enjoy birds including Blue-winged Teal, Turnstone, Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer, and our first Dunlin. From a little further on we can get closer views of the same sand bar that is busy with birds and this time we track down two Short-billed Dowitchers.

The next, and last, stop of the morning takes us along a path parallel to a channel with over-hanging mangroves that hide first an immature Yellow-crowned Night Heron, followed by a gleaming adult that has just caught a small fish. Star birds though are two Bald Eagles that land on a tall pylon and they seem oblivious of the people walking by below. Well, almost oblivious, as when it's our turn to walk by one leaves its calling card on Anne's hat!

We get some sandwiches from the deli and take them to the wharf at Tarpon Bay,

for a shady lunch spot. And it's not without wildlife highlights as in the water a hundred or so yards away are two cavorting Manatees! They look fantastic through the telescopes, at times seeming to climb over each other – perhaps a courting couple.

We decide that we might get better looks on one of the boat trips so enrol on an afternoon cruise. Included in our ticket is a fact-finding tour around some of the aquaria and tanks that display the creatures of the bay and spell out just how special the refuge is: Horseshoe Crabs, Hermit Crabs, Seahorses, Pistol Shrimps and more. But we are keen to get on the water to search for bigger things. Unfortunately, the Manatees that were around earlier have moved and they don't seem to want to show themselves, we criss-cross Tarpon Bay but can't relocate them but it's a fine cruise nevertheless. We see a close Osprey pair on nest, Brown Pelicans at roost with White Ibises, Herons, Egrets and Grackles on picturesque islands. The sun going down behind the mangrove islands is colouring the water orange.

As we approach the wharf there is splashing in the water far to the right, sadly in an out-of-bounds area they are the two Manatees we watched earlier and we'll have to leave them for another time. Still it's been a fantastic trip to magical Sanibel Island and the end of another great day.

Day 7: Bunche Beach and Corkscrew Swamp

Blimey! Some folk are keen for a swim before breakfast while others are content to spot a few birds that include some new species, as there are plovers running around; Piping, Semi-palmated and Snowy are on show with the smattering of species from the day before. The Bottlenose Dolphins are back rounding up fish in the shallows for their breakfast.

After our breakfast, we head off the island to nearby Bunche Beach, where the low tide has exposed lots of wet mud and sand, particularly inviting for shorebirds. We park and walk (or squelch) across the sand with waders at our feet. We get incredible looks at close peeps and plovers. In particular, Piping, Semi-palmated and a few Wilson's Plover scurrying around with Sanderling, Dunlin, Western Sandpipers and Least Sandpipers. Larger Willet are on more distant sand bars and there are one or two Short-billed Dowitchers. In the opposite direction are masses of Brown Pelicans preening and roosting on a sand bar so we stroll in their direction. Alongside these birds are lots more Willets and beautiful Marbled Godwits.

From Bunche Beach it's a short drive to the residential area of Cape Coral, famous in the bird world for its Burrowing Owl population and we have up-to-date info on where to find them. We drive along to a large baseball park and around the edge of the green space are a few markers ringed around known owl burrows. We scan and wander but as it's sunny and warm we think they may have gone underground in the shade however, Garry has other ideas and he spots a small lump at the base of a telegraph pole. There, sitting in the shade is a beautiful

Burrowing Owl and we walk around for a closer look. The owls here are very used to people and we can view from the other side of the road without worrying the bird, at a distance of some forty feet or so. Fabulous and a great way to end the morning.

After lunch, we drive inland east of Naples to Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, a showcase National Audubon Society Reserve. A fantastic Visitor Centre marks the start of a network of boardwalk trails that wind through pine forest, sawgrass glades and cypress swamp. We've a few hours to explore fully and we start off in the strong sun and heat noting that there are few birds calling and showing themselves. There are a few feeders but no birds present, so we walk a short distance further and pause at another feeder alongside the boardwalk. A female Cardinal makes a brief appearance and a Gray Catbird skulks nearby.

We continue the loop and enter the moist woodland and soon locate a small wave of bird activity. Palm, Black-throated Green, Yellow-throated and Black-and-white Warblers are with several Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Tufted Titmouse. There are Red-bellied, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers too, as well as a fine Red-shouldered Hawk, then our birding gets interrupted by a critter on the boardwalk! A small Raccoon walks along, then clocks us and enters the water. It continues foraging using its forepaws to feel in the water and through the mud and leaf litter, as if to stir up some prey items. We get great looks at it beneath our feet as it works back and forth under the wooden boardwalk – a delight!

Three people are walking ahead of us and we notice they are stopped in their tracks. Ahead of them, just feet away is a confiding Pileated Woodpecker working the bark of one of the cypress trees. Through binoculars we can see the crampon like claws clinging to the vertical and the long tongue working beneath the bark – an exceptional encounter with an exceptional bird.

Next, we hear the deep hoots from two Barred Owls and they don't seem to be far away, we walk along the boardwalk in the direction of the calls but when we arrive in the area they have stopped calling and we just can't track them down, perhaps another time. Then, behind us on the boardwalk two more Raccoons are ambling along – more great looks at these adorable animals – some folk want to take them home!

We carry on, content with strolling around the trail adding Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, Purple Gallinule, Limpkin and Anhinga but the birds are just additions to the day as the real attraction is Corkscrew Sanctuary itself. The delightful boardwalk continues to meander through an ancient swamp, a flooded landscape of lofty cypress trees festooned with Spanish moss and bromeliads. Huge splayed buttress roots support the largest trees, many of which are embraced by strangler figs that are sending their own tangle of roots back to the inundated earth. The rotted stumps of former giants dot the surface reminding us that this watery world has existed for thousands of years. What a place – a contender for place of the trip for sure.

Day 8: The Tamiami Trail

We drive to the adjacent Lover's Key for a pre-breakfast walk on this our final morning at Fort Myers. At the southern end, we can walk through the muddy trail that overlooks the creeks and sand bars at low tide and as it's still early several Yellow-crowned Night Herons are stalking the shallows - a bright Roseate Spoonbill is more obvious! Other shorebirds include Least Sandpiper, Willet and Black-bellied Plover, yet our attention is drawn to the far sand bar that has hundreds of birds at rest. Biggest are the Brown Pelicans but amongst the gulls and terns there are lots of very black-winged birds - Black Skimmers! We view through telescopes but decide that we might be able to get nearer from the State Park entrance further along the key. We walk back to the van checking the mud on the opposite side of the road before we leave - a good move as we see our first American Oystercatcher on the mud! At the Lover's Key State Park we walk to the most southerly beach and then walk to opposite the furthest bar that is bristling with several hundred birds. We get better looks at Black Skimmers, Royal, Sandwich(Cabot's), Common and Forster's Terns as well as many Laughing Gulls and Brown Pelicans - a good stroll and we feel ready for a big breakfast - bring on Buffy and Danielle - the waitresses with the mostest!

After leaving Fort Myer's we head south to Marco Island, a beautiful resort, still on the Gulf Coast. We decide to take a look at Tigertail Beach for a walk along the shore and the sand along the lagoon is dotted with shorebirds - we watch Wilson's Plovers creeping in front of us and one catches a fiddler crab. Short-billed Dowitcher, Dunlin and Least Sandpipers work along the edge too. As we walk to the water's edge we get a respite from the intense heat when the offshore breeze kicks in. At sea we see Magnificent Frigatebird and lots of assorted terns flying by - sadly no sign of skimmers. Walking back the lagoon has more shorebirds that are now gathering to and we sift through Piping, Semi-palmated and Wilson's Plovers, Western and Least Sandpipers, Dunlin and Short-billed Dowitcher. Time for lunch at the café kiosk - this turns out to be a lengthy affair as the leader has some house-keeping to do.

Leaving Tigertail we check out one more Burrowing Owl site and bingo! There, next to one burrow, along Tigertail Road, is another beautiful owl. It seems unperturbed by us even when we get out of the van - it looks fab in the late afternoon light with its eyes looking an intense yellow - another superb bird.

Leaving Marco Island we drive to Big Cypress Preserve, part of the Fakahatchee Wilderness area. There is a boardwalk into another pristine flooded forest and we spend a short time exploring. Close to the entrance, a Northern Waterthrush perches on vegetation along a watery channel; then a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker taps at a palm tree; soon three Pileated Woodpeckers adorn one large dead tree; two Bald Eagles perch in another and a Northern Harrier sails over. Sadly, our time here is far too short and we start the long drive east across the Everglades with water, reeds and forest either side of the road as far as the eye can see. Belted Kingfishers seem to be on every other wire and there are egrets and herons gathering at roosts in trees. We continue through the darkness, finally arriving

at our final base of the tour at Homestead. We have a short time to freshen up then it's off for our evening meal at Sonny's BBQ.

Day 9: The Everglades

After breakfast at 7.30am, we head south and west to the world-famous Everglades National Park. The route takes us through an area adjacent to the protected wetland, indicative of the fertility of south Florida, with fruit growing stretching across the landscape. Soon we arrive at the National Park Visitor Centre and we walk around the trees for twenty minutes or so to see what we can find. There are a few passerines, like the now familiar Gray Catbird, Eastern Phoebe, and Palm Warbler. Also, a new species – American Redstart. The Visitor Centre itself is superb with a fine display that puts this watery wilderness in perspective, particularly informative when it comes to describing the importance of the water levels and the effect that the agricultural irrigation is having on this treasured place.

Next, we elect to drive into the Park towards Royal Palm and some easy trails, the first of which is appropriately named the Anhinga Trail - it's the first bird we see! The next is a star bird – a pale hawk is soaring over the trees with three Turkey Vultures – a fabulous white form Short-tailed Hawk – a bird limited to just Florida in North America. We watch it circle around and then it's joined by another one, this time a fantastic dark morph bird! Further along the trail is a huge alligator lying in the cool water just below the surface as we peer down from a low wooden bridge – a wonderful beast!

The boardwalk takes a loop out into the wetland and although it is not as busy as we'd like, we get great looks at some birds: a tiny Marsh Wren, a hunting Green Heron, a fishing Double-crested Cormorant and a parent and young Red-bellied turtle. On the last section we see a Common Yellowthroat and Dee finds a nice White-eyed Vireo. Around the circuit dragonflies include Halloween Pennant, Scarlet Skimmer and Eastern Amberwings.

We next walk around the enchantingly named Gumbo Limbo trail that weaves through the hardwood hammock marked by red trunked trees – Gumbo Limbo trees! It's a wonderful look at the richness of these tropical forests and there are pockets of bird activity from northern birds choosing to winter in Florida: We see great Crested Flycatchers, White-eyed Vireo, Northern Parula, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Carolina Wren, Palm Warbler and a new species Prairie Warbler.

It's now the middle of the day and we head for the furthest section of the Park that the road will take us, to the hub at Flamingo. We cross miles and miles of flooded landscape that alternates between open sawgrass or wet pine and cypress forest – a bewildering experience as we comprehend the vastness of the Everglades National Park. At Flamingo there is a shop and marina and we enjoy our sandwiches overlooking the coming and goings of boats and kayakers. After eating, a stroll around proves very productive - Alison picks up some tell-tale disturbances in the water; we recognise the circular patterns bubbling up from big beasts below the surface. Manatees! We watch enthralled as two animals come

up again and again as they nibble the weedy growth alongside a floating jetty – fantastic! Then Dee spots something in the water below the over-hanging mangroves – it looks like a piece of mud or rock but when we look through the telescope we can see its beady eye and flat-snouted profile of an American Crocodile – another Florida specialty. We've chosen a great place for lunch! There are birds around too – Pauline points to a group of Caspian Terns on the far sand bar, a Broad-winged Hawk glides over the tree tops and all the while we get shows from Green Heron, Black-crowned Night Herons, vultures galore and the ubiquitous Ospreys.

A short drive away is a circular trail around Eco Pond and it's another productive session. The first bird we see is a large white heron or egret. Its bill is bi-coloured and heavy and its legs are dull grey – it's the white form of a Great Blue Heron, more appropriately named Great White Heron - another Florida rarity! Two American Avocets are feeding with a small group of Greater Yellowlegs, then Dee spots a White Pelican flying around – it circles and comes to land in the water in front of us. The walk is thankfully mosquito-free and we add a few birds around the circuit – Palm, Prairie and Parula Warblers, Rough-winged and Tree Swallows, American Kestrels and a Northern Harrier. From Eco Pond we can drive to the southernmost car park a short distance away and look over the series of mangrove islands that dot the shimmering horizon – shorebirds and terns fly back and forth in the distance and there's a nice breeze! Time for ice-creams at the marina and a second look at the manatees and crocodiles before heading back.

The return drive is in the afternoon sun and we stop at a few places to scan. At the last point we admire the huge clouds lit by the evening sun and Garry even finds us a new bird – in the distance, hovering over the grassland is a fabulous White-tailed Kite! A nice way to end the day, well sort of.

After another lovely evening meal at Applebee's we venture back to the park for some night-time exploring. We've had success with owls and other critters of the dark before, so set off with high hopes. Our first point reveals the other interesting critters of the night – mosquitos, nothing responds to our owl coaxing so we move on. At Royal Palm we get a result – a beautiful Barred Owl flies into a tree above our heads – fantastic in the torchlight! We stop at other points and admire the stars and sounds of the night and at one point we can hear the faint tremeloes and whinnying from a distant Eastern Screech Owl. A successful night!

Day 10: The Florida Keys

We've a big day planned exploring some of the many islands that make up the Florida Keys, a linear archipelago linked by causeway, that stretches from Key Largo at the southern tip of the Everglades, south and west for over a hundred miles to iconic Key West. After a late ending to last night, we leave around 8.30am, driving the short distance to the nearest and largest island Key Largo. Here at the Key Largo Hammocks Botanical site we can walk through the tropical hardwood forest that clads many of the Florida Keys. Gumbo Limbo, Ironwood and

Mahogany trees form a dense impenetrable jungle that is, sadly for us, bereft of birds save Palm Warblers and a brief flight view of a Mangrove Cuckoo – a Wood Pewee calls too. We check the wires at the entrance of the Reserve hoping to see some White-crowned Pigeons but fail in that quest – however we do catch up with some big Green Iguanas, a recent exotic introduction to this part of the world and destined to be a feature of the day.

Journeying through the more heavily developed areas of the Upper Keys we head for Fat Deer Key and Curry Hammocks State Park where we can stretch our legs. It's a traditional spot for hawk-watchers as there can be a movement along the chain of islands. We wander to the restrooms and showers building that has a large elevated platform so we can gain some height to scan. It's really breezy with the wind from the south so the birds we can see soaring are a distance away. However, in the short spell we are there we see Broad-winged and Short-tailed Hawks, American Kestrels and a large immature Peregrine. All the while Turkey and Black Vultures are soaring and a few Frigatebirds sail high in the sky.

After collecting sandwiches at Marathon we drive across the spectacular Seven Mile Bridge, one of the biggest spans connecting the islands. We have our picnic next to the water the other side, then move onto Big Pine Key where there are several notices informing us that this is the stronghold of the endemic Florida Key Deer, a smaller version of the White-tailed Deer that is widespread over much of the eastern states. We drive slowly along the spine of the island, along the appropriately named Key Deer Boulevard and there in a shady clearing on the left is a small cutesy deer! Well, it's not so cutesy as its ears are mis-shaped and look like they've been clipped or chewed and then regrown – a very obliging model nevertheless. Further along we park at Blue Hole, a freshwater feature in the centre. Here there is another fine alligator beneath the viewing deck and Dee spots a Green Heron around the pool. In the distance are masses of vultures and there are migrant hawks soaring with them.

The final island is the characterful Key West, the southernmost point in the USA and a small piece of tropical paradise. Our first stop is at the delightful botanical gardens which offers the last patch of green in the island chain and so can be attractive to migrants. Sure enough, the first tree next to the car park is busy with some bright jewels: the first is a lovely yellow and streaked Cape May Warbler followed quickly by a dancing American Redstart. In the back hops a Prairie Warbler; then the brightest of all a stunning Yellow-throated Warbler works along the branches like a treecreeper. Garry also spots a Ruby-throated Hummingbird that zips by!

We enter the gardens proper and walk along the boardwalks and trails spending a pleasing time learning about the tropical plants and catching up on some special birds: more Palm Warblers, White-eyed Vireos, Northern Cardinal, Prairie Warbler, American Redstart are joined by a stunning male Black-throated Blue Warbler. A great list of winter migrants!

And so to the end of the line and the charming town of Key West. We zig-zag around the narrow streets with their pretty wooden period buildings and take in the marker announcing the southernmost point in the United States and that Cuba is a mere seventy miles away. We park close to Ernest Hemmingway's house and then stroll through this very American bohemian colony, noting the many feral poultry walking around – a throwback to the days of Cuban cock fighting. Along Whitehead Street we pass more buildings of note including President Truman's grand unofficial Whitehouse, and the Audubon house that celebrates the great artist and ornithologist John James Audubon's time here. Finally we end up at Mallory Square where we enjoy a stroll around the harbour soaking up the sunset atmosphere noting Laughing Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Royal Tern and Black Skimmer on the quay. Some folk are lucky enough to spot a White-crowned Pigeon too!

The long journey back is broken with a stop for an evening meal at Marathon (and very nice too with a view over the water and the lighthouse) and then the long drive back to Homestead. Phew! What a day.

Day 11: Castellow and Wakodahatchee

After the exertions of a big day on The Keys, we go for a lazy breakfast at 8am and we load the vans with bags for the off at 9.30am. We still hope to do some birding during the day and we've two sites to explore. The first is the County Park at Castellow Hammock, just a twenty minutes drive north. It's an unassuming place set in the flat fruit growing area where a parcel of woodland has some ornamental plantings and some flowering bushes can attract over-wintering hummingbirds. We park opposite the entrance and, ignoring the fact that the Park is closed, we stroll around anyway. There are lots of Blue Jays and Mockingbirds vocalising and flying here and there - Common Grackles too are creaking in the bushes. A Loggerhead Shrike is on one bush and Garry spots a female Painted Bunting that sadly quickly disappears. Then we spot a new bird – a smart rufous coloured Brown Thrasher is hopping around on the ground in front. Then, around a large planted bed of bushes with red flowers are the unmistakable dashing whirrs of hummingbirds. Three or four dart this way and that and sometimes perch on overhanging twigs. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds!

We continue our stroll and catch up with small birds in the canopy – Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Black-throated Green Warbler and Northern Parula. Other species during our visit include Cardinals and Gray Catbird.

From Castellow our plans include a visit to Wakodahatchee Wetlands that lies an hour north of Miami so we join the Florida Turnpike the long drive. When we exit the highway we have a lunch stop before driving the short distance further to the wetlands. Wakodahatchee is a man-made landscape of a series of lagoons that serve as a water treatment facility. There is a boardwalk that takes us around the pools, embankments, reedbeds and moist woodland. The birds are used to people and we get very close looks at Tricoloured, Green and Great Blue Herons, Anhingas, Great Egret and Double-crested Cormorants that are still

nesting and rearing young. A bright male Purple Gallinule is preening just feet away and one island is be-decked with White and Glossy Ibises.

There's some drama when someone loses their sunglasses in the water very close to a large alligator and we watch them try to retrieve them with a hook and handle fashioned from a reed stem – no surprises that it doesn't work! The alligator has a small family of young croclettes nearby so is not impressed with all the commotion.

Nearby, on a berm at the side of a pool there is a series of non-native animals from afar, all now free-roaming in the Florida countryside: there are lots of Green Iguanas, some Egyptian Geese and a bright Gray-headed Swamphen. Dee spots another exotic reptile – a Basilisk Lizard – quite the menagerie! In some nearby trees there is a flurry of activity from first a Black-and-white Warbler, then several Yellow-rumped Warblers joined by an American Redstart and a Blackpoll Warbler. The final stretch yields nice looks at Pied-billed Grebes, Double-crested Cormorants in breeding finery (check out the emerald eyes and tufted quiffs) and we get a nice end to the show when a group of Wood Storks land in a tree.

It's been a nice visit to Wakodahatchee but time is pressing on and we've some traffic to negotiate along the Florida Turnpike on the way to the airport so we board the van for the last time. An hour and fifteen minutes later we are pulling into the rental car centre and decamping to the airport terminal. It's been a wonderful winter trip to sunny Florida – many thanks to all.

Species of the trip: Manatee, Raccoon and Yellow-throated Warbler with honourable mentions to Pileated Woodpecker.

Place of the trip: A split vote – Key West and Corkscrew Swamp.

Magic Moment: A split vote between Wacky Woodpeckers, Magical Manatees and the Super Space Shuttle.

Birds

Black-bellied Whistling Duck

Egyptian Goose

Mottled Duck

Blue-winged Teal

American Wigeon

Ring-necked Duck

Wild Turkey

Pied-billed Grebe

American White Pelican

Brown Pelican

Magnificent Frigatebird

Anhinga

Double-crested Cormorant

Wood Stork

American Bittern

Great Blue Heron

Great White Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Reddish Egret

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

White Ibis

Glossy Ibis

Roseate Spoonbill

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck

Turkey Vulture

Black Vulture

Northern Harrier

Osprey

White-tailed Kite

Snail Kite

Sharp-shinned Hawk

Cooper's Hawk

Red-shouldered Hawk

Short-tailed Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

Bald Eagle

Limpkin

Purple Gallinule

Common Moorhen

American Coot

Gray-headed Swamphen

Whooping Crane

Sandhill Crane

Black-bellied Plover

Snowy Plover

Wilson's Plover

Piping Plover

Semi-palmated Plover

Killdeer

American Oystercatcher

Greater Yellowlegs

Lesser Yellowlegs

Willet

Spotted Sandpiper

Marbled Godwit

Ruddy Turnstone

Western Sandpiper

Least Sandpiper

Sanderling

Red Knot

Dunlin

Short-billed Dowitcher

Laughing Gull

Ring-billed Gull

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Caspian Tern

Royal Tern

Cabot's Sandwich Tern

Common Tern

Forster's Tern

Black Skimmer

Feral Pigeon

White-crowned Pigeon

White-winged Dove

Mourning Dove

Collared Dove

Common Ground-Dove

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Mangrove Cuckoo

Great Horned Owl

Barred Owl

Florida Burrowing Owl

Eastern Screech-Owl (h)

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Belted Kingfisher

Red-headed Woodpecker
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker (h)
Pileated Woodpecker
Peregrine
American Kestrel
Merlin
Crested Caracara
Monk Parakeet
Black-hooded Parakeet
Eastern Phoebe
Great-crested Flycatcher
Western Kingbird
Eastern Wood Pewee (h)
Loggerhead Shrike
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Solitary Vireo
Blue Jay
Florida Scrub Jay
American Crow
Fish Crow
Tree Swallow
Rough-winged Swallow
Barn Swallow
Tufted Titmouse
Brown-headed Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
Carolina Wren
Marsh Wren
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
Northern Mockingbird
Gray Catbird
Brown Thrasher
Common Myna
European Starling
Northern Waterthrush
Black-and-white Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
American Redstart
Northern Parula
Magnolia Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Pine Warbler
Prairie Warbler
Palm Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler
Myrtle Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Eastern Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Northern Cardinal
Painted Bunting
Common Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
House Sparrow

Mammals

Raccoon
Gray Squirrel
White-tailed Deer
Florida Key Deer
Nine-banded Armadillo
West Indian Manatee
Bottle-nosed Dolphin
Wild Pig
Marsh Rabbit
Marsh Rice Rat

Reptiles and Amphibians

Black Racer Snake
Brown Anole
Green Anole
House Gecko
Green Iguana
American Crocodile
American Alligator
Gopher Tortoise
Red-eared Slider
Common Cooter
Red-bellied Turtle
Leopard Frog
Pig Frog
Carnate Curly-tailed Lizard
Mediterranean Gecko
Giant Toad/Marine Toad
Oak Toad

Dragonflies

Blue Dasher
Green Pondhawk
Halloween Pennant
Scarlet Skimmer
Eastern Amberwing
Eastern Pondhawk
Green Pondhawk
Bandwinged Dragonlet

Butterflies

Monarch
Viceroy
Queen
Julia
White Peacock
Buckeye
Eastern Tiger Swallowtail
Black Swallowtail
Palmedes Swallowtail
Zebra Swallowtail
Ruddy Daggerwing
Zebra Longwing
Barred Yellow
Monk Skipper
Long-tailed Skipper
Carolina Satyr
Cloudless Sulphur

Moths

Rattlebox Moth

Misc

Eastern Lubber Grasshopper

Plants (thank you to John Duerden)

Common Name	Botanical Name	Remarks
Titusville Area		
Sixangle Foldwing	<i>Dicliptera sexangularis</i>	
Nuttal's Thistle	<i>Cirsium nuttallii</i>	
Jack-in-the-bush	<i>Chromoleana odorata</i>	
Spanish Needles	<i>Bidens alba</i>	
Hairy Chaffhead	<i>Carphephorus paniculatus</i>	
Woodland Lettuce	<i>Lactula floridana</i>	
Leavensworth's Tickseed	<i>Coreopsis leavenworthii</i>	
Blanketflower	<i>Gaillardia pulchella</i>	
Camphorweed	<i>Heterotheca subaxillaris</i>	
Browneyed Susan	<i>Helenium pinnatifidum</i>	
Tall Elephantsfoot	<i>Elephantopus elatus</i>	
Narrowleaf Silkgrass	<i>Pityopsis graminifolia</i>	
Seaside Goldenrod	<i>Solidago sempervirens</i>	
Walter's Aster	<i>Symphotrichum walteri</i>	
Blackeyed Susan	<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>	
Downy Milkpea	<i>Galactia regularis</i>	Kissimir Lake
Bay Lobelia	<i>Lobelia feayana</i>	
Carolina Frostweed	<i>Helianthemum carolinianum</i>	
Saltwort or Turtleweed	<i>Batis maritima</i>	
Lyreleaf Sage	<i>Salvia lyrata</i>	
Pink Purslane	<i>Portulaca pilosa</i>	St Cloud
Yellow Pondlily or Cowlily	<i>Nuphar advena</i>	In most open water ponds
Coastal Mock Vervain or Beach Verbena	<i>Glandularia maritima</i>	
Pickerell Weed	<i>Pontederia cordata</i>	
Royal Fern	<i>Osmunda regalis</i>	
Fort Myers Beach		
Seven-sisters or String-lily	<i>Crinum americanum</i>	Corkscrew Swamp (and elsewhere)
Bulltongue Arrowhead	<i>Sagittaria lancifolia</i>	Six Mile Cypress Slough
Feay's Palafox	<i>Palafoxia feayi</i>	Archbold Center
Slender Goldentop	<i>Euthamia caroliniana</i>	Tigertail Beach
Climbing Aster	<i>Symphotrichum carolinianum</i>	Six Mile Cypress Slough
Mile-a-minute Vine	<i>Ipomoea cairica</i>	Sanibel Island
Railroad Vine or Bayhops	<i>Ipomoea pes-caprae</i>	Bunche Beach
Gray Nicker or Nickerbean	<i>Caesalpinia bonduc</i>	Bunche Beach (spiny vine with large spiny seed pods)
Coinvine or Fish Poison Vine	<i>Dalbergia ecastaphyllum</i>	Tigertail Beach
Seagrape	<i>Coccoloba uvifera</i>	Bunche Beach (shrub with large circular leaves)
Seaside Jackbean or Baybean	<i>Canavalia rosea</i>	Tigertail Beach
Alligator Flag	<i>Thalia geniculata</i>	Corkscrew Swamp
American Beautyberry or French Mulberry	<i>Callicarpa americana</i>	Archbold Center

Hairy-pod Cowpea
Largeflower Mexican Clover
Burmut or Jamaican Feverplant
Red Mangrove
Seoats
Muhly Grass
Seashore Paspallum
Saltmeadow Cordgrass

Everglades

Leafy Bladderwort
Big Floatingheart
Fireflag
Cheesytoes
Common Eveningprimrose
Pink Purslane
Monk Orchid
Starrush Whitetop

The Keys

Poisonwood
Balloon Vine

Vigna lueola
Richardia grandiflora
Tribulus cistoides
Rhizophora mangle
Uniola paniculatum
Muhlenbergia capillaris
Paspalum vaginatum
Spartina patens

Utricularia foliosa
Nymphoides aquatica
Thalia geniculata
Stylosanthes humata
Oenothera biennis
Portulaca pilosa
Oeceoclades maculatum
Rhynchospora

Metopium toxiferum
Cardiospermum corindum

Bunche Beach
Ground cover in South
Cape Coral

Tigertail Beach
Tigertail Beach
Tigertail Beach
Tigertail Beach

Anhinga Trail
Anhinga Trail
Wakodehatchee
Anhinga Trail
Anhinga Trail
Gumbo Limbo Trail
Gumbo Limbo Trail

Key Largo Botanic Garden
Key Largo Botanic Garden