



SOUTH FLORIDA & Dry Tortugas 7–16 April 2014

I first visited Florida in 1997, just when Paradise Birding was getting off the ground. Such Florida specialties as Limpkin, Snail Kite, Gray Kingbird, and Florida Scrub-Jay made the trip more than memorable, ensuring that I would return. It wasn't until 2009 that I finally made it back to the Sunshine State to visit such legendary birding spots as Sanibel Island, the Everglades, and the Dry Tortugas, along with enjoying the eastern "red" woodpeckers: the Red-bellied, Red-headed, and Red-cockaded. This year, we are delighted to show you some of the most exciting birding in North America at the peak of spring migration!

Your Host and Lead Guide, Stephen Shunk



Bush and Long keys, Dry Tortugas

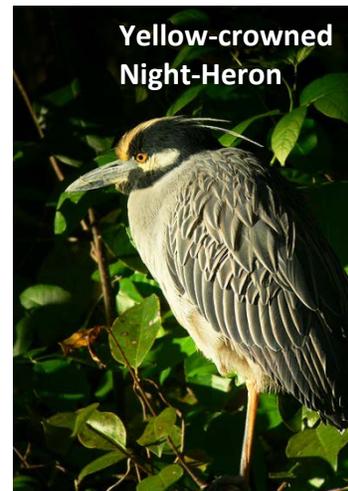
TOUR SUMMARY

Our adventure begins in the sprawling metropolis of Miami/Ft. Lauderdale, although we will quickly leave the city to explore the more rural parts of South Florida. We will spend three nights among the Gulf Coast and inland habitats around Fort Myers; three nights near the southern tip of the mainland, in Florida City, gateway to the Everglades; and three nights at the southernmost city in the United States, Key West.

After leaving the Miami and/or Ft. Lauderdale airports, we will head to the southern reaches of Lake Okeechobee, the second largest freshwater lake in the lower 48 states. We will bird a couple of spots on the lake and then head west down the Caloosahatchee River to Fort Myers, on the eastern shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

Fort Myers will be our staging area for two full days of birding, from the Gulf Coast to its inland oases, including Sanibel Island, Tigertail Beach, Corkscrew Swamp, and Six-mile Slough. Among the many highlights of the Fort Myers/Naples region, we will watch Red-cockaded Woodpeckers at their evening roost sites, with Brown-headed Nuthatch and Pine Warbler in the pine canopy and Bachman's Sparrow in the grassy understory. We will also search for the endemic Florida Scrub-Jay and Limpkin, while we enjoy hordes of shorebirds and long-legged waders, with storks, herons, and ibises concentrated among several wetland preserves.

Next, we will head to the southern tip of the Florida Peninsula, where we will spend three nights in Florida City, at the edge of Everglades National Park. Just south of Naples, we will pass through Big Cypress Preserve, with possible stops at Everglades City, Fakahatchee Strand, and Shark Valley. Once at our base in Florida City, we will explore the southern Everglades, including the legendary Anhinga Trail, Mahogany Hammock, and the remote village of Flamingo. One full day in this region will be dedicated to exploring suburban Miami (with the help of a local guide) to search for a handful of fun exotic birds such as the Hill Myna, Spot-breasted Oriole, Red-whiskered Bulbul, and White-winged Parakeet. We will also hope to find Purple Swamphen and the elusive Smooth-billed Ani. A break from the city will take us out to the migration hotspots on Key Biscayne. Throughout the region, we will keep our eyes skyward in search of special raptors such as Snail Kite, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Short-tailed Hawk.



The final leg of our trip will give you a true taste of the Caribbean, as we island-hop down the Florida Keys to sunny Key West, where we will spend our last three nights. As we jump off the Florida Peninsula and onto Key Largo, we will search for “Golden” Yellow Warbler and Black-whiskered Vireo, as well as the skulky and elusive Mangrove Cuckoo. Various stops along Highway 1 will give us a great sampling of waterbirds, and migrant songbirds can be thick in the nearby vegetation. After stopping for lunch at Steve’s favorite seafood spot, on Marathon Key, we will pass through the Key Deer and “Great White” Heron refuges, with excellent chances to see both of these endemic gems. We will arrive on Key West in time for some evening birding on this hotspot for Caribbean vagrants, with a great chance before dinner for our first White-crowned Pigeon.

Despite its touristic appeal, Key West offers some excellent birding, and we will have ample time to hit the prime habitats on the island. However, our main purpose for being here is to establish our base of operations for birding on the Dry Tortugas. On the last two full days of our tour, we will ride a fast catamaran 70 miles across the Gulf of Mexico to Dry Tortugas National Park, with two primary goals in mind: nesting seabirds and migrant songbirds. The boat trip itself can be eventful, with a good chance to observe Roseate Tern, Northern Gannet, and Pomarine Jaeger, among the more common gulls and terns. As we approach the tiny sandbars of the Tortugas, we can expect cacophonous swarms of seabirds, with thousands of Sooty Tern and Brown Noddy, plus Brown and Masked boobies, and nesting Magnificent Frigatebirds. We will land at Garden Key and explore the civil-war-era Fort Jefferson, its grounds teeming with songbirds. We could see dozens of warblers, orioles, tanagers, and buntings among the gardens, often with a dozen Merlins and a Peregrine Falcon or two in attendance.



So, why are we visiting the Tortugas on two consecutive days? The array of migrant birds changes daily. As birds leave Cuba and the Yucatan Peninsula en route to the North American mainland, they rest and refuel on these tiny islands and then continue their journeys. New birds arrive daily, and a second day on Garden Key doubles our chances of seeing vagrants among broad arrays of more common species. One day, we might see Swainson's, Black-throated Blue, and Cape May warblers, and the next day may be full of Kentuckys, Blackburnians, and Black-throated Greens. Larger songbirds may include mobs of Summer Tanagers, scattered Gray Kingbirds and Orchard Orioles, and Yellow-billed Cuckoos in nearly every tree! We may have several Common Nighthawks on Garden Key on both days, but perhaps we will get lucky and have an Antillean Nighthawk arrive on the night in between. I have also made special arrangements for us to have guided zodiac tours of the main lagoon, providing an amazing experience of immersion in the nesting seabird colonies. A second day on Garden Key will ensure that we have ample time to explore every corner of the island, with the bonus of allowing time for snorkeling for those who might be interested in swimming among the Goliath Groupers and other coral-reef dwellers in the crystal-clear waters. Trust me. After a day on Garden Key, you will want another!



Our boat trip will return us to Key West with plenty of time for some afternoon and evening birding on the island. After our second trip to the Dry Tortugas, we will depart Key West on the final morning for the long drive back to Miami.

Our daily itinerary will depend on the weather and tides, as well as local bird reports and our success at finding certain species, but the general plan will be as follows:

Monday, April 7: Miami/Ft Lauderdale arrivals and airport pickups by 2 p.m.

Drive to Fort Myers, with possible birding stops at Lake Okeechobee and Babcock-Webb Wildlife Area. *Dinner and night in Fort Myers.*

Tuesday, April 8: Fort Myers area

Birding sites may include Sanibel Island, Babcock-Webb Wildlife Area, Six-mile Slough, and Estero Island. *Dinner and night in Fort Myers.*

Wednesday, April 9: Naples Area

Birding sites may include Corkscrew Swamp, Rookery Bay, Tigertail Beach, and Imokalee uplands. *Final dinner and night in Fort Myers.*



Brown Noddy

Thursday, April 10: Travel from Fort Myers to Florida City
Birding sites may include Fakahatchee Strand, Big Cypress Swamp, Everglades City, and Shark Valley.
Dinner and night in Florida City.

Friday, April 11: Everglades National Park
All day exploring the main route through Everglades Park, including Anhinga Trail, Mahogany Hammock, and Flamingo village. *Dinner and night in Florida City.*

Saturday, April 12: Suburban Miami
Birding for Miami exotic specialties, plus Key Biscayne and other Atlantic Coast hotspots. *Final dinner and night in Florida City.*

Sunday, April 13: Key Largo to Key West
Birding on Key Largo, with other possible stops at Long Key, Curry Hammock, and Marathon Key. *Dinner and night in Key West.*

Monday, April 14: Dry Tortugas & Key West
Boat trip to Dry Tortugas, evening birding on Key West. *Dinner and night in Key West.*

Tuesday, April 15: Dry Tortugas & Key West
Boat trip to Dry Tortugas, evening birding on Key West. *Dinner and night in Key West.*

Wednesday, April 16: Return to Miami
Early morning birding on Key West, followed by drive to Miami, with arrival by 1 p.m. for 3 p.m. or later departures.

NOTE: Depending on available flights and your personal preferences, you may avoid the drive back to Miami by flying out of Key West on the final morning. Otherwise, if you are leaving from Miami, we will have you at the airport by 1 p.m.; if you are flying out of Ft. Lauderdale, we will have you at the airport by 2 p.m.



DAILY ACTIVITIES

Birding in Florida is a fairly casual experience, with the region's many well-developed trails and other visitor facilities, very flat terrain, and relatively easy viewing conditions, especially of the hordes of waterbirds. The most challenging birding will be on the ferry to the Dry Tortugas (see note below) and in the city around Miami (the reason we are hiring a local guide for the day). We also may have some distant raptor sightings, fleeting glimpses at rails, and heard-only shrub-birds, but the birding is generally very easy. As with all group birding trips, birders with more advanced skills will be able to find and identify more of the anticipated species, while those with less experience will delight in the abundance of "life-birds" throughout the tour. This tour may even be fine for some beginners, but they should be prepared for the abundance of birds and new information. Your lead guide, Steve Shunk, is a patient, professional educator, and he will work diligently to help you learn bird vocalizations and visual ID, as well as general natural and cultural history of the region.



Summer Tanager

This tour is for moderately active people in good health. Our guides are certified first aid providers, but we will usually be fairly close to urban medical facilities. Every day will involve considerable walking, and we may hike a total of a couple miles per day. Most individual walks will be short and at a "birdwatcher's pace," and most routes are very flat. We will do our best to cater each day's activities to the ability level of the group. Throughout the tour, we will bird mostly on foot, with very little of our birding to be conducted from the vehicle. To take advantage of cooler temperatures and the height of bird activity, we will usually start birding early each morning, with breaks or meals in the heat of the day, often birding until sunset.

We will travel in a large passenger van with ample room for each guest to have his or her own window in the vehicle, and we will use a step stool for easy entry. This is a non-smoking tour. We will stay in non-smoking rooms and eat in non-smoking areas, but we cannot avoid exposure to cigarette smoke in all circumstances.

We encourage you to take photos as souvenirs, but this is not a photography tour. If you wish to focus on photographic opportunities, we ask that you remain sensitive to the group's needs and the tour schedule. Ensuring that everyone in the group gets their binoculars or scope on a bird will take precedence over shooting photos, and it may not be practical to stop just for photos. That said, you are welcome to haul along any camera gear you can tolerate carrying, and you might at least want a small camera to capture some of the region's scenic vistas.



Spiny Crab-like Orb Weaver

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Warm to hot temperatures and high humidity predominate in South Florida, but the daily weather can be quite changeable. We may experience thunderstorms, light rain, fog, and extended periods of sun, all in one day. You should be prepared to be outside, away from the vehicle or other shelter, for a couple hours at a time. Please pack conservatively to allow room for all our gear, but do not compromise your ability to be comfortable in a wide variety of conditions out-of-doors.

Biting insects will occur in many areas along our route, and we recommend that you take the proper precautions. Recent rains could cause us to encounter enough mosquitoes to add an additional level of challenge to the birding experience, and you may need chemical repellent or bug resistant clothing. You should also be prepared to protect yourself from the sun, as we will spend many hours outdoors on most days.

We recommend that you bring your own binoculars and favorite field guide. You also may bring a spotting scope, although we will have at least one scope available for the group. We also carry an extensive birding library for reference and learning.

NOTES ABOUT THE DRY TORTUGAS FERRY: We can hope for glassy seas with barely a breeze, but we should be prepared for choppy conditions and stiff winds. You will want to have a good windbreaker and tight hat for the ride. Spotting scopes are not practical on the boat, but you will usually be high enough off the water to avoid getting sea-spray on your camera gear. The ferry operator provides complimentary mask, snorkel, and fins for those who wish to snorkel on the trip, but you would need to bring your own swimsuit and towel if you want to go in the water (the boat has a shower for rinsing off after your dip).

If you are susceptible to motion sickness, you should take preventative measures.

In addition to the many pharmaceutical options, we recommend the following actions:

- Low-fat, high-protein breakfast and lunch on the day of the trip.
- Minimal alcohol with dinner the night before the trip.
- Ample sleep the night before the trip.
- Steve prefers Meclizine HCl (aka Dramamine 2 or “less-drowsy” formula) among the over-the-counter drug choices, but there are also some prescription options; ask your doctor.
- If you are extremely susceptible, ask your doctor for a prescription anti-nausea drug in case your preventative drug doesn’t do its job.



Red-bellied
Woodpecker



Masked Booby

LODGING, MEALS & REFRESHMENTS

We will spend three nights in Fort Myers, three nights in Florida City, and three nights in Key West, all in comfortable Best Western motels. Details on specific lodging facilities are below. If you are traveling with a birding partner or are willing to share a room with another birder, we will do our best to place you in a double room. If we are not able to match you with a roommate, you will be responsible for the single tour rate.

Your tour fee includes all meals from dinner on April 7 through breakfast on April 16. We will eat in restaurants that appeal to a wide variety of food preferences, but it may be difficult to accommodate the most restrictive diets. If you maintain such a diet, remember that appropriate foods may not be available at restaurants or rural community stores. To prepare for these contingencies you may wish to bring foods that will meet your needs.

Most breakfasts will be held early to allow us an early start to our birding day. Some will be continental-style while others will be complete meals. We will eat most lunches in restaurants, and lunch will occasionally be our largest meal of the day. We may also snack through lunch in anticipation of an early dinner. In addition to restaurant meals, we provide food and beverages, with plenty of water, in the field. One of our goals is to keep you pleasantly fueled and hydrated to help you get the most of the long birding days. The survey included in your registration materials asks your dietary restrictions and preferences. While we cannot honor every food and drink request, the more detailed your response, the better we can serve you on the road.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS & TOUR FEE

We will meet all participants at the Miami International Airport at approximately 2:00 p.m., Monday, April 7. If you wish to fly into Fort Lauderdale, we will pick you up at approximately 3 p.m., after we make our stop in Miami. Specific pickup time and location may be changed depending on individual itineraries, and we will make alternate rendezvous plans for those of you who arrive on the weekend prior to the tour. We will return to Miami no later than 1 p.m. on Wednesday, April 16, to allow plenty of time for 3 p.m. or later departures. If you wish to fly out of Fort Lauderdale, we will have you at the airport by 2 p.m. If you wish to avoid the drive back to Miami, you may fly out of Key West at whatever time is convenient for you on April 16 (our motel has an airport shuttle).



**Double-crested
Cormorant**



Brown and Masked Boobies on Hospital Key

Your tour fee includes all meals, snacks, and non-alcoholic beverages; nine nights lodging; two boat trips to the Dry Tortugas; transportation from Miami; park fees, licenses and permits; service-related gratuities; and the instruction and leadership of your guide(s). The fee does not include guides' gratuities, which are never expected but always appreciated based on your satisfaction with our service.

We are pleased to accept checks or credit cards (VISA or Mastercard). A non-refundable \$95 deposit is required to hold your space, with the balance due 60 days prior to departure. If you register after February 7, the entire tour fee is due with your registration materials. We recommend that you purchase travel insurance.



2014 FEE PER PERSON: \$3,990 single/\$3,385 double
DEPOSIT: \$95
BALANCE DUE February 7: \$3,895 single/\$3,290 double

NOTE: Our tour fees are structured to allow the best possible client-to-guide ratio for an optimal birding experience, with a maximum of 7 participants on this tour.

REFUND POLICY: Your deposit is non-refundable. If you cancel your reservation more than 60 days prior to the tour, you will be refunded any payments above your deposit. If you cancel between 60 and 30 days prior to the tour, you will receive a 50% refund of fees paid over the deposit. If you cancel less than 30 days prior, you forfeit your entire tour fee, unless you can fill your space with another birder. If you cancel at any time, your deposit is transferrable to any Paradise Birding tour at any time in the future.

To pre-register for the tour, please complete the registration forms printable from our web site at www.paradisebirding.com/2014regforms.pdf and return them with your non-refundable \$95 deposit. *We look forward to seeing you in Texas this spring!*

LODGING CONTACTS

Fort Myers: Best Western Fort Myers Inn and Suites.....239-278-3949

Florida City: Best Western Gateway to the Keys.....305-246-5100

Key West: Best Western Hibiscus Motel.....305-296-3500

NOTE: We will have emergency phone access only while on the boat to the Dry Tortugas.

PARADISE BIRDING CONTACT INFORMATION

Stephen Shunk, Owner and Lead Guide

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