



SOUTHERN FLORIDA & Dry Tortugas 7–17 April 2015

I first visited Florida in 1997, just when Paradise Birding was getting off the ground. Such Florida specialties as Limpkin, Snail Kite, 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. Now running this tour for our 4th 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



Float Plane to the 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 southern Florida. We will meet the evening of April 7 at the Best Western motel—Fort Lauderdale Airport, and we will hit the road after breakfast the next morning. We will spend the next three nights among the Gulf Coast and inland habitats around Fort Myers; followed by three nights near the southern tip of the mainland, in Florida City, gateway to the Everglades; and our final three nights at the southernmost point in the United States, Key West.

Fort Lauderdale to Fort Myers

After leaving Ft. Lauderdale, we will head toward the southern reaches of Lake Okeechobee, the second largest freshwater lake in the lower 48 states. En route, we may stop to scan flooded agricultural fields for shorebirds and raptors. We will then bird a couple of key spots along the lakeshore before having lunch in the town of Belle Glade. After lunch, we will head north to Lake Wales Ridge, where we will visit the Archbold Biological Station—home of one of the highest concentrations of Florida Scrub-Jays. After birding around the station, we will head south and then 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 the interior, 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 roost sites, with Brown-headed Nuthatch and Pine Warbler in the canopy and Bachman's Sparrow in the grassy understory. On Sanibel, we will take a private, guided tram-tour through the mangrove wetlands of Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Just inland, the National Audubon Society's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary will offer some of the best boardwalk birding anywhere, with wading birds, swamp birds, raptors, and more. Around the region, we will watch for Limpkin, Wood Stork, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Short-tailed Hawk as we go from beach to pine barren to cypress swamp.

Fort Myers to the Everglades

To begin our fourth full day, we will head south past Naples, with morning birding on the Big Cypress Boardwalk at Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve. We will then head south to Everglades City at the northern boundary of Everglades National Park. This wind-swept town can offer some excellent birding before we enjoy one of our favorite lunch spots overlooking the Barron River. We will take the afternoon to drive east across Big Cypress Swamp and the Everglades Wildlife Area, where we may make several stops to search for Snail Kites in the expansive wetlands. We will spend the next three nights at our base in Florida City, from which we will explore the Everglades and the urban habitats of Miami.

We will hire a local guide to help us navigate Miami's urban jungle, as we search for several fun exotic birds such as the Egyptian Goose, Common Myna, Spot-breasted Oriole, Red-whiskered Bulbul, and White-winged Parakeet. We will stop at a mall to look for Purple Swamphen, followed by a break from the city at the migration hotspots on Key Biscayne. Our second full day will take us into Everglades National Park, where another world-famous boardwalk will put you eye-to-eye with more alligators that you can count and where amazingly unwary waterbirds wander around at your feet. We will enjoy lunch in the remote village of Flamingo, where we may see Gray Kingbird and Shiny Cowbird. The marina here may also offer our best chances to see West Indian manatee and American crocodile.

Everglades to Key West

The final leg of our trip will give you a true taste of the Caribbean. We will spend the travel day island-hopping down the Florida Keys to sunny Key West, where we will spend our last three nights. Before leaving the Florida Peninsula for Key Largo, we will search for "Golden" Yellow Warbler and Black-whiskered Vireo on Card Sound Road. Various stops along Highway 1 will give us a great sampling of resident waterbirds and migrant songbirds.



The Everglades

After stopping for lunch at Steve's favorite seafood spot, we will pass through the Key Deer and "Great White" Heron refuges, with excellent chances to see both of these endemic gems. If we arrive in Key West with time for some exploring before dinner, we will search for our first White-crowned Pigeons.

Despite its touristic appeal, Key West offers some excellent birding, and we will spend one full day scouring the shores and inland habitats of the island. We will search for Mangrove Cuckoo, Roseate Tern, more White-crowned Pigeons, and any specialty migrants or rarities being reported. Of course, Key West also serves as our jumping off point for a full adventurous day on Garden Key in Dry Tortugas National Park.

The legendary Dry Tortugas

In 2014, we discovered the premium way to bird the Dry Tortugas: by float plane! Most birders travel to Garden Key by boat—some on the tourist "ferry", which takes over 2 hours, and some on the slower charter boats, which take over 5 hours, each way. Instead, we will enjoy an amazing low-altitude tour of the crystal-clear Caribbean waters, with sharks, sea turtles, shipwrecks and more seen from your private window of our 10-seater plane. After a comfortable 45-minute flight, we will "ski" into the harbor at Garden Key and spend a full 8-hour day birding on the main island of the park (the tourist boat spends only 4.5 hours on the island). Garden Key has multiple attractions, including two distinctive birding phenomena: spring migration fallout and nesting seabird colonies.

Millions of tiny songbirds leave Cuba and the Yucatan Peninsula in April on their routes to northern breeding grounds; many of them rest and refuel on the tiny Dry Tortugas. You will be distracted by Palm and Prairie warblers running around at your feet, while your partner next to you calls out, "Worm-eating Warbler at eye level!" As you enjoy jaw-dropping looks at a *flock* of Summer Tanagers in the same tree, another birder will exclaim, "Blackburnian and Black-throated Blue in the same field of view!" All of this will be happening while Gray Kingbirds, Orchard Orioles, and Yellow-billed Cuckoos hide in the scattered trees and shrubs from the hungry Merlins. And what is that amazing background symphony? If you can pull yourself away from the migrants for a few minutes, you will become immersed in cacophonous swarms of seabirds, with thousands of Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies, plus Brown and Masked boobies, and displaying Magnificent Frigatebirds.

In case the birds of the Dry Tortugas aren't enough to keep you busy, you will have ample time to explore the fascinating civil-war-era Fort Jefferson. Those who get a little warm in the tropical sun might also take a dip in the turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea.



Bush and Long keys, Dry Tortugas

Our plane ride even includes snorkeling gear for those who wish to swim among the Goliath groupers and other coral-reef inhabitants around the island.

Key West to Miami/Fort Lauderdale

After breakfast on our final morning in Key West, we will drive back to Miami for returns to your respective airports. *(See note below regarding departures).*

THE DAILY ITINERARY

Our day-to-day activities will depend on the weather and tides, as well as local bird reports and our success at finding certain species. The general plan will be as follows:

Tuesday, April 7: Meet at Best Western Hotel, Fort Lauderdale Airport by 6 p.m.

Dinner and night in Fort Lauderdale.

Wednesday, April 8: Fort Lauderdale to Fort Myers

Birding at Lake Okeechobee and Lake Wales Ridge. *Dinner and night in Fort Myers.*

Thursday, April 9: Fort Myers Region

Birding at Sanibel Island, Babcock-Webb Wildlife Area, and Six-mile Slough.

Dinner and night in Fort Myers.

Friday, April 10: Fort Myers/Naples Region

Birding sites may include Corkscrew Swamp, Tigertail Beach, and Marco Island.

Dinner and night in Fort Myers.

Saturday, April 11: Fort Myers to Florida City

Birding sites may include Fakahatchee Strand, Everglades City, and Shark Valley.

Dinner and night in Florida City.

Sunday, April 12: 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.*

Monday, April 13: Suburban Miami

Birding for Miami exotic specialties, plus Key Biscayne. *Dinner & night in Florida City.*

Tuesday, April 14: 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.*



Wednesday, April 15: Dry Tortugas National Park
Seaplane trip to Dry Tortugas, and all day exploring the island.
Dinner and night in Key West.

Thursday, April 16: Key West
All day birding the hotspots of Key West and nearby Sugarloaf Key.
Dinner and night in Key West.

Friday, April 17: Key West to Miami
Return drive to Miami and/or Fort Lauderdale airports. See below for airport timing.
Lunch in Miami

A NOTE ON AIRPORT DEPARTURES: Depending on available flights and your personal preferences, you may avoid the 3.5-hour drive back to Miami (4 hrs to Fort Lauderdale) by flying out of Key West on the final morning. If you choose this option, we will either drop you at the Key West airport in the morning or let you make your own arrangements. 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. The most challenging element of Florida birding is the heat. We will take ample breaks and will always have water available, but you should be prepared for hot, humid birding conditions. As for general birding challenges, we 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 new 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. Note that we are not hard-core bird "listers", and we spend plenty of time enjoying bird behavior and studying the fascinating natural history of the region.

This tour is for moderately active people in good health. Our guides are certified first aid providers, and 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.



Spiny Crab-like Orb Weaver

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 average ability level of the group, but there may be times when one of our guides will hang back with group members who walk at a slower pace. 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 typically eat an early breakfast and try to get in the field shortly after sunrise (approx. 7:00 a.m.). We may also plan breaks, meals, or travel between destinations during the heat of the day. On some days, we will stop birding before sunset (approx. 7:45 p.m.) to allow you a short break before dinner.

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.

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Warm to hot temperatures and high humidity predominate in southern 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 a birding and natural history library for reference and learning.



LODGING, MEALS & REFRESHMENTS

We will spend one night in Fort Lauderdale, 3 nights in Fort Myers, 3 nights in Florida City, and 3 nights in Key West, all in comfortable Best Western motels. Specific lodging facilities are listed 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 fee.

Your tour fee includes all meals from dinner on April 7 through lunch on April 17. 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 local cafes, and we may occasionally 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. We cannot honor every food and drink request, but the more detailed your response, the better we can serve you on the road.

Your Tour Guides

Our lead guide on this tour is Paradise Birding owner, Steve Shunk. Steve brings 25 years of birding experience and an extensive leadership background to our tours, and he had dozens of multi-day tours under his belt. He is a patient, professional educator, and he will work diligently to help you learn bird vocalizations and visual identification, as well as general natural and cultural history of the region.

As part of our new commitment to having two guides on every tour, we are pleased to be joined by Steve's partner and co-leader Christine Elder. Christine is an experienced environmental educator, professional biologist, and biological illustrator. Her enthusiasm and natural history expertise may only be matched by her outstanding commitment to top-notch hospitality and customer service!

TRAVEL LOGISTICS & TOUR FEE

We will meet all participants at 6:00 p.m., Tuesday, April 7, at the **Best Western motel at the Fort Lauderdale Airport**. A free airport shuttle to the motel is available.



If you wish to fly into Miami, you will need to arrange for transport to Fort Lauderdale. Shuttles are available, but it actually may be less expensive to rent a small car at the Miami airport and drop it at the Fort Lauderdale airport. Please contact us with any questions or concerns about the arrival schedule.

We will return to Miami no later than 1 p.m. on Friday, April 17. If you are flying out of Miami airport, we will have you there in time for 2 p.m. or later departures. If you will fly out of Fort Lauderdale, we will reach the airport by 2 p.m. See the note above under "Daily Itinerary" regarding the option to fly home directly from Key West.

Your tour fee includes all meals, snacks, and non-alcoholic beverages; 10 nights lodging; transportation from Fort Lauderdale; seaplane trip to the Dry Tortugas; park fees, licenses and permits; local guide fees and gratuities; 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. Note that any gratuities will be shared equally between our guides.

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 always recommend that you purchase travel insurance to help you manage any unforeseen cancellations or changes to your travel plans.

2015 FEE PER PERSON: \$4,950 single/\$4,225 double
DEPOSIT: \$95
BALANCE DUE February 7: \$4,855 single/\$4,130 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 and return them with your non-refundable \$95 deposit. *We look forward to seeing you in Florida this spring!*

LODGING CONTACTS

Ft Lauderdale: Best Western Fort Lauderdale Airport.....954-462-7005
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

PARADISE BIRDING CONTACT INFORMATION

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