

SOUTH FLORIDA & THE KEYS

APRIL 25 – MAY 1, 2013



Western Spindalis at Key West Botanical Garden, photo by Michael O'Brien

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This short South Florida & the Keys trip was designed as a quick sampling of South Florida specialties, as well as an opportunity to encounter migrants at various points along the way. Beginning and ending in Key West, we ventured north through the Keys to Florida City, from which we explored the Everglades and suburban Miami.

On our first day we headed to Summerland and Saddlebunch keys, where numerous White-crowned Pigeons put on a great show. We also had good studies of our first Black-whiskered Vireo and several Gray Kingbirds, and saw several of the resident mangrove subspecies of Prairie Warbler. But the main event of the morning was to search for the female Western Spindalis that had been seen at Key West Botanical Garden. Before leaving the parking lot, Jeff spotted this bird and we all ended up getting good looks. The lush plantings at this botanical garden also held a nice assortment of migrants including Black-and-white, Cape May, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, and Palm warblers, Northern Parula, American Redstart, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. We even saw a Painted Bunting, though views were brief. As we headed up the Keys, a stop at Ann's Beach produced a nice selection of shorebirds, including Black-bellied Plover, Greater Yellowlegs, Western Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Semipalmated and Least sandpipers, and Short-billed Dowitcher. A real highlight of the day came as we were headed up Route 1 south of Florida City and found a pair of Snail Kites at the side of the road. These beautiful birds posed well for us, and even copulated. One of them disappeared into a shrub where we suspect a nest was hidden.

On our second day we headed to suburban Miami in search of exotics. Starting near the Baptist Hospital in Kendall, we cruised the neighborhoods and eventually found several Red-whiskered Bulbuls, as well as Mitred and Yellow-chevroned parakeets. A friendly homeowner invited us to watch parakeets at her feeder, so we graciously accepted the offer and enjoyed wonderful views of Mitred Parakeets devouring fruit. Meanwhile, we were captivated by a Common Gallinule and her cute little chicks, which were roaming the edge of the canal. The presence of several West Indian strays altered our plans slightly, which is why we spent most of the late morning and early afternoon at Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park. Although the Thick-billed Vireo and La Sagra's Flycatcher eluded us, we did have more migrants, including great looks at several Cape May Warblers. On our way back to Florida City, we stopped at Cutler Ridge to enjoy the nesting colony of Caribbean Cave Swallows. This is one of the few places this richly colored subspecies nests in the United States.

Having spent the first two days in relatively congested areas, day three at Everglades National Park provided a delightfully relaxing change of pace. We began by heading straight to Mahogany Hammock, where we found the very localized Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow, a distinctive subspecies that is restricted to fresh sawgrass marshes of the Everglades. Then we visited Paurotis Pond, which was a real highlight. Nesting Wood Storks were obvious, and brightly colored Roseate Spoonbills were coming and going. And before long, a stunning Swallow-tailed Kite magically appeared over the tree line.

Our first alligator nicely rounded out the ambiance of this wonderful site. A long walk along Bear Lake Trail didn't produce any Mangrove Cuckoos, but was a lovely way to experience life in the mangrove swamp, and get good looks at the mangrove subspecies of White-eyed Vireo. Around Flamingo, we scrutinized the cowbird flocks until we turned up a couple of Shiny Cowbirds, an uncommon recent immigrant from the south. We also scanned Florida Bay and found all three forms of Great Blue Heron, plus numerous shorebirds and a flock of Black Skimmers. An afternoon stroll around Anhinga Trail was enjoyable, particularly for the numerous Anhingas nesting there. An evening excursion to Long Pine Key produced two close, calling Eastern Screech-Owls and a more distant Chuck-will's-widow.

The next day, we began early at Key Largo Hammocks State Botanical Site in hopes of finding a Mangrove Cuckoo. Although cuckoos were frustratingly silent, we did have excellent views of Ovenbird and other migrants, and also heard the distinctively low-pitched song of the "Golden" Yellow Warbler, a largely Cuban member of the Mangrove Warbler group. Later, an afternoon drive to Tamiami Trail turned into an unbirdable deluge, though we did see quite a few Wood Storks, as well as Tricolored and Little Blue herons, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and a very wet Common Gallinule.

On our final day, still hoping to see Thick-billed Vireo, we returned to Bill Baggs first thing in the morning. Our luck wasn't any better the second time around, but a few migrants livened up our time there. A return to Key Largo was similarly devoid of our target, Mangrove Cuckoo, but we had excellent views of Black-whiskered Vireo, and more migrants: seldom have we seen an Ovenbird so well, and, though it's easy to get jaded, we were truly delighted to have such fine and repeated views of Cape May Warbler. Feeling a bit defeated from the morning, our mood changed during lunch at the Big Chill, where we not only had the best key lime pie of the trip, but we also enjoyed some fly-by Nanday Parakeets, a species recently added to the ABA "countable" list.

One real highlight of the trip occurred as we headed south across Seven Mile Bridge. The Caribbean Osprey we had seen at a distance on the drive north was now perched on the side of the highway, just feet away. Even though we were traveling at highway speed, with such a close view we were able to see the bird's distinctive head pattern, and both Joe and Jeff were able to obtain nice photos. This is only about the third record of this subspecies in North America! A stop at Ohio Key a few minutes later produced some nice shorebirds, including a Wilson's Plover. We ended the day near Key West Airport, where we succeeded in finding two Antillean Nighthawks flying alongside a Common. A great way to end the tour!

ITINERARY:

April 25 – Arrivals; tour orientation at hotel; dinner at Roostica. Night in Key West.

April 26 – Key West Airport (Little Hamaca City Park); Summerland Key; Saddlebunch Key; Key West Botanical Gardens; lunch at Square Grouper; Little Duck Key; Anne's Beach; dinner at Ruby Tuesday. Night in Florida City.

April 27 – Kendall area; Matheson Hammock; Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park with picnic lunch; Virginia Key Ecosystem Restoration Area; Cutler Ridge; dinner at Mutineer. Night in Florida City.

April 28 – Everglades National Park, including Mahogany Hammock, Paurotis Pond, Nine Mile Pond, West Lake, Bear Lake Trail, Flamingo (with picnic lunch), and Anhinga Trail; dinner at Capri; evening excursion to Long Pine Key for night birds. Night in Florida City.

April 29 – Key Largo Hammocks State Botanical Site; lunch at Cracker Barrel; Tamiami Trail to Shark Valley. Dinner at Longhorn Steakhouse. Night in Florida City.

April 30 – Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park; Key Largo Hammocks State Botanical Site; lunch at The Big Chill; Long Key State Park; Seven Mile Bridge; Ohio Key; Key West Airport; dinner at La Tattoria. Night in Key West.

May 1 – Departures.

BIRDLIST

Note: Species appearing in **bold print** are birds of special note that are either rare, local specialties, or are otherwise generally hard to find. The taxonomic order and nomenclature follows American Ornithologist Union Check-list of North American Birds, 7th edition (including 47th suppl.). Species in parentheses () are not considered “countable” (i.e., not yet known to be firmly established) by the ABA.

WATERFOWL

(Muscovy Duck) (I) – An established exotic in Florida; we saw them at several locations, particularly around Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

Blue-winged Teal – two at Matheson Hammock

Northern Pintail – one at Matheson Hammock

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe – one at Key Largo

STORKS

Wood Stork – seen on several days, including nests with large young at Paurotis Pond

FRIGATEBIRDS

Magnificent Frigatebird – small numbers throughout the keys

GANNETS & BOOBIES

Northern Gannet – one distant bird at Ann’s Beach

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant - seen daily

DARTERS

Anhinga – seen every day, including large young at Anhinga Trail

PELICANS

American White Pelican – we saw quite a few out in Florida Bay from Flamingo

Brown Pelican – seen daily

BITTERN & HERONS

Great Blue Heron – we saw typical dark morph birds almost

(Great White Heron) – The white form of Great Blue Heron, we saw them at three locations in the Keys, and also at Flamingo.

(Wurdemann's Heron) – three of this intergrade form at Flamingo

Great Egret – seen daily

Snowy Egret – seen almost daily

Little Blue Heron – seen almost daily

Tricolored Heron – seen almost daily

Reddish Egret – several in the keys

Cattle Egret – seen almost daily

Green Heron – seen almost daily

Black-crowned Night-Heron – two on Tamiami Trail

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis – seen daily

Roseate Spoonbill – nesting birds at Paurotis Pond

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture – abundant on the mainland, absent from the keys

Turkey Vulture – seen daily, including on the keys

HAWKS, EAGLES, & KITES

Osprey – seen daily. Of special note was a single bird of the **Caribbean subspecies** seen on both of our transits of Seven Mile Bridge. The only previous records of this subspecies in the United States was a bird seen near Islamorada back in December-January, and two at Flamingo in 2004.

Swallow-tailed Kite – we had several spectacular views of this amazing bird in the Everglades

Snail Kite – Close views of a pair, probably at a nest, along Route 1 south of Florida City.

Cooper's Hawk – one at Key West Botanical Gardens

Bald Eagle – one along Route 1 south of Florida City

Red-shouldered Hawk – numerous in the Everglades and elsewhere around the mainland;
the resident race (*extimus*) is distinctively pale
Broad-winged Hawk – seen at Key West, Matecumbe Key, and Virginia Key

RAILS & COOTS

Common Gallinule – seen almost daily, including tiny young at Kendall
American Coot – a few in the Everglades

LIMPKIN

Limpkin – heard at Anhinga trail, and seen briefly along Route 1 south of Florida City

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover – a few on the Keys and at Flamingo
Wilson's Plover – one at Ohio Key
Semipalmated Plover – a few at Ann's Beach and Flamingo
Killdeer – seen at several locations

STILTS & AVOCETS

Black-necked Stilt – two flying by our hotel in Florida City were a bit of a surprise

SANDPIPERS

Spotted Sandpiper – seen at Key West and Flamingo
Solitary Sandpiper – fly-bys at Big Pine Key and Purotis Pond
Greater Yellowlegs – one at Ann's Beach
Willet – numerous in the Keys; all of these were of the western subspecies that winters here and breeds in the Plains.
Ruddy Turnstone – a few in the Keys and Flamingo
Sanderling – numerous at Ann's Beach
Semipalmated Sandpiper – a few in the Keys and Flamingo
Least Sandpiper – seen at Ann's Beach and Ohio Key
Dunlin – several at Flamingo
Short-billed Dowitcher – numerous in the Keys and Flamingo; all of these appeared to be of the *hendersoni* subspecies, which breeds in Central Canada and migrates mostly through the Central Flyway.

GULLS, TERNS, & SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull – seen daily
Ring-billed Gull – a few in the Keys and Flamingo
Herring Gull – two on Seven Mile Bridge
Lesser Black-backed Gull – one at Little Duck Key
Least Tern – a few in the Keys
Caspian Tern – a few in the Everglades
Forster's Tern – a few in the Everglades
Royal Tern – seen daily
Black Skimmer – 15 at Flamingo

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon (I) – seen daily

White-crowned Pigeon – numerous in the Keys, especially at Summerland Key

Eurasian Collared-Dove (I) - ubiquitous in South Florida

White-winged Dove – a few around Florida City and Kendall

Mourning Dove - seen daily

Common Ground-Dove – a few seen here and there

CUCKOOS

Yellow-billed Cuckoo – three heard at Key Largo

OWLS

Eastern Screech-Owl – two calling in the Everglades

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Common Nighthawk – a daily sight at our hotel in Florida City; also at Key West Airport

Antillean Nighthawk – seen and heard well at the Key West Airport

Chuck-will's-widow – heard in the Everglades

SWIFTS

Chimney Swift – seen almost daily

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker – seen daily; we enjoyed watching one excavating its nest cavity at Flamingo

Northern Flicker – one south of Florida City

Pileated Woodpecker – seen in the Everglades and south of Florida City

FALCONS & CARACARAS

Merlin – one migrating northeast along Seven Mile Bridge; presumably the same bird caught up to us when we stopped for coffee in Marathon!

PARROTS

Nanday Parakeet (I) – three flew over us at The Big Chill restaurant while we were having lunch

(Mitre Parakeet) (I) – seen at Kendall and Key Biscayne

Yellow-chevroned Parakeet (I) – several around Kendall and Matheson Hammock

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Great Crested Flycatcher – seen or heard at several locations

Eastern Kingbird – a few in the Everglades

Gray Kingbird – seen every day, often along roadsides

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – one seen briefly at Key West Botanical Garden

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – seen daily on the mainland; we especially enjoyed a cooperative pair right by our hotel in Florida City; none on the Keys

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo – seen or heard almost daily; most or all of these were of the resident Keys subspecies, which are slightly drabber than migrants

Black-whiskered Vireo – nice views at Summerland Key and Key Largo

CROWS & JAYS

Blue Jay – seen at several locations

American Crow – seen almost daily, always in largely undeveloped areas such as the Everglades and Tamiami Trail; none on the Keys or in suburban areas

Fish Crow – seen almost daily; all in suburban areas, including a few in the Keys

SWALLOWS

Purple Martin – seen at Matheson Hammock and Homestead

Tree Swallow – one at Paurotis Pond

Cave Swallow – great looks at the highway overpass colony in Cutler Ridge; these were of the nominate subspecies, *fulva*, which breeds primarily in the Caribbean, but also occurs in small numbers in South Florida.

Barn Swallow – seen at Long Key and Homestead

WRENS

Carolina Wren – heard in the Everglades and Key Largo

BULBULS

Red-whiskered Bulbul (I) – we saw several of this introduced Southeast Asian species around Kendall

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird – seen at Bill Baggs and in the Keys

Northern Mockingbird – seen daily

MYNAS & STARLINGS

(**Common Hill Myna**) (I) – native to India and declining in its U.S. range; one fly-over seen in Kendall

Common Myna (I) – native to the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia and found in Florida since the 1980s; a few seen daily between Florida City and the Keys.

European Starling (I) – seen daily

WOOD WARBLERS

Ovenbird – excellent views at Key Largo

Northern Waterthrush – seen at Bill Baggs and the Everglades

Black-and-white Warbler – seen at several locations
Common Yellowthroat – seen at several locations
American Redstart – seen every day
Cape May Warbler – seen every day, to our delight!
Northern Parula – seen at several locations
Yellow Warbler – heard at Key Largo; this was of the “Golden” subspecies (part of the resident “Mangrove Warbler” group)
Blackpoll Warbler – seen every day
Black-throated Blue Warbler – seen almost daily
Palm Warbler – seen at several locations; all were of the “Western” subspecies, which winters in South Florida and the Caribbean
Prairie Warbler – numerous, especially in the Keys where most were likely the resident Florida subspecies

TANAGERS & ALLIES

Western Spindalis – A real highlight of our tour was seeing a female of this West Indian stray at the Key West Botanical Gardens.

SPARROWS & ALLIES

Savannah Sparrow – one on Saddlebunch Key
Seaside Sparrow – we saw several of the endangered “Cape Sable” Seaside Sparrow at Mahogany Hammock in the Everglades; this is the only race that breeds in freshwater wetlands

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal – seen daily
Rose-breasted Grosbeak – one at Key West Botanical Gardens
Indigo Bunting – seen at Key West Botanical Gardens and Bill Baggs
Painted Bunting – one seen briefly at Key West Botanical Gardens

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Bobolink – a few fly-overs at Bill Baggs
Red-winged Blackbird – seen daily
Eastern Meadowlark – several in the Everglades
Common Grackle – seen daily
Boat-tailed Grackle – seen daily on the mainland, but absent from the Keys
Shiny Cowbird – a male and at several locations

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow (I) – small numbers seen daily

BUTTERFLIES

Giant Swallowtail
Great Southern White

Little Yellow
Large Orange Sulphur
Orange-barred Sulphur
Ceraunus Blue
Gulf Fritillary
Zebra Heliconian
White Peacock
Monarch
Queen
Mangrove Skipper
Monk Skipper

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

American Crocodile
American Alligator
Florida Red-bellied Turtle
Florida Softshell
Brown Anole (I)
Green Iguana (I)
Everglades Blue Racer
Eastern Ribbon Snake
Coral Snake
Squirrel Treefrog (H)
Southern Cricket-Frog (H)
Pig Frog (H)

MAMMALS

Eastern Gray Squirrel
Raccoon
“Key” White-tailed Deer
West Indian Manatee