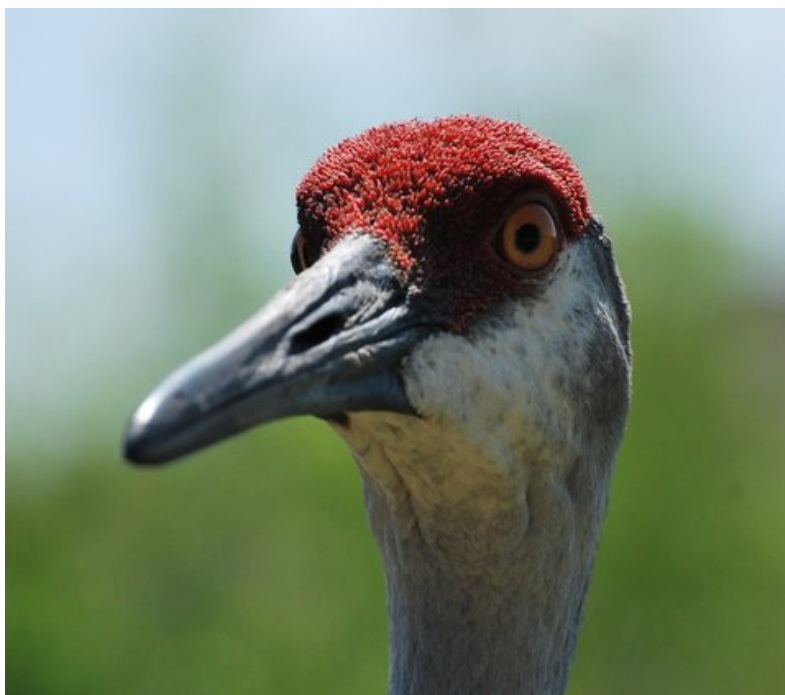


FLORIDA, SPRING 2010

SUBTLE BIRDING IN TOURIST SPOTS

by Peter Welch



Introduction:

I was lucky enough to enjoy a family break to Florida this Easter and whilst me doing any proper birding would have been tricky with two young children to entertain it was possible to combine to tourist haunts with some wildlife. Finding reports on Florida birding before I left the UK was problematic, so I thought I'd write this report to try and help anyone else who finds themselves in Florida but tied to a non birding agenda.

Over the course of twelve days I managed to identify sixty-two species and photograph fifty-six of them. Fifty of the birds seen were lifers for me and I was unable to conclusively identify at least a further fifteen sightings.

Please excuse the less than scientific style of this report but I decided to cover the geographical locations rather than a timeline or genus led approach. All of the birding was done with a notebook, camera and the loan of the excellent Peterson Eastern Birds guidebook but without binoculars or telescope. Identifications were made from the guides and a few were checked with others, more expert in wildlife from the USA.

In almost all areas Grackles, House Sparrows, Black Vultures and Northern Mocking Birds were seen but otherwise for each location I've listed the species seen, any specific areas of interest and any other wildlife sightings of note. I'm sure that there are other spots I missed and species I didn't pick up but the main sightings are as follows.

Champions Gate area

When looking for a villa to stay in my first criteria were finding a good one, with enough room for our extended party but I will admit that when I found VillaMagic near Champions Gate the idea of there being a swamp area immediately behind the Villa did add to its appeal!



Above: Sandhill Crane (top) and Boat-tailed Grackle (bottom)

The list of birds seen from the villa itself included White Ibis, Boat-tailed Grackle, roosting Little Blue Heron (which I didn't see anywhere else), Northern Cardinal, Northern Mockingbird, Anhinga, Cattle Egret, Black and Turkey Vulture (overhead fly over most afternoons down to 20m) and best of all visiting Sandhill Cranes, a single bird and later in the stay, a pair. Quite bizarre and fascinating to watch Sandhill Cranes feeding 3m away from the swimming pool...



Above: Little Blue Heron (top), Northern Mockingbird (middle) and Turkey Vulture (bottom).

Early morning walks within a mile of the villa, and in an area of swamp, orange groves and scrub bordering the Champions Gate golf course off Loughman's Road gave Sandhill Cranes roosting in the lagoons, Wood Stork, Anhinga, Green Heron, Osprey, Tufted Titmouse, Brown Thrasher, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Palm Warbler and Loggerhead Shrike on the wires.



Above: Brown Thrasher (top) and Loggerhead Shrike (Bottom).

An area of original swamp a mile or so to the west crossing the I27 and down Deen Still Road was only discovered on the last morning but a very brief visit saw a flock of eight or nine Black Vultures on the road itself and more roosting nearby, several unidentified hawks, Northern Parula Warbler and a Swamp Rabbit in the roadside verge. More time spent in this area would have paid dividends I'm sure.



Above: Tufted Titmouse (top) and Swamp Rabbit (bottom).

Magic Kingdom area

Including sightings on the approach to the Disney area

On the actual approach roads to the Disney area from the I4 exits: Wild Turkey, Sandhill Crane, American Moorhen, Wood Stork, Great White Egret and Cattle Egret were present as well as Turkey and Black Vultures. In the evenings there were frequent sightings of Armadillo and one sighting each of a Raccoon and an Otter in the clearings along side the road.



Above: White Ibis (top) and (bottom) Common Grackle.



and Great White Egret (bottom).

In Magic Kingdom itself, again both vulture species were seen, along with Boat Tailed and Common Grackle, House Sparrows and Egrets. Locations of note included around the Liberty Square River where White Ibis and Great White Egrets were keen on scavenging roast turkey legs being sold as light snacks (not sure what they feed Turkeys on in the US but they were huge drumsticks!). In addition juvenile Laughing Gull and Ring-billed gulls were around the river with Red-bellied and Downy Woodpecker seen in the trees along the main street in Frontierland. There were also calls from a buteo species (not seen) from the island area, which also held more White Ibis.

Mourning Doves could be seen in the quieter areas such as around Ariel's Grotto where I also had fleeting views of Grey Catbirds.

A particularly good spot was the Monorail station where Double-crested Cormorants can be seen on the pontoons on the main lake, or Seven Seas Lagoon as its known, an Egyptian Goose was also present on the lake itself. The wooded area to the right of the ramp up to the express monorail which returns to the parking lot also gave sightings of Brown Thrasher and Red-bellied Woodpecker, with the star bird being observed flying high over the station: a Swallow-tailed Kite.



Above: Swallow-tailed Kite.

Finally the car parking areas saw gulls and crows feeding on discarded food and some unidentified hawk species in the belt of pine trees along the edges of the parking lots.

Animal Kingdom

As well as a collection of captive birds in walk through aviaries the Animal Kingdom park gave Northern Cardinals in the bamboo plantations around the Kali River Rapids queuing area, excellent views of Black Vultures in trees around the Meerkat enclosure and Grey Catbirds foraging in the gorilla enclosure. The safari drive which in theory should have resulted in more native species was non stop which made for tricky spotting and perhaps due to the time of day didn't reveal anything unexpected with a good sized flock of White Ibis in with the captive Flamingos. Mottled Duck were seen with Mallard on the Discovery River, which rings the centre of the park.



Above: Northern Cardinal (top) and Mottled Duck (bottom).

Mourning Doves were again observed feeding in the quieter exhibit areas and as only a limited amount of time was spent in this park there are probably other good locations not encountered.



Above: Mourning Dove

Seaworld and Discovery Cove

There was limited habitat in both these parks but again Grackles were common as were American Crows. The sea lion exhibit attracted Great White Egrets and Snowy Egrets and again Northern Cardinals could be found in the thicker vegetation. For anyone that hasn't encountered Cardinals the location call they use sounds very close to that of a Wren in the UK, so ignore Wren type calls at your peril. Despite the male Cardinals being bright red they can be difficult to spot in cover.

The most interesting thing for me was the Manatees – especially as I didn't get to see any in the wild: as far as zoo exhibits go, the Manatee enclosure was large and seemed to offer some interest and variety for these amazing creatures.



Above: A Manatee

Osprey, Ring Billed Gull and Mottled Duck where all present in the vicinity of the Sky Tower.

Gatorland



Above: Black Vultures.

Gatorland was a pleasant surprise as it appears to be a well run attraction based around Alligators and some Crocodile species but also had a wild swamp boardwalk and a walk through the Alligator breeding swamp which holds a large and mixed breeding colony (or rookery) of Egrets, Herons, Double-crested Cormorant, Anhinga, Wood Stork and Roseate Spoonbill. The Gatorland website includes a section on photographic interest and has a comprehensive guide to the species that may be seen but on this visit they included Limpkin, Grey Catbird and close up views of Black Vultures in the main attraction.



Above: Grey Catbird (top) and Snowy Egret (bottom).

Also of interest seen from the boardwalk were Carolina Wren (which appears at least double the size of a UK Wren) Florida Water Snake and Five Lined Skink

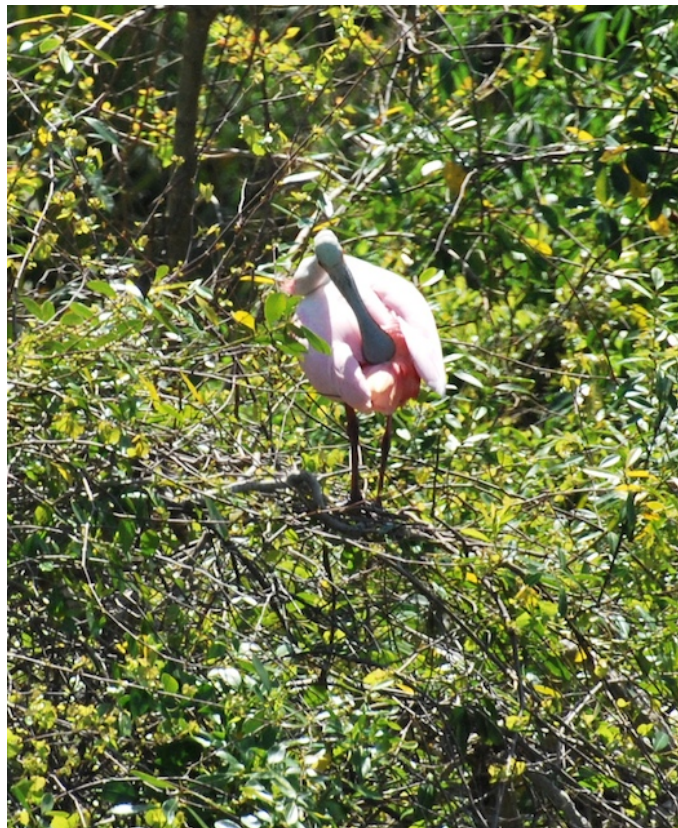


Above: Florida Water Snake.



Above: and Carolina Wren (bottom).

In the main swamp area were Anhinga, Double-crested Cormorant, Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill, Snowy and Great White Egret, Great Blue and Tricolored Heron plus around 40 large Alligators. After some careful examination of the wooded area Black Crowned Night Heron were also seen.





Above: Roseate Spoonbill (top), Tricolored Heron (middle) and Wood Stork (bottom).

Lake Toho area

Including Southport Road

A trip to Boggy Creek Airboats was very good for bird life and wild alligators but on reflection a 45 minute private tour would have allowed more chances to see many more species as the airboat captain could have been asked to seek out bird species in particular. The 30 minute trip undertaken and the area immediately around the boat launch gave Bald Eagle, Osprey, Sandhill Crane (nesting out in the marsh), Royal Tern, Great Blue Heron, Tree Swallow, Red-winged Blackbirds, Savannah Sparrow and a 12 foot long Alligator!



Above: Bald Eagle (top), Red-winged Blackbird (bottom).



Above: Alligator.

Sadly I couldn't spend much time on the approach road to Bogey Creek but saw a couple of unidentified hawks plus Wood Stork, Wild Turkey, Red Shouldered Hawk, Red Tailed Hawk and unidentified Woodpecker species. The couple of miles from the main road to the airboats is well worth careful examination.

Clearwater area

Including Dunedin

A trip to the west coast was undertaken via the Sunshine Skyway Bridge a bit of a detour but worth it for the spectacular nine-kilometer drive over what has been rated the world's third best bridge! Also from the bridge itself were Brown Pelicans fishing, Osprey, a quick sighting of three dolphin and a very frustratingly brief view of a Frigate Bird, I hadn't previously appreciated just how big a Frigate Bird would appear in flight. Again I was unable to explore the various beach side car parks and pull in spots alongside the approach roads to the north of the bridge, which would have yielded more species or at least better views.



Above: Laughing Gull



Above: Laughing Gull (top), Brown Pelican (middle) and Ring-billed Gull (bottom).

The Clearwater beach area itself gave Laughing Gull, close up views of Brown Pelican's from the pier, American Herring Gull, Ring-billed Gulls, Ruddy Turnstone, Double-crested Cormorant, Fish Crow and various parakeet species.



Above: Blue Jay (top) and Osprey (middle).



Above: Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.

Leaving Clearwater by the I19 north the stretch of coastal road just before Dunedin town had at least ten active Osprey nests, some on artificial platforms and some in trees. I missed the shot of the trip when an Osprey carrying a fish as long as the Osprey itself flew in low from the sea just as my memory card reached capacity. There is a very pleasant memorial park at the Best Western yacht harbour just prior to Dunedin's main street (handy shopping for non birding partners) and whilst the children played on the park, Blue Jay and Yellow-crowned Night Heron were seen (the latter setting up a new colony in the trees over the play area). Out on the water front was a bird house being used by a colony of an unidentified Blackbird type species, without binoculars I couldn't get a good view.

I believe further north on the I19 is Honeymoon Island and a birding route from which Bald Eagles can be seen plus many more waders and coastal species.

Conclusions

There are plenty of opportunities to mix a family vacation in Florida with some casual birding, especially if you choose some of the attractions to visit on non-park days with care: for example Gatorland is a really well thought out attraction for the non birders, so there were no complaints about fifteen minutes in the rookery!

Other locations I didn't get to visit but which could have been very useful were the areas around the space coast, particularly Merritt Island and Black Point Drive, plus the Cypress Lake and Lakeland areas.

I'd recommend taking binoculars for non park days, keeping your eyes to the skies at all times, even when in the car. I saw Swallow-tailed Kite over the 417, Sandhill Cranes with a pair of new chicks at a Shell garage and Ospreys and Vultures all along the I4. The Peterson guide I borrowed was excellent – the Smithsonian Guide to "Birds of Florida" was so bad I returned it to the vendor – photos of captive birds, some that looked like museum specimens and appalling colour reproduction.



Above: Sandhill Crane

My last non birding tip would be fly into Tampa not Orlando – not sure the birds are any better along the road from the airport but to fly Manchester to Tampa on the same day, with the same first leg to Philadelphia, was 40% of the cost of flying to Orlando.

Peter Welch, June 2010

www.manchesterbirding.com