

News from the Everglades

A Weekly Update from Everglades Imagery

May 1, 2005

The Experience

This past week was one of the best birding weeks I have ever experienced. Starting early Monday morning I headed down to Key West by way of Key Largo and Card Sound Road where I did some birding. By the time I met up with the group headed to the Dry Tortugas I had already found three lifebirds and had seen over 60 species of birds. The next morning we left port very early and headed to the Dry Tortugas. On the way over we looked for seabirds, also known as pelagic birds, but did not find anything that was out of the ordinary. We arrived at Dry Tortugas National Park early afternoon and made a stop at Hospital Key to see the nesting Masked Boobies. From there we headed into the fort to do some birding.

The thing that makes the Dry Tortugas such an attraction to birders is the chance of a fall out. Each spring, millions of songbirds fly north from Central and South America to their breeding grounds in the United States and Canada. If these birds run into a cold front while they are flying they will often seek shelter on dry land, also known as a fall out. As birds are traveling from the Caribbean to the United States, the Dry Tortugas are one of the few places where there is land available and even a small bit of fresh water. If conditions are just right, the number of birds and the diversity of species can be extremely high. Thursday morning provided just those conditions and the birding was phenomenal. Hundreds of birds descended onto the fort and nearly every bush or tree was full of birds. I had never witnessed a fallout of this magnitude and thoroughly enjoyed the birding despite the heavy rain in the morning.

The next day, many of the birds had left but there were still a fair amount around. We headed back to Key West midmorning and did not find too many pelagic species on the way back. Most of the group spent a couple hours searching for a Western Spindalis, a rare Caribbean vagrant, at the Key West Botanical Gardens but we were unsuccessful. After that I headed back home, arriving at my place late Thursday evening. It was a truly magnificent experience. While it did not have a direct connection to my Everglades project, it is something I have always wanted to do and this was a perfect opportunity for me to go.

I have included a number of images this week from the trip. Photography at the Tortugas was much more difficult than I had hoped, but I still was pleased to walk away with a few images. My favorites have been posted on my weblog from last week but I think these images speak to different aspects of the park.

The Photos



Brown Booby – Open Ocean, Dry Tortugas National Park

The Brown Booby, as well as other species in the Booby family, is a pelagic bird that spends much of its life over open ocean. They are easily spotted resting on some of the old weather towers located between Key West and the Dry Tortugas.



Masked Booby – Hospital Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

Masked Boobies have nested annually on Hospital Key for a number of years. Hospital Key is not much more than a large sandbar that is permanently above water. At one point the island was home to the hospital that serviced Fort Jefferson but today the only thing on the key is the colony of birds. The odd green color on the underside of this white bird is caused by light reflecting off the surface of the water. It creates a weird color but at the same time hints at the birds habitat, warm tropical waters.



Juvenile Magnificent Frigatebird – Long Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

The only place in the United States where Magnificent Frigatebirds nest is on Long Key, adjacent to Garden Key and Ft. Jefferson. The birds are present year round as the birds grow slowly taking many months to reach adulthood. This bird is a juvenile and was perched on one of the channel markers until we drove by in the boat.



Lighthouse at Ft. Jefferson – Garden Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

The Dry Tortugas boasts two different lighthouses. This one is found in a corner of Ft. Jefferson while the other is located on nearby Loggerhead Key. I am not sure about the one on Loggerhead but this light still functions properly.



Magnolia Warbler at Fountain – Fountain in Ft. Jefferson, Dry Tortugas National Park

Birds come to the Dry Tortugas for a variety of reasons. Freshwater is one of the most important. This small fountain is one of the most popular birding attractions on the island. It is the only source of fresh water on the island for the birds (but is not fit for human consumption) and the birds flock to it. A number of benches are set up around the fountain and trees to allow some of the most relaxing birding around. We witnessed a large variety of birds coming in to drink and bathe. This stunning male Magnolia Warbler spent almost a minute drinking and bathing before flying off to search for food in the nearby trees.



Chestnut-sided Warbler – Garden Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

Chestnut-sided Warblers are not very common in Florida and we were lucky to see at least two while we were at the fort. This female is perched in a seagrape tree that is in full bloom.



Yellow Warbler – Garden Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

This Yellow Warbler perched nicely on a branch as it was working its way down to the fountain. I was hesitant about the light background at first but it is now one of my favorite images from the trip.



Female Common Yellowthroat – Garden Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

This female Common Yellowthroat was perched in a nearby Silver Buttonwood as it was searching for bugs. Insect populations on the island are very small resulting in the deaths of a many birds who can not find sufficient food to allow them to complete the rest of their journey to the mainland and up the coast.



Nighthawk – Garden Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

Nighthawks are usually seen flying over fields at dusk while they are searching for insects. We found several individuals perched in trees throughout the fort. These birds are most likely Common Nighthawks but an identical species, the Antillean Nighthawk, is occasionally found on the island and regularly in the Keys. These birds can only be distinguished by flight call and none of these birds ever called, even when they were accidentally flushed.



Brown Noddy – Bush Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

Nearby Bush Key is home to a large tern colony. Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies nest there in the tens of thousands. The colony is off limits to the public during the nesting season, but I was fortunate to have the opportunity to accompany Sonny Bass, the park biologist, into the colony while they were doing some monitoring. I was able to photograph Noddies on nests and Sooties with almost full-sized chicks. The images of the Noddies were my favorite so I included them here.



Brown Noddy – Bush Key, Dry Tortugas National Park

I loved the contrast of the Brown Noddy's face so I tried to capture a tight portrait. These birds were virtually undisturbed by our presence and I was only a matter of a few feet from this bird. It was a much different experience than working in the wading bird colony at Alley North.

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