

Florida, winter 2013-14

Contributed by Jos
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Covering all the classic sites in southern Florida, this tour covered a total of about 4030 km all in the comfort of a rental car and staying in a range of accommodations from camping in the Everglades and Lake Kissimmee to a rather luxurious hotel on Fort Meyers Beach. Weather throughout was basically excellent, hovering mostly around 28-30 C (80-85 F) and sunny most of the time. One day only was marred by light rain, with a second seeing mist and rain at dawn, later to clear to another bright sunny day.

Daily Log. 18 December - Trans-Atlantic. A long day indeed, not least due to a terminal technical failure on the trans-Atlantic flight as we flew over the frozen wastes of Nova Scotia. Cue, one unscheduled stop in Boston! Two hours on the ground turned into four, then crept to six. Eventually another plane was found and into the air we went again, finally touching down in the delicious warmth of Miami close to 1 a.m. local time, rather many hours after leaving Eastern Europe! After picking up a rental car, we motored down to Florida City, home for the night a rather nice motel. No birds seen during the day! 19 December - Everglades. Having barely been in bed for four hours, and slightly warped by the time difference, we were up at the crack of dawn to begin the birding adventures. Staggered out into the parking lot, palm trees plentiful, a warm sun just rising. European Starlings, two Common Mynas, a little flock of Monk Parakeets and a couple of House Sparrows hardly classic American birding to kick things off! Just twenty minutes to the west of Florida City however lay the entrance to the legendary Everglades, a vast wetland of saw grass and prairie, 20,000 square kilometres of pristine habitat full of birds, alligators and others critters to delight. So scoffing down breakfast and chucking coffee into a thermos, off we went. A short drive through agricultural areas, Northern Mockingbirds, American Kestrels and umpteen Boat-tailed Grackles on roadside wires, waves of White Ibis and Cattle Egrets winging over, and then we were there. Tricoloured Herons and Great Egrets in the first marshes, a wave of Yellow-rumped Warblers in trees adjacent to the visitor centre. Having paid to enter, our first port of call was the Anhinga Trail, a short trail that led along an embankment, then circled on a boardwalk through the wetlands. A bunch of Red-shouldered Hawks on bushes just before we arrived, then an enormous flock of Black Vultures waiting to ambush us as we entered the parking lot! Dozens of them, and ambush is the right word, as I exited the car, hordes of them lolloped over, immediately forming a circle penning us in, with others plonking down on the car roof! I am far too skinny to be viewed as potential dinner, na these vultures had the actual car in their sights! Signposts warned of the danger - these vultures were the hoodlums of the 'hood', wanton damage their thing. Apparently they have taken a like to windscreen wipers and rubber window trims! Thoughtfully the national park authorities leave a big box of tarps for visitors to cover their cars, so ten minutes later, car now wrapped up like an early Christmas present, we were ready to begin exploration. And fantastic it was. Almost needing a nudge to get them out of the way, Anhingas, Great Blue Herons and Black Vultures littered the path, diminutive Green Herons hunted from lily pads and Pied-billed Grebes bobbed on open patches. Overhead, a Short-tailed Hawk rose on the developing thermals, trillions of Black and Turkey Vultures now also circling. One Common Yellowthroat popped out, so too a little flock of Blue-grey Gnatcatchers. Double-crested Cormorants, White Ibis, Common Gallinules and Belted Kingfisher also present. An hour or so later, many photographs already taken, it was time to continue, our ultimate destination the Flamingo campsite on Florida Bay. Many stops on route - Alligators lazing on the grassy sidewalks, Ospreys fairly common, numerous herons and egrets of assorted types, but the best stop was at Mahogany Hammock. The hammocks in the Everglades are small islands of tropical forest within the sea of grasses, typically either dominated by palms or hardwoods. Mahogany Hammock contains the largest mahogany tree in the United States and the trail that meanders around the hammock is a delight, the dense vegetation and drift of butterflies suggestive of a wild jungle rather than isolated patch. In winter many of these hammocks harbour flocks of warblers and it was these that I hoped to find. Twenty minutes of slowly working the habitat, then bingo! On branches dripping with epiphytes, a rapidly moving mixed flock ...Blue-grey Gnatcatchers leading the way, a dozen or Yellow-rumped Warblers, then a flash of colour as a dazzling Prairie Warbler hopped into view, then a cracking Northern Parula (my first since one on the Isles of Scilly in 1985!). Birds flitting each and every way, then a real jewel appeared from nowhere, one splendid Black-throated Green Warbler. Two Blue-headed Vireos next, then creeping up the branches like humbugs on legs, a superb Black-and-White Warbler, another following shortly after. Phew, that was a moment of excitement, and then the branches began to fall silent, the flock moving off into the depths of the hammock. By now early afternoon and a splendid 29 C, it was time to get down to Flamingo to erect the tents. A few stops on route added an enormous flock of about 600 Tree Swallows, as well as assorted ducks such as Blue-winged Teal and Ruddy Duck and, as we pulled into the campsite, an American Kestrel adorned a dead tree, a Red-shouldered Hawk perched on the next along. Up went the tents, past stalked an immature Yellow-crowned Night Heron, clearly not aware of its usual nocturnal status. A bit of lazing around, watching Willets and Marbled Godwits on the adjacent mudflats, then quickly popped over to the nearby marina. Sometimes a locality for West Indian Manatee, I was quietly happy that none were present on this day (hoping to save them for a very special locality later in the trip), but two American Crocodiles cruising the waterways just off the key were most welcome! With the tide on the rise, it was then time to plonk myself on a conveniently placed bench overlooking Florida Bay. Amongst the hordes, hundreds of Willets and White Ibis, many dozens of Little Blue Herons, one Roseate Spoonbill and, a bird I had hoped to encounter, one Reddish Egret prancing around in the shallows. Far more impressive however was a sandbank just in front of me - as the tide pushed, so it filled up: flocks of Laughing Gulls at one end, a mass of American White Pelicans in the middle, a few Brown Pelicans in their midst, but choc'a'bloc up the other end, at least 400 Black Skimmers, very nice indeed. Even more so, when the tide periodically pushed them into the air, a mass swirl of black and white as they wheeled round to resettle. Ever-present ospreys completed the picture and as sunset began to approach, I departed for a quick look for Lesser Nighthawks around Eco Pond. None seen, the best

birds there being two American Avocets ...accompanied by rather many mosquitos. And with that, end of day one, one quite contented observer clambered into his tent, next morning I had ideas to be up pre-dawn. 20 December - Everglades. Of all the specialities in Florida, Mangrove Cuckoo is probably the hardest. A rare inhabitant of dense mangrove swamps, the bird is all the harder in the winter months when the bird does not call and generally creeps about in the inaccessible interiors of the mangroves. Nevertheless, at least one attempt was in order, so with a little too much enthusiasm, an hour before dawn saw me sitting in the car at the beginning of the Snake Bight Trail, the dark hole of the trail vanishing off into the interior of the mangroves. With no hope of actually seeing any birds so early and a splendid collection of mosquitoes waiting for an early breakfast, I slurped down my coffee with relish and waited a while. Hints of dawn began to flood the sky, stirrings of life began in the mangrove, time to begin my walk. In the mangrove interior, dark and dank, a warm musky feel to the air, a few bird calls emanating from the depths, barely a bird seen from the first half hour or so. Two Green Herons peering into a channel, Northern Cardinals adding colour, six Northern Waterthrushes on the trail. Delicate long-winged butterflies fluttered as dabbled sunlight filtered through, then the distinctive call led me to a Great Crested Flycatcher. Beyond, a mixed flock produced a bunch of Yellow-rumped Warblers, plus a couple of White-eyed Vireos, one Prairie Warbler, two Northern Parulas and a Black-and-White Warbler, a nice little collection. And then, a pair of White-crowned Pigeons in the canopy, another of Florida's specialities. A little further along, the mangrove opened out and Florida Bay appeared in front. Hopes of a nice vista were dashed by mangroves growing across the mudflats, but still a few Little Blue Herons could be seen, along with both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, a stack of Turkey Vultures and a Palm Warbler feeding on the mud next to the mangroves. The walk back to the car was rather more rapid, Northern Waterthrushes seen again, but predictably no Mangrove Cuckoos. Rely need to return in spring for this one! Back at the campsite, Eastern Phoebes were new to the trip list, and over another coffee, a few other birds also seen - Northern Mockingbird, Fish Crow, Red-shouldered Hawk and oodles of vultures prancing about. Decided to shift the tent to another spot within the campsite, a Red-shouldered Hawk on the grass the new neighbour, and then headed off for a tour of a few of the pools within the southern sector of the Everglades National Park. Paurotis Pond, generally famous for its breeding concentrations of Wood Storks and other long-legged birds, was basically devoid of any birds (breeding had yet to begin), but Mrazak Pond and Nine-mile Pond were far better, not only sporting a few very large Alligators, but also decent concentrations of waterfowl, including at least 800 American Coots, about 150 Green-winged Teals, 60 Ring-necked Ducks, 25 Lesser Scaups and a couple of Redheads. Ended the day off back at the Flamingo Marina - Ospreys atop nests, Black Skimmers again on the sandbanks, one Northern Harrier passing by. And, last bird of the day, viewed by torchlight, one Yellow-crowned Night Heron stalking the campsite. 21 December - Shark Valley. Shark Valley, two hours north of Flamingo by road, the northernmost extreme of the Everglades National Park. Leaving at an unearthly hour, and picking a Short-eared Owl en route, I was at the entrance to Shark Valley just before the sun rose. Pity the gates were not going to open until 8.00 a.m.! However, no big deal, parking up in a car park opposite, I soon had two of my main targets in my sights - a splendid male Snail Kite on a bush just yonder and, yodelling like cats on steroids, two rather stunning Limpkins in a line of bushes aside a canal. What a super vista it was - these two charismatic species to a backdrop of a gentle mist hanging over the marshes, an orange sun rising and squadrons of herons, egrets and ibises cutting across the sky. Boat-tailed Grackles gathered in bunches, a Belted Kingfisher peered down from overhead wires. Impatient for the entrance to open, and moreover keen not to waste the best hour of the day, I abandoned my chum in charge of the car and proceeded on foot, deciding to walk the seven-mile trail that cuts across the marshes and seas of grass. Absolutely phenomenal it was, following a channel most of the way and absolutely packed with birds. Two-a-penny Anhingas, Great Blue Herons, Little Blue Herons, Tricoloured Herons, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Double-crested Cormorants ... not little dots vanishing off in the distance, but virtually underfoot, most not even bothering to waddle out of the way! In a bush, four Black-crowned Night Herons at roost, overhead majestic Wood Storks soaring, what a nice way to start the day. As the heat began to build, on I walked, a couple of Green Herons spotted, then the first of three American Bitterns, each rising from pools aside the track. Atop a wooded island, a gaggle of Wood Storks sat, still clearly waiting to rise from roost. From afar, the calls of Sandhill Cranes began to echo. By 10 a.m., with the temperature climbing towards its day high of 31 C (88 F), I decided I was not going to complete the full hike, i.e. seven miles each way, so did an about turn and began the wander back. Grey Catbirds and Palm Warblers were still active in shrubbery, another four Limpkins shuffled about on bushtops, but most impressive on the walk back were the Alligators! Whereas the walk out in the cooler conditions of early morning had merely resulted on a few snouts rising from the waters, the big beasts were now out and sunbathing ...dozens of them and right on the very track that I and other tourists were now walking along. Great fat things some of them, toothy grins and beady eyes to watch as you edged past them, no sweat to get within a metre without a flinch from them. Also found three Eastern Glass Lizards, harmless snake-like beasts. Arrived back at the entrance about midday, kettles of Turkey Vultures hanging in the sky overhead, along with a couple of Ospreys and Red-shouldered Hawks. One American Purple Gallinule ambling along, quite a few dozen turtles out sunning, Florida Softshell Turtles and Peninsula Cooters I believe. Refinding chum and car, it was then a slow drive back to Flamingo, a stop in Florida City's McDonalds my concession to sampling the local cuisine, Common Grackles in the car park outside perhaps more enthusiastic for the offerings than me. Arrived back in the campsite late in the day, one Red-shouldered Hawk on the grass, a surprise Broad-winged Hawk in woodland nearby. Did a little night drive in search of nighthawks or owls, failed to find any. 22 December - Lake Kissimmee. 5.00 a.m. departure from the Everglades National Park, destination the rich pastures east of Lake Kissimmee. If all went to plan, this single destination could produce more of my target birds than any other single locality, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Crested Caracara and Whooping Crane all most prominent. With an early start, I was already cruising north through the Everglades agricultural areas as dawn broke, suitably impressed that even this rather monotonous landscape was pretty jam-packed with birds - herons and egrets of every variety, Belted Kingfishers at regular intervals, a Merlin spooking stuff on one occasion, plus my first Crested

Caracara of the trip, a mighty bird indeed and one Yellow-crowned Night Heron. Also, in one rather bog-infested area, three Marsh Rabbits on the roadside verge and, in a more wooded zone, a White-tailed Deer. Arriving at Lake Kissimmee, it was an absolute delight - unbroken sunshine again, temperatures sitting at about 28 C and stacks of birds all around in a most picturesque setting. Chucked up the tent, then sat back to admire the surroundings ...four Bald Eagles at various points, oodles of Turkey Vultures yet again, a mixed bunch of waterbirds just beyond the tent, Forster's Terns, Anhingas, Pied-billed Grebes and a vagrant Long-billed Curlew amongst the haul, and piling down for scraps of food 'accidentally' dropped, masses of Boat-tailed Grackles. Couldn't be doing with relaxing too long however ...two important birds awaited discovery in the nearby pastures and woodlands! Top of the list was Whooping Crane, one of North America's most critically endangered birds. With the remaining population limited to a handful of highly-vulnerable breeding pairs migrating between Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada and coastal districts of Texas, reintroduction projects were established with the goal of boosting the long-term prospects of the species. One of these schemes involved the establishment of a non-migratory population in central Florida and it was birds of this group that I was hoping to find. Scanning pastures along the famous Joe Overstreet Road, I was soon seeing Sandhill Cranes, a pair here, a pair there, then an absolutely fabulous flock of about 510. I was pretty confident I would find my Whooping Crane with these birds, but scan as I might, not a sign amongst them! One Crested Caracara sitting in a field, scattered flocks of Killdeers, quite a few Glossy Ibises. Up and down the length of the road I went, Loggerhead Shrikes and Eastern Phoebees on roadside wires, a splendid flock of about 600 Tree Swallows hawking over meadows, but no big white cranes. Giving up on Joe Overstreet, I then decided to venture a little further north ...and almost immediately hit the jackpot. Just a mile or so along the road, amongst cattle quietly grazing, a big white bird was stalking. Stopped the car, slung up the binoculars, and there he was, one majestic Whooping Crane plodding along. Not far from a side road, I realigned the car and sat and waited, the gentle giant slowing approaching, three Sandhill Cranes nearby for nice comparison. Well, that was good. Next stop, the pine flatlands of the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area. Although a designated hunting area, and late-December being at the heart of the hunting season for boars and deer, the area remains open for birders ... though the lady at the entrance did seriously advise that I both remained on the main tracks and wore florescent orange rather than my drab tee-short. So, in I went, the lure of potential Red-cockaded Woodpeckers overcoming my slight reservations that I might be mistaken for something worthy of shooting! Red-cockaded Woodpecker is another endangered bird, the shrinking populations limited to open pine forests in the south-east of the US, where the birds live in highly-dispersed family groups, each group highly territorial and ranging over quite large ranges. It is a bit like looking for needle in a haystack, but with one saving grace - the birds tend to return to roost each evening in favoured nesting holes, and these have largely been marked by white rings to protect them against cutting, etc. So, spot the white-ringed tree, wait till dusk and bingo, you get your bird. Well, not quite! Every tree that has ever been used by the woodpeckers has been ringed, and it was immediately apparent that these woodpeckers had bored many holes in many trees over the years ...there were white-ringed trees everywhere! Ah well, back to the time-honoured technique of putting in the legwork and hoping for a result! Soon forgot about the requirement to stay on tracks and had a most enjoyable afternoon, a dozen or so Eastern Bluebirds in sunny glades, flocks of American Robins passing over, Pine Warblers fairly common and, after much searching, two Brown-headed Nuthatches, a very much desired bird indeed. Also, added one Cooper's Hawk, found a roosting Great Grey Owl and, despite encountering a few hunters, didn't manage to get myself shot. On the woodpecker front however, the best I could do was one Downy Woodpecker. Sunset came, no Red-cockaded Woodpeckers appeared anywhere near any of the white-ringed trees that I was near. Back at camp, a Raccoon strolled past the tent, one Great Grey Owl called somewhere in the dark. 23 December - Lake Kissimmee. If I had been a tad apprehensive wandering around in hunter-infested forests the day before, doing so in a mist-clad pre-dawn was downright spooky! As light of sorts began to reveal the outlines of pines, so too birds began to appear - roving flocks of Pine Warblers, American Robins emerging from roost, scolding House Wrens, a Swamp Sparrow sitting atop damp scrub. And so to the continuing search for Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Walking great arcs of the forest, I stuck to tracks as much as possible, but detoured widely to track down distant drilling and hammering that might lead me to my quarry. Woodpecker tally started to rise quite nicely ...six Red-bellied Woodpeckers, one Downy Woodpecker and no less than eight Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers! Nice birds all, but no sign of the target bird. By 10.30 a.m., with the sun again in full charge and another hot day developing, things were beginning to quieten down, I had encountered an Eastern Towhee, seen a Common Yellowthroat and bumped into quite a few Eastern Bluebirds, but the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers certainly seemed rather elusive. Somewhere I had read that Red-cockaded Woodpeckers peck out little holes around active nest/roost holes to promote a flow of resin down the trees, probably as a defence mechanism against snakes and the like. Examining umpteen white-ringed trees, I eventually settled on two that seemed to have relatively fresh resin flowsRed-cockaded Woodpeckers rarely spend the day anywhere near active roost sites, so, with these two holes only about a kilometre apart, I decided it might be a good idea to depart and return in the evening, focussing on this area. Failed to relocate the Whooping Crane of the day before, but quickly found the big Sandhill Crane flock again, plus another Crested Caracara, a couple of Eastern Meadowlarks and a bunch of Wild Turkeys ambling along. Back at the campsite, under the pretence a couple of hours of relaxation, two Snail Kites were watched quartering the marsh, plucking giant Apple Snails from the vegetation, plonking down on stumps to devour them. Bald Eagles too, plus Red-shouldered Hawk and waterbirds, including Blue-winged Teal and assorted herons. Mid-afternoon edged towards evening, time for another attempt on the Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, these blighters were becoming an obsession! One Gopher Tortoise on route and then back I was, walking through the open pines of the Wildlife Management Area. Nothing till about half an hour before dusk, then 50 metres short of one of my resin-lined roost holes, a sudden flit of a bird in a tall pine adjacent. Up with the binoculars and there, playing peep-po behind a twisted branch high in the tree, one Red-cockaded Woodpecker! And then, one tree across, another! But these were woodpeckers on a mission - no hanging about, they were hurtling through the forest, zipping from tree to tree,

barely pausing to give each more than a passing peck. All too soon, I struggling to keep up, the last I noted was of them flying off in the general direction in the other resin-lined tree I had noted during the day. When I finally arrived, not a sign of either bird. I sat and scanned, nothing. Where had they gone? Then a thought occurred to me, maybe they had gone straight into their roost holes. Realigning I watched with care the hole, continuing to scan all around, and then, just for a brief second, a black and white face appeared at the hole, the birds were indeed already inside! Wow, they fly in from feeding areas distant and then vanish inside immediately. But, I had succeeded, not only finding the birds, but better still, I knew where they were sleeping, so I would get another crack at the whip at dawn next day! With this, and the sun about to go down, I returned to camp, five White-tailed Deer in meadows, a few last Savannah Sparrows bunching up on roadside wires. 24 December - Lake Kissimmee-Cocoa Beach Jeepers, Red-cockaded Woodpeckers wake up late! With an unexpected and rather heavy shower coinciding with dawn, maybe it was just a dislike of rain that was keeping them snug within the depths of the tree. Either way, an hour after light broke, with my eyes glued to the roost hole, not a peek of the birds had been seen ...I began to worry that they had actually flown the coop pre-dawn and slunk off into the forest somewhere. One hour and twenty minutes past dawn, a blur of movement and, in the blink of an eye, out shot out a Red-cockaded Woodpecker, vanishing immediately into the gloom of forest beyond. Rats, an hour and a half of rain, just for that, I was disappointed! But then, from the hole, a small beak, then a head ...Red-cockaded Woodpecker number two had woken up! And this was a far more cooperative bird, flitting out and landing on the pine adjacent, fluffing out its feathers for a while, having a little peck and then slowly edging up the trees. Nice views indeed. And then off it went, launching into the air and taking off in the same general direction as the first bird, gone for good. I have to conclude these birds do need a certain amount of effort to see them, finding them in the forests certainly requires some luck, staking out roost holes doesn't guarantee prolonged views. I considered myself lucky, and with that departed. Back at camp, with the sun now beginning to break through, I took a short walk along Lake Kissimmee, loads of White Ibis et al, plus a second pair of Snail Kites and a splendid eight Bald Eagles. I then packed up the tents to begin the drive to our next destination, the Atlantic coast of central Florida. Managed to relocate the Whooping Crane as we exited the Kissimmee area, but otherwise had a fairly uneventful drive across to the coast. One Eastern Cottontail en route, as well as a few Wild Turkeys and the usual herons and egrets. Rented a fairly luxurious room on Cocoa Beach, checking in for three nights and then immediately having a quick saunter across to the adjacent beach. Brown Pelicans drifting up and down, lots of Ring-billed Gulls. With my interest in beaches tending to wain after about ten minutes, I then decided to backtrack over the Banana River and find the Viera Wetlands, a site I had not initially planned to visit. A water-treatment site, now developed into a nature reserve with trails and hides, Viera turned out to be an excellent little addition to my itinerary, not only sporting a good bunch of assorted ducks, including my first Mottled Ducks and Hooded Mergansers of the trip, but also a good selection of other species including a Green Heron and a fabulous pair of Limpkins feeding four little fluffy-ball chicks, dead cute! Moderately small in size, the Viera wetlands would have made for a pleasant hour or so in themselves, but leaving the site, I took a small track to the left and found an even greater reward - two large settling pools, both shallow and fringed by expanses of exposed mud. And upon this, great hordes of birds! Sandhill Cranes, American White Pelicans, Green-winged Teals by the hundred, Blue-winged Teals in the dozens and, best of the lot, masses of waders, assorted flocks zipping back and fro across the mud. Foolishly I had left my telescope back at the hotel, but using the car as cover, I was able to park close to the birds and enjoy the spectacle - an absolute minimum of 350 Least Sandpipers, 150 Short-billed Dowitchers, 40 or so Dunlins, a couple of dozen Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and, scattered across, an occasional Black-bellied Plover here and there. With my scope, I was pretty sure I might have been able to pick out a Long-billed Dowitcher from the many dowitchers largely sleeping. Ah, well, I vowed to return. Anyhow, add the only Bonaparte's Gull of my trip, a few Forster's Terns and ever greater numbers of Sandhill Cranes dropping into roost, and it certainly was a nice way to celebrate Christmas Eve! 25 December - Merritt Island. With Florida boasting just a single endemic species, i.e. Florida Scrub Jay, it seemed appropriate to save it for Christmas Day. So it was, an hour before dawn, through the deserted streets of Cocoa Beach I began my drive, destination the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Timed it just perfect, crossing the Indian River into the reserve as light began to flood across the wetlands. Picking up a reserve map at the entrance, my first part of call was the excellent Blackpoint Wildlife Drive, a seven-mile auto route that meanders around a mosaic of habitats, the most productive of which were shallow impoundments, some tidal, some not. These were generally full of birds - heron cocktails on many, ducks on some, waders on others, it certainly made for a good start to the day. Amongst the many highlights, numerous Snowy Egrets, Great Egrets and Great Blue Herons, plentiful Tricoloured Herons and Little Blue Herons, four Reddish Egrets, a flock of about a thousand mixed Blue-winged Teals and Northern Pintails, an assortment of waders including American Avocets and both yellowlegs and, on the non-bird front, a splendid River Otter and quite a few Feral Hogs. Also Belted Kingfishers, a couple of Bald Eagles, loads of Pied-billed Grebes and a few Caspian Terns. With Blackpoint finished, thoughts began to turn to the Florida Scrub Jay. To the impressive backdrop of Kennedy Space Centre, I began my search with a slow drive along the Kennedy Parkway, ideal habitat throughout, but no birds on this occasion. No worries, I had the whole day, so turned towards Playalinda Beach to check the scrub along this road. Hardly need to check anything - parking the car in the ranger station behind the toll booth, all too soon a whole flock of Florida Scrub Jays were bouncing towards me over the lawn! What little crackers they were, a lively flock of eight birds, hopping about, jumping up onto posts and generally showing off most generously. Spent a good half hour with these birds, stopping by a little later for second helpings. With photographs not exactly challenging to obtain, I then decided to proceed down to the beach. Though warm and sunny, a wicked onshore wind had been blowing for much of the day, Merritt Island itself largely sheltered by the dunes, but stepping atop those dunes, the full strength was soon apparent. Hmm, maybe a seawatch might be productive I thought, at least it should notch up a Gannet or two! So, perching down on a convenient bench, Brown Pelicans and Royal Terns adjacent, a most pleasant couple of hours idled by. Seawatching off the Atlantic coast of Florida is rarely a productive pastime, but with the onshore winds my little effort was well-rewarded - not

only were Gannets passing in reasonably numbers (at least 60), but I also scored a few less expected additions, the best being three flocks of Black Scoters (a total of 30 birds), five quite superb Pomarine Jaegers at close range and, most unexpected of all, a single Sooty Shearwater cruising south! Also found three Common Loons and a Horned Grebe, all sitting on the sea. From the coast, now mid-afternoon, I then looped along Bio Lab Road - several large Alligators, a few Roseate Spoonbills and a Bald Eagle - and walked the Scrub Trail, the latter producing a single Northern Flicker, but nothing else. At this point, I did consider a return to base, but opted instead for a quick retrace of all localities visited during the day and, as motoring towards the exit, made a spur of the moment decision to have a look at Peacocks Pocket Road, a dead end track leading to the Indian River. What a good decision this was ...not only a smart Sora Rail shuffling along the roadside creek and both American Bittern and Green Heron in the same ditch, but an absolutely corking Bobcat crossing the road midway along. What an excellent Christmas present! And with that I did depart, a quick scan of the Indian River adding a few waders and a couple more Black Scoters, and then back to Cocoa Beach I went. Christmas Day over, Florida Scrub Jay and Bobcat in the bag. 26 December - Merritt Island. Day Two at the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. After a quick scoot round the Blackpoint Wildlife Drive, I had decided to spend this day focussing on the woodland hammocks and then later on the tidal flats on the Indian River. Things had already begun well with a flock of five Wood Storks in a ditch on route up from Cocoa Beach, and another on the Wildlife Drive. The birding was about to get even better however when I ventured along the Peacocks Pocket Road again, primarily to see if lightning might strike twice with the Bobcat. No feline action, but almost immediately encountered a most impressive roving flock of passerines in the broken woodland that edges the initial parts of the road. Three Cedar Waxwings perched on exposed snags, two Pileated Woodpeckers thumping away at stumps, a few Ruby-crowned Kinglets and, a positive feast for the eyes, an amazing 80 or so Yellow-rumped Warblers buzzing through the bushes, truly a sight to behold, even more so when a right stunning Yellow-throated Warbler appeared in their midst! Also American Robins, Blue-Grey Gnatcatchers and Downy Woodpecker. After that little haul, I decided to try my luck in the tropical lushness of Palm Hammock, another wooded island seemingly plonked in Florida from the depths of the South American rainforests. Not terribly many birds seen, but a very nice walk regardless - amongst the highlights, another flock of 40 or so Yellow-rumped Warblers, a pair of Tufted Titmice, two White-eyed Vireos, three Carolina Wrens and several Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. Had ideas of leaving early enough to pop back to the Viera Wetlands, but before doing so, I made the best of a perfect tide to work Gator Creek Road and the causeway over the Indian River. Superb stuff all in all, a flock of 800 Lesser Scaups, ten Black Scoters, six more Wood Storks and a fair selection of waders, including at least 800 Dunlins and 400 Least Sandpipers, plus Red Knot, American Avocet, Black-bellied Plover, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Willet and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs all present in varying numbers.

Yup, Merritt Island had been good, but I was now eager to get back to the waders on the settling pools at the Viera Wetlands. The idea was to try and find a Long-billed Dowitcher amongst the Short-billed Dowitchers, but no such luck. I did however find three Stilt Sandpipers, ample compensation indeed. Wader numbers were perhaps slightly higher than a couple of days before, so too the numbers of White Pelicans, approximately 80 now present. But, with no Long-billed Dowitcher to add to my haul, back to Cocoa Beach I went, arriving just as the sun was setting. Another productive day over. 27 December - Day of the Manatee. Essentially a day of travel, the basic plan was to shift from the Atlantic coast to the Gulf of Mexico, a direct drive of some 350 km. I however had plans to do it rather less directly by first detouring north to incorporate Blue Springs State Park into my itinerary, an extra 120 km or so. And the purpose of the detour? West Indian Manatees, not in some murky estuarine river or as noses poking up beyond mangroves somewhere, but in the crystal clear waters of the Blue Spring, surely one of the best places in the world to view these endangered aquatic mammals in all their glory. So much I had wanted to see them here in fact that I had purposely avoided one at Merritt Island and felt fortunate to miss one that swam in front of me at Flamingo in the Everglades! And so it was, another pre-dawn departure from Cocoa Beach, hitting Interstate 95 for an hour or so to reach Blue Springs as the sun rose. Or didn't rise, as the case happened to be, a rather overcast dawn it turned out to be. But the sight awaiting was simply a joy, no other tourists at such an early hour and in the tranquil waters, overhung by the deep green of lush palms and ferns, dozens and dozens of Manatees, most seemingly still in semi-slumber, gently drifting along a picturesque kilometre or so of river. With a number of viewing platforms close to the water, it was truly an eye-to-eye experience with these half-tonne giants, chubby mermaids with the faces of sad old men. Over an hour and more, slowly they began to wake, graceful aerobics in the water, younger animals rolling, larger individuals nudging and shoving. Attracted to winter in the warm waters of the spring, 172 Manatees this morning, far more than I expected, very nice they were. By 10 a.m., a steady procession of other tourists were beginning to arrive, so I decided it time to depart, first having a quick look around the adjacent St John's River and the wooded fringe. Best of the birds, one Black-and-White Warbler, one Orange-crowned Warbler, one Yellow-throated Warbler and one Baltimore Oriole. Also seen, five Tufted Titmice, a Belted Kingfisher, a Sharp-shinned Hawk and assortment of other common species. Much of the rest of the day was spent upon the highways, multi-lane roads with no sense of slower vehicles sticking to any particular lane. Result, a fairly steady crawl southbound, made slightly longer by a scrape with the fringes of Disney World and an accidental detour into downtown Tampa. Arrived at the very touristy Fort Meyers Beach just in time to join a mighty traffic jam, eventually getting to my hotel in time to watch Brown Pelicans cruising into a glorious sunset. Home for the next three nights was a decidedly upmarket hotel, way above my usual standards ...at least there was a Tropical House Gecko on the wall! 28 December - Ding Darling/Fort Meyers Beach. Duff day of the trip to some extent, sun-seeking tourists, choc'a'bloc roads and birding that hardly set the stage alight. Ah well, at least the sun was shining and the temperatures touched 28 C again. First stop, Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island, one of Florida's premier reserves on the Gulf coast, raved about in many trip reports, top spot for photographers. Have to say though, nice though it was, I found it perhaps the least productive of all the major localities on my itinerary. Heart of the reserve, and offering the best birding, a four-mile auto drive loops through a series of brackish pools, each fringed by fairly

extensive mangrove forests and with lookout points at regular intervals. One Reddish Egret, five Roseate Spoonbills, a couple of Hooded Mergansers, a dozen or so Mottled Ducks, dozens of the commoner herons, egrets and ibises ...not bad at all, but certainly the most enjoyable bird of the morning was a young Yellow-crowned Night Heron that decided to plod about just in front of me while I was sitting down on a grassy bank admiring a flock of about 120 American White Pelicans. With the sun rising high, and rather many tourists beginning to arrive, I decided I had seen everything I was likely to see, so set off to explore the rest of Sanibel Island. Wild beaches, exposed headlands, mass roosts of waders and terns, frigatebirds patrolling the beaches. Er, not exactly. The residential retreat of the wealthy, the entire coastline seems to be edged by the wooded gardens of well-to-do mansions, eateries and modest hotels, a sedate road linking all, a snail's crawl the best I could do stuck behind other tourists looking for non-existent parking. The first accessible beach I found sported early sunbathers and random deckchairs, the next was rather better. Parking at the further point the road actually goes, in a tiddly little car park that I imagine is jam-packed full by mid-morning, I took a little stroll. Lots of folk on the beach, but a quick scan with the binoculars and I was impressed to find quite a selection of birds too, a big 'black patch' some way up looking most inviting. And nice it was too, roosting down between kiddies playing on the beach, ladies taking a dip and joggers pounding along at the surf's edge, one communal roost of birds, barely blinking at the human activity all around. Sat myself down and did actually quite enjoy the spectacle - several hundred Laughing Gulls, 40 or so Royal Terns, at least 15 Sandwich Terns and, cream of the crop, a magnificent 60 Black Skimmers. Edged down onto my belly and wiggled forward, ending up lying with the flock just 10 metres or so in front, quite resplendent. Probably didn't really need to do the wiggling, occasional passing tourist didn't bother giving them a wide berth, but still the birds basically didn't care, a bit of shuffling this way or that, and that was it. Just to top it off, a pod of Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised just offshore, pirates on the wing, eight in menacing silhouette. Well that was nice, leaving Sanibel Island and returning to Fort Meyers Beach was not! With half of Florida seeming intent on squeezing into Fort Meyers, the last half dozen kilometres was a real treat ...near-stationary traffic, bored kids in the back of SUVs with feet stuffed on the seat backs in front and a manic jogger doing a comic act as he weaved in and out of the cars. Slight distractions here and there, Brown Pelicans in roadside quays, a few American White Pelicans too, one Belted Kingfisher on roadside wires, Ospreys perched like traffic police on a road island. I should have learnt my lesson, but instead I decided to round the experience off with a visit to Lover's Quay State Park. Tinker toy tram ride to reach the beach, tourists all the way along and not a single bird of any note to mitigate. Still, long suffering companions on the trip didn't seem to be complaining. In the evening, still not defeated, I decided to walk 5km of Fort Meyers Beach from Holiday Inn back towards town. I didn't really have high hopes ...but, hey ho, up popped half the birds I'd been looking for all day! Not only about 20 Magnificent Frigatebirds, another Reddish Egret and about 40 Black Skimmers, but finally a decent gathering of waders - Ruddy Turnstones, Black-bellied Plovers, Willets, Least Sandpipers, Sanderlings and, huddled in a fairly tight flock, ten Semi-palmated Plovers, three exquisite Piping Plovers and a rather splendid 40 Wilson's Plovers! Was dark by the time I finally got to my hotel. In reflection, for a duff day, it had actually been quite good. 29 December - Corkscrew Swamp/Tigertail Beach The ultimate 'almost was' experience! Corkscrew Swamp, dark primeval swamplands, the greatest expanse of bald cypress forest remaining in North America, a wetland forest habitat par excellence. Arriving in the still dark pre-dawn, I toured around awaiting the official opening at sunrise, then ventured out onto the boardwalk that loops through the forest. First visitor of the day. A hanging mist added a spook factor to the ancient forests, epiphytes draping gnarled branches, Wood Stork clipping tree tops as emerging from roost off yonder. Here however was about to be my fatal mistake, as the mist gave way to a heavy drizzle, the forest dripping at every quarter, I decided to return to my car to leave the camera behind. Ten minutes only it took, but returning to the boardwalk, another gentleman had arrived, a gentleman that strolled slightly faster than my preferred mode in such habitat ...soon, he would be far ahead. And so, as the drizzle turned into a rather heavy rain, off around a corner he went, forest to the one side, wet prairie opening on the other. With tee-shirt already decidedly damp, on I went. And then the gentleman was back, 'Er, how big are Panthers? I think there was one on the boardwalk'. And strength, he'd even got a blurry picture of the thing, indeed a Florida Panther! As far as I can gather it was just sitting on the boardwalk, then with the arrival of this first visitor, it had jumped over the handrail and slipped away into the forest! Arrgh! Panther, a.k.a. Mountain Lion, one of the hardest animals to see in all North America, if only I hadn't returned to my car! And with the rain remaining heavy for the next hour, I didn't really see much else to compensate. Two soggy Yellow-crowned Night Herons in roost, a couple of Black-and-White Warblers running up and down trunks, a little flock of Tufted Titmice. The cypress swamp however was truly impressive - magnificent trees, orchids hanging from branches overhead, pools of water lettuce, unique. After an hour in the rain, I required a chance to dry out a little, so made my way to the visitor centre to wait for drier conditions. Fortunately, soon the sun did begin to peek out, a couple of Wood Storks soaring over, a small flock of Tree Swallows too. Wandering around again, with the better weather, the nooks and crannies of the forest seemed to come alive, far more bird activity, the best of which being a single mixed flock of some 50 birds or so, Yellow-rumped Warblers most, but also another Black-and-White Warbler, a Downy Woodpecker, a couple of Carolina Wrens, several very vocal Great Crested Flycatchers and, a couple of each, both Blue-headed and White-eyed Vireos. Also encountered another large mixed flock in the open pine forest closer to the visitor centre, a pleasant mix of Pine Warblers and Yellow-rumped Warblers forming the core, but with a loose assemblage attached, the best being Piliated Woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and, a right stunner, one Prairie Warbler. Before leaving Corkscrew Swamp, there was to be one last treat - one of the reasons that I had come to the sanctuary was the knowledge that a certain colourful chap was near guaranteed at the visitor centre feeders. And so there I waited, Common Grackles and Common Ground-Dove for company, and then the female of the desired species, she a mere drab green replica. Ten minutes later, an eyeful of bold reds, purples and greens, up he flitted, one superb male Painted Bunting. Stuffing himself on the feeders, end up with four in all, two males and two females. Next up, back to the beaches. Not content with my mixed bag of results on the day before, thought I would potentially bore myself by walking the beaches on Marco Island,

Tigertail Beach to be exact. To be truthful, I actually hoped to add Snowy Plover to my Wilson's, Piping and Semi-palmated trio of the day before. First impressions at Tigertail were not good - another expanse of sand with more people than birds, cruising Magnificent Frigatebirds nice, but waders on view amounted to a grand total of two Willets! The Tigertail car park is not at the sea itself but on a small lagoon, so undeterred, I trudged round to the sea and decided to walk north, the idea being if I went far enough, I must surely find a bird or two. And indeed I did, after a kilometre I got to a patch of mangroves and beyond that, on a broad spit that separated sea and lagoon, tourist numbers were negligible and suddenly I was amongst birds, not one or two, but heaps and heaps of them. In the next hour or so, I truly enjoyed the best beach birding of the trip. Mostly roosting on shingle or feeding in the shallows of the lagoon, a very respectable 14 species of wader were noted - Willet, Sanderling and Least Sandpiper in best numbers, Ruddy Turnstones, Black-bellied Plovers, Dunlins and Western Sandpipers also prominent. For me however, the best were two American Oystercatchers (the only ones of the trip) and, all congregated on a sand ridge, a neat flock of small plovers - 25 or so Semi-palmated Plovers, 15 Wilson's Plovers, six Piping Plovers and, yippee, three Snowy Plovers. Success at last, plodding the beaches had done the trick. Also Reddish Egret here, one Belted Kingfisher and an Osprey that was unbelievably tolerant of passers-by, simply sitting atop a post as folk wandered past less than fifteen metres away! Certainly proved good for photographs. Having seen Burrowing Owls in California just a few months earlier I had not really intended to seek them out in Florida, but remembering reports of them in residential areas on Marco Island, it seemed a shame not to do a little 'kerb-crawling' in the area. From Tigertail Beach, after a couple of random turns, I spotted a little area fenced off with tape between posts. Stopping, a helpful little signpost explained it was a Burrowing Owl nest. No owl present, or at least above ground, but another turn or two and I found two more fenced off areas ...and bingo, on the first, there was a little head peeking out of the burrow, one Florida Burrowing Owl. Well, that was easy! I sat and watched a while. He peered around, swivelling his head, occasionally throwing a glance my way. Very nice he was. And with that, back to Fort Meyers Beach I went, a monster flock of about 60 Magnificent Frigatebirds awaiting my return, 50 or so Black Skimmers also on the beach behind my hotel. Sunset over the sea, back to the hotel. 30 December - Wakodahatchee/Green Cay. With my trip nearing its end, I had now visited most of the localities that were on my planned itinerary, but I did still have one last detour I wanted to squeeze in, a small wetland sandwiched into the urban sprawl that spreads up the Atlantic coast from Greater Miami through Fort Lauderdale to West Palm Beach. A mangle of freeways, malls and suburbia hugging the coast for endless miles south to north, but within it a couple of real little gems. On route from the Gulf coast, I'd already stopped in at one wetland, adding a bunch of Limpkins and a Wood Stork amongst others, but my real target was the Wakodahatchee Wetlands, an enhanced water-reclamation site with a boardwalk circling around a series of pools and marshes. Small in size, the reason for my visit was simple, essentially to twitch Neotropic Cormorant. Unknown in Florida until very recently, a single pair was unexpectedly discovered on a nest a couple of years back, huddling in with a few Double-crested Cormorants and Anhingas. On arriving I had no idea where the birds would be, or if they were actually nesting at this time, but it couldn't have been easier ...a hundred metre walk, plus or minus, and the boardwalk passed a tiny tree in the marsh with ten or so nests weighing it down. Anhinga, Anhinga, Double-crested Cormorant, ...bingo, Neotropic Cormorant! Well, I didn't expect to find the bird on the very first pool! But here it was, an arm's throw from the boardwalk, panting in the heat of the day, one half of Florida's one and only pair of Neotropic Cormorants. Adjacent giant Green Iguanans slouched across the low canopy of the tree, Great Blue Herons paddled the shallows and a Belted Kingfisher sat viewing the waters below. Wakodahatchee is not very large, so the remaining part of the reserve did not occupy too much time, but still some 'added extras' in the form of a Roseate Spoonbill, a flock of overhead Monk Parakeets and assorted other herons, ducks and ibises. Many turtles too, plus a couple of large Alligators. Very much a sister wetland, a mere ten-minute or so drive from Wakodahatchee, lies the rather larger Green Cay Wetland. And very nice it is too, my couple of hours ambling around this locality notching up a whole range of nice birds, two Limpkins amongst them, plus dozens of Pied-billed Grebes, one Wood Stork, no less than four Green Herons, several Mottled Ducks, a Northern Harrier and, stars of the show (but perhaps not for the local avifauna), five chunky Purple Swampheens plucking water lily buds to eat. Native to the warmer parts of Old World, this birds are currently expanding in the sunny climes of Florida, along with a motley crew of assorted parrots and other exotica. Still, I was happy to see them! With the wetland show over, it was time to hit the highways and head down to Miami, sixteen-lane highways in places and not a single American seems to know anything about concept of slower cars using the inside lanes! Result, a steady mass of cars moving in both directions, the stately towers of downtown Miami slipping by, Turkey Vultures ever present, occasional flights of Brown Pelicans in the distance. Destination for the evening was Florida City, checking into a motel for a couple of nights. 31 December - Lucky Hammock/Florida Keys. Mopping up operation, my last couple of days in Florida were to be spent in the Homestead and Keys area. Started at dawn at the so-called Lucky Hammock, a tiny patch of woodland very close to the entrance of the Everglades National Park. So insignificant does it seem that I almost drove straight past it when trying to find it, but a most impressive track record it has in luring migrants and vagrants, several major Florida rarities found here. In the area around, plenty of American Kestrels and Loggerhead Shrikes, but circling the patch of woodland, all at first seemed quiet, Blue-Grey Gnatcatchers the only birds stirring. Sticking it out however did pay reward, with the rising sun, so a select bunch of species appeared in the fringes and canopy. First a gaudy Prairie Warbler in loose association with Yellow-rumped Warblers, then a Brown-crested Flycatcher in the tree tops (a Florida rarity, but recorded at this site a couple of weeks earlier) and finally a rather nice Wilson's Warbler in low vegetation. And that, although still only 9.00 a.m., was basically the best birding of the day. Having travelled through the Arctic to the northernmost point of the American road network four months earlier, I now thought it obligatory to cruise the 200 kilometres down Highway 1 through the Florida Keys to reach Key West, the most southerly point on the road network in the USA. Hmm, while I can honestly say the Dalton Highway in Alaska proved to be one of the best journeys I have ever done, spectacular scenery, a sense of adventure and fantastic wildlife, the road to Key West has to rank as one of the most uninspiring! Brown

Pelicans and mangroves two-a-penny, but do dispel images of unspoilt tropical islands linked by a series of spectacular road bridges. Reality is a rather dull road, fairly heavy traffic and, at regular intervals, urban sprawl or developments lining the route. Ah, delightful! Still, it was tropical in weather and at least Key West itself is a fairly easy-going town. Saw a flock of about 65 Black Skimmers in the ferry terminal, had a quick walk around the historic fort, then turned tail and motored back to Florida City, one Key Deer on route. Last birds of the day, and indeed 2013, a squadron of Brown Pelicans flying into a setting sun, nice.

1 January - Castellow Hammock Preserve/Everglades. In traditional style, I was up way before dawn to celebrate the New Year, 4.00 a.m. to be exact. The idea had been to find some elusive mammal or perhaps an owl to kick the year off, but as it was, a Wilson's Snipe took the honours, a singleton bobbing in the car lights as it fed beside a small roadside pool. Before getting totally lost on random farm tracks, I then veered a little to the north, ensuring a dawn arrival at Castellow Hammock Preserve. A fairly small area of protected tropical hardwood in an otherwise residential area, this locality was simply excellent. Before it was even light enough to begin proper birding, as I strolled around the lawn in front of the visitor centre, Grey Catbirds and Northern Mockingbirds were emerging from the bushes, American Robins and Boat-tailed Grackles pouncing out onto the lawn and a Blue Jay into a tree. Up came the sun, out came even more birds. A rainbow of colours in a single low tree, a most impressive warbler flock was certainly nice for the 1st January - amongst Palm Warblers and Yellow-rumped Warblers, a positive feast for the eyes with two superb Northern Parula, two stunning Black-throated Green Warblers, one Prairie Warbler and a smart Black-and-White Warbler. Also Blue-Grey Gnatcatchers with them and, in the next tree along, two Loggerhead Shrikes. As the warbler flock eventually began to dissipate, I relocated myself all of a hundred metres or so to the a series of large flowering shrubs. With a considerable warmth already in the rising sun, I had high hopes amongst these blooms. Zip, zip, a little fleck of a bird zooming by, a brief hover, then radical change of direction and the dot hurtled away to a perch high up. Super, this was exactly what I was looking for ...hummingbirds! Not terribly abundant in winter, this locality has a good reputation for harbouring a few most years, the blossoms a magnet. And so I settled down and waited, and soon there was another, and another. Then another. Oh ho ho, almost a dozen by the end! Four months earlier I was watching Rufous Hummingbirds in southern Alaska on their summering grounds, here I was now watching their in their winter home, neat. And just for good measure, one Ruby-throated Hummingbirds too. Also walked the woodland trail, but saw very little, so decided to return via a residential crawl to the hotel for coffee, Monk Parakeet, Common Myna and White-winged Dove amongst birds decorating gardens. Sadly, my trip to Florida was now reaching its end. Still time however for one last outing - chucked all the bags in the boot and, finishing where it had all started, returned to the Everglades for a few hours. Alligators sunning, Red-shouldered Hawks atop bushes, a Northern Harrier quartering, all familiar birds now, but a most relaxing and enjoyable way to end the trip. On the Anhinga Trail, as well as the assorted herons and egrets, added one very nice American Purple Gallinule and gazed up at the kettles of Turkey Vultures rising on the thermals. Ah boo hoo, it was now early afternoon and time to head for Miami. Did sneak in a last detour, incorporating the edge of Biscayne National Park onto my route, adding a few Brown Pelicans atop posts. More impressive however was the adjacent rubbish tip - this was simply mind boggling, above the immense mound of trash rising a couple of hundred metres was an even more immense cloud of birds, not just gulls, but also thousands and thousands of Turkey Vultures! Wow moment indeed. And then it really was time up, zigzagged through south Miami, saw a couple of feral Muscovy Ducks on a pool and arrived at Miami International in good time for my flight. American Airlines to Atlanta, British Airways to London, trip over.