



**FLORIDA PENINSULA: CENTRAL, SOUTH, AND THE
FLORIDA KEYS**

24 APRIL - 3 MAY 2021



Mangrove Cuckoo is one of our targets on this trip.

On a map, the finger-like state of Florida protrudes prominently from the continental United States, reaching south towards the Caribbean until it just barely misses being in the tropics. To the north, frost-hardy, temperate deciduous forest dominates, while warm bodies of water surround the rest of the state. Together, both climate and geography isolate Florida from the rest of the country. Because of its geographically unique position, Florida is a crossroads between the temperate northern latitudes and the sultry Caribbean tropics. Indeed, about a dozen bird species of West Indian origin reach the northern limits of their range here, while many species typical of more northern latitudes reach the southern edge of their range here. Many of the West Indian species live nowhere else in the United States. We also time our tour in late April, when spring migration peaks, potentially augmenting our trip list with a wide variety of colorful warblers and charismatic waders.

On this tour we cover the southern two thirds of the state comprehensively in search of the many specialty birds on offer. We begin by exploring Miami, a city with a decidedly Caribbean flair, in search of several established exotics such as **Spot-breasted Oriole**, **White-winged Parakeet**, and **Red-whiskered Bulbul**. In the central part of the state, pinelands feature a specialized avian community, including **Red-cockaded Woodpecker**, **Brown-headed Nuthatch**, and **Bachman's Sparrow**. We also explore nearby oak scrub for Florida's only endemic bird, **Florida Scrub Jay**. On the last leg of our journey we explore the tropical hardwood hammocks and mangrove swamps of the Florida Keys in search of Caribbean specialties such as **Mangrove Cuckoo**, **White-crowned Pigeon**, and **Black-whiskered Vireo**. We also take a day trip to Dry Tortugas National Park, where **Sooty Tern** and **Brown Noddy** breed in the thousands. With some luck, many of the sites we visit on this tour can be alive with migrant songbirds, and there is always a chance for a vagrant from the Caribbean like **La Sagra's Flycatcher** or **Western Spindalis** to show up.

Itinerary (10 days/9 nights)

Day 1. Miami

After arriving at Miami International Airport you will be transferred to a nearby hotel for the night.

Overnight: Miami

Day 2. Miami and Palm Beach

The nearly tropical climate and exotic vegetation of the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale metropolitan area offers a unique landscape of opportunity for a myriad of introduced bird species from all over the world. We spend our first morning in Florida exploring this urban landscape in search of ABA-countable exotics such as **Purple Swamphen**, **Spot-breasted Oriole**, **White-winged Parakeet**, **Red-whiskered Bulbul**, and **Common Myna**. However, introduced species are only a small fraction of the avifauna of Miami, a county which claims one of the longest bird lists east of the Mississippi River. Parks, preserves, and even parking lots provide opportunities to see native species like **Grey Kingbird**, **White-crowned Pigeon**, and more, along with a supporting cast of migrant songbirds.

After a delicious lunch at a Cuban restaurant in Miami we head north to Green Cay Wetlands and Wakodahatchee Wetlands, two artificially-created wetlands that host nearly all of Florida's wetland specialties: **Black-bellied Whistling Duck**, **Least Bittern**, **Limpkin**, **Sora**, **Purple**

Gallinule and more. The rookeries at Wakodahatchee Wetlands should be active at this time of year, providing excellent photographic opportunities of nesting herons, egrets, ibis, and storks. We end the day near Port St. Lucie, where we stay for the night.

Overnight: Port St. Lucie

Day 3. Three Lakes WMA, Circle B Bar Reserve, Lettuce Lake Park

After an early breakfast we drive to Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area. Although heavily altered by years of cattle ranching and logging, this wildlife management area still protects a sizeable piece of pineland habitat with a saw palmetto understory. This specialized habitat is home to three American endemics, which will be the focus of our morning search: **Red-cockaded Woodpecker**, **Brown-headed Nuthatch**, and **Bachman's Sparrow**. It also pays to keep close attention to the roadsides in this area for **Northern Crested Caracara**, **Wild Turkey**, **Sandhill Crane**, and **Bald Eagle**.

We then continue west to Circle B Bar Reserve and Lettuce Lake Park. Oak hammock, freshwater marsh, and cypress swamp at these sites provide habitat for a tremendous variety of birds, including waterfowl, waders, raptors, and passerines. Many summer migrants approach the southern edge of their breeding range at Lettuce Lake Park, including the spectacularly-hued **Prothonotary Warbler**, the diminutive **Ruby-throated Hummingbird**, and the boldly-patterned **Yellow-throated Warbler**.

Overnight: Tampa

Day 4. Fort De Soto Park

Lying on a series of small islands in the Gulf of Mexico, Fort De Soto Park is one of the premier migration hotspots in the state of Florida. Given the right weather, exhausted migrant songbirds land en masse on these small islands, filling the woods and fruiting mulberry trees with a riot of color. **Swainson's Warbler**, **Hooded Warbler**, **Cape May Warbler**, **Black-throated Blue Warbler**, **Baltimore Oriole**, **Scarlet Tanager**, and **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** are just a sample of the migrant songbirds we hope to see here. This site is also excellent for migrating waders, gulls, and terns. By scanning the sandy beaches and mudflats we can see a broad sampling of Nearctic waders such as **Snowy Plover**, **Piping Plover**, **Willet**, and **Marbled Godwit**. The elegant **Reddish Egret** and the bizarre **Black Skimmer** are also regular along the coast. The area around Fort De Soto hosts a healthy population of **Nanday Parakeet**, now an ABA-countable exotic. With so many potential species we will be in no rush to leave and allot a full day of birding here.

Overnight: Sarasota

Day 5. Oscar Scherer State Park and Tamiami Trail

We make the short drive from Sarasota to Oscar Scherer State Park, which hosts a healthy population of the threatened and endemic **Florida Scrub Jay**. This jay lives only in a unique oak scrub community adapted to regular fires and well-drained, sandy soils. Unfortunately, this rare habitat is under increasing pressure from agriculture and housing developments, corresponding in population declines for this species.

Afterwards we continue our journey south and then back east across the peninsula via the Tamiami Trail to Homestead, passing through Big Cypress National Preserve and the northern edge of Everglades National Park. Sites along this road provide excellent opportunities to see **King Rail** and **Snail Kite** for our growing trip list.

Overnight: Homestead

Day 6. Everglades National Park

Published in 1947, Marjory Stoneman Douglas's *The Everglades: River of Grass* highlighted the uniqueness of the Everglades. Lying at the southern tip of the state, the Everglades is a vast, subtropical sawgrass prairie broken only by cypress domes, tropical hardwood hammocks, pinelands, and mangrove swamps. There is nowhere else in the United States with such a decidedly tropical suite of habitats. We work throughout the day along the length of the main park road that terminates in Flamingo, exploring these various habitats for several birds difficult or impossible to see anywhere else in the country, like "**Cape Sable**" **Seaside Sparrow** and **Shiny Cowbird**. **American Crocodile** is possible at the marina in Flamingo. There will also be an optional birding session after dark to look for **Eastern Screech Owl**, **Northern Barred Owl**, and **Chuck-will's-widow**.

Overnight: Homestead

Day 7. Florida Keys

After an early breakfast we drive along Card Sound Road to Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park, making a brief stop at a patch of mangroves along the way to see the Florida race of **Prairie Warbler** and the Cuban race of **American Yellow Warbler**. Once slated to become a housing development, Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park protects one of the largest tracts of tropical hardwood hammock in Florida. It is also an important breeding ground for several target species on our tour, particularly the elusive **Mangrove Cuckoo** and vociferous **Black-whiskered Vireo**. For the rest of the day we keep our schedule open, as we make our way south to Key West, to accommodate the presence (or absence) of migrant songbirds or even chasing a Caribbean vagrant. Regardless of the status of migration we visit a breeding colony of **Roseate Tern** in Marathon and stand vigil in the evening for **Antillean Nighthawk** in Key West.

Overnight: Key West

Day 8. Dry Tortugas National Park

Seventy miles west of Key West, the Dry Tortugas National Park consists of a series of tiny coralline islands surrounded by the shimmering aquamarine waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Among birders these islands are particularly famous for having the only nesting colonies of **Brown Noddy**, **Sooty Tern**, **Magnificent Frigatebird**, and **Masked Booby** in the contiguous United States. We reach these islands via the *Yankee Freedom II* catamaran on a day trip.

Upon arrival at Garden Key we have about four hours to enjoy the cacophony and bustle of activity from the seabird colonies on nearby Bush Key as well as marvel at impressive Fort Jefferson, the largest masonry structure in the Western Hemisphere. Due to the isolation of these islands from any land, the parade grounds of this grand fort function as a welcoming oasis for exhausted migratory songbirds, including warblers, cuckoos, flycatchers, vireos, tanagers, and buntings.

On our return voyage to Key West we make sure to stop at nearby Hospital Key to see the colony of **Masked Booby**.

Overnight: Key West

Day 9. Florida Keys to Homestead

We drive north back to Miami, stopping at various state parks and preserves in the Florida Keys to look for migrant songbirds and breeding specialties or perhaps even chance upon finding a Caribbean stray. We will also make a stop at the National Key Deer Refuge to see the miniature and endemic **Key Deer**, the smallest subspecies of the White-tailed Deer and the smallest deer in North America. This will be a flexible day so that we can chase any reported rarities, and we will keep ourselves wired to any special sightings.

Overnight: Homestead

Day 10. Transfer to Miami International Airport

After some optional birding early in the morning for any bird species we may have missed we drive back to Miami, where the tour ends.

Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Duration: 10 days
Limit: 3 – 8
Date: 24 April – 3 May 2021
Start: Miami
End: Miami

Price: US\$4183 per person sharing assuming 5 – 8 participants
 US\$4849 per person sharing assuming 3 – 4 participants

Single supplement: US\$850 or US\$1388 if upgraded

We can run the same trip at a price similar to the larger group price for two tour participants, if they rent their own vehicle and pay for fuel – please e-mail info@birdingecotours.co.za for details.

Price includes:

Meals
 Accommodation
 Guiding fees
 Entrance fees
 All transport while on tour
 Tolls

Price excludes:

Flights to and from Miami
 Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts
 Alcoholic drinks
 Personal insurance
 Gratuities