BIRDING TOUR USA: FLORIDA PENINSULA – SOUTHERN SPECIALS AND THE KEYS

24 APRIL–02 MAY 2027
25 APRIL–03 MAY 2028
25 APRIL–03 MAY 2029



Pirates of the skies, ***Magnificent Frigatebirds*** *truly are magnificent.*

Overview

On a map, the finger-like state of Florida protrudes prominently from the continental United States, reaching south towards the Caribbean just barely missing Cuba 90 miles (c. 140 kilometers) beyond. 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 with almost tropical forest-like habitat resulting in some fantastic bird watching opportunities. 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 in Florida. 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 and the national parks, botanical gardens and residential areas are teeming with bird life, potentially augmenting our trip list with a wide variety of colorful warblers and charismatic shorebirds.



Florida Scrub Jay *is a charismatic and quizzical species*.

On this tour, we cover the southern two thirds of the state comprehensively in search of the many special 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/western 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 specials 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 their thousands. With some luck, many of the sites we visit on this tour may be alive with migrant songbirds, and there is always a chance for a vagrant from the Caribbean like a **La Sagra's Flycatcher** or a **Western Spindalis** to show up.

Detailed Itinerary (9 days/8 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Miami

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

Overnight: Miami



Spot-breasted Oriole *is one of the many exotics we will target in the Miami area.*

Day 2. Miami and the Palm Beach Area

The nearly tropical climate and exotic vegetation of the Miami-Fort 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 **Grey-headed 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 local spot in Miami, we will head north to Green Cay Wetlands and Wakodahatchee Wetlands, two artificially created wetlands that host nearly all of Florida's water-associated specials: **Black-bellied Whistling Duck**, **Least Bittern**, **Limpkin**, **Anhinga**, **Purple Gallinule**, the incredibly beautiful **Roseate Spoonbill** and more. The rookeries at Wakodahatchee Wetlands should be active at this time of year, providing excellent birding photographic opportunities of nesting herons, egrets, ibises, and storks.

Overnight: West Palm Beach



*The Palm Beach area usually holds decent numbers of **Grey-headed Swamphens**.*

Day 3. Ocean side to gulf side

We will spend the morning hours birding the ocean (east) side of the Florida peninsula at several local parks, hoping to catch a new batch of migrant songbirds. Depending on how we faired with waders the previous day and how migration fairs for the day, we may head to Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge for species such as **Roseate Spoonbill**, **Snail Kite** and a shot at **Smooth-billed Ani**. After lunch, we will spend the slower afternoon birding hours driving across the middle of Florida towards Fort Myers. The late afternoon and evening hours will be spent birding the gulf (west) side of the peninsula, searching the coastline for shorebirds including **Snowy**, **Piping** and **Wilson's Plovers**, **American Oystercatcher**, **Willet** and more.

Overnight: Fort Myers

Day 4. Babcock-Webb and Tamiami Trail

Today will be an early start to ensure our sunrise arrival at the Fred C. Babcock/Cecil M. Webb Wildlife Management Area. This huge tract of land hosts a wide variety of habitats including Florida slash pine, a favorite of several special bird species. We will spend the better part of the morning exploring these pines in search of **Red-cockaded Woodpecker**, **Bachman's Sparrow** and **Brown-headed Nuthatch**. Following a successful morning at Babcock-Webb, we will then explore one or two other locations to search for the endemic **Florida Scrub Jay**. Where we go will depend on recent trends and timing.

Afterwards, we start our journey southeast 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



*The majestic **Swallow-tailed Kite** is often encountered on this tour.*

Day 5. 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 bird throughout the day along the length of the main park road that terminates in flamingo campground, 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**, **Barred Owl** and **Chuck-will's-widow**.

Overnight: Homestead

Day 6. Florida Keys

After an early breakfast, we will 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 look for 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 the vociferous **Black-whiskered Vireo**. For the rest of the day we will keep our schedule open as we make our way south to Key West, to accommodate the presence (or absence) of migrant songbirds or even the possibility of 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 7. Dry Tortugas National Park

Seventy miles (c. 110 kilometers) 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**.

We spend a second night in Key West to hopefully allow some time to relax and admire this famous town and perhaps to visit Ernest Hemingway's home for example.

Overnight: Key West

Day 8. Florida Keys to Homestead

We drive north back towards Miami, stopping at various state parks and preserves in the Florida Keys to look for species we may have missed (possibly a **Bald Eagle** or two). Perhaps we'll find some new migrant songbirds and breeding specials or maybe we'll even chance upon finding a

Caribbean stray (we'll be checking the e-bird reports frequently to see what's around!). We also usually make a stop at the National Key Deer Refuge to see the miniature and endemic **Key Deer**, the smallest subspecies of **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



Brown Noddy *will certainly be a highlight of the Dry Tortugas.*

Day 9. Transfer to Miami International Airport

After some optional early morning birding, looking for any bird species we may have missed, we drive back (less than an hour when there is no traffic) to Miami to catch our flights home.

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. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling or other factors.

Tour Details

Duration:	9 days
Group size:	4–8
Dates:	24 April–02 May 2027 25 April–03 May 2028 25 April–03 May 2029
Start:	Miami
End:	Miami
Prices:	US$ 5,257 per person sharing, assuming 4–8 participants (2027) US$ 5,290 per person sharing, assuming 4–8 participants (2028) US$ 5,580 per person sharing, assuming 4–8 participants (2029)

In the event of only 3 participants, there will be a 15% surcharge to guarantee departure if all participants agree.

Single supplements:	US$ 1,113 (2027) US$ 1,150 (2028) US$ 1,200 (2029)

Price includes:

Meals
Accommodation
Transport
Guiding fees

Price excludes:

Flights
Personal insurance
Drinks
Gratuities – (please see our tipping guidelines blog)
Laundry service
Personal expenses such as gifts