





turn around and retrace its route. As the vans re-united, an arm appeared from the second van and pointed up into a tree at a superb Barred Owl. Eileen had spotted this bird from the van at 50 mph perched on a branch over the road, completely in the open! It seemed oblivious to our presence and a lot more film was used! Eventually we had to drag ourselves away and just past the Flamingo visitor centre, we made a further short stop to check a flock of cowbirds where, amongst nine Brown-headed Cowbirds were two of the recent colonising Shiny Cowbirds. From the two storey visitor centre, you could see right across Florida Bay with Great, Snowy and Reddish Egrets, White Ibis, Roseate Spoonbill and Great White Heron (the white phase of Great Blue Heron) all over the mudflats. Waders (shorebirds) were also present in the form of 50+ Western Sandpipers, at least eight Willets, Black-bellied (Grey) Plover, Dunlin, two Spotted Sandpipers and a couple of dowitchers. Both Brown and American White Pelicans sat on a sandbar alongside Royal and Caspian Terns and the ubiquitous Laughing Gulls. Ospreys were common, often four or five were flying around at one time, and Grey Kingbirds sang from telegraph wires. In the distant haze a lone Caribbean Flamingo was spotted, very hard to identify had it not flown briefly! We also picked up Sharp-shinned Hawk here. Our next stop was to prove a talking point for the rest of the trip, Snake Bight Trail. Our aim was to walk the trail through the woods to the end where it opened out to the mudflats of Florida Bay, where we hoped to get better views of the flamingo. We did have some great birds as we walked the trail: pairs of Indigo Buntings, 3 American Redstarts, 6 Black-and-white Warblers, a male Blackpoll Warbler, 2 male Northern Parulas, Worm-eating Warbler, a pair of Black-throated Blue Warblers, Northern Waterthrush, Palm Warbler and Prairie Warbler. Even better were the White-crowned Pigeons (very flighty but eventually seen well) and very good views of Black-whiskered Vireo. The only problem was the billions of mosquitoes, all determined to suck as much blood as possible from us. Everyone suffered to some degree, some more so than others, but unless one was wearing a full body protection suit being bitten was unavoidable. Despite the adversity of the mosquito attacks we did finally reach the end of the track, only to find that the path ended at a wall of mangroves and was, as yet, unfinished! Most people started on the long walk back but a few of us clambered through the muddy mangroves and got to the shoreline. There were no flamingos present as a reward but we did see two (American) Black Terns, Wurdemann's Heron (Great White x Great Blue Heron) and a Greater Yellowlegs. This walk is definitely off the itinerary for future trips!! Back at the information centre we added our first Baltimore Oriole to the list, saw four Common Mynas and watched a close Osprey on a flagpole eating a fish.

**Day 6** This morning we returned to the Everglades to look for the Cape Sable race of Seaside Sparrow again. We didn't see any sparrows but did find Eastern Towhee, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, five Eastern Meadowlarks, a Bobolink and our first Eastern Bluebird. Now to the Florida Keys and our first stop was at John Pennekamp State Park on Key Largo. We picked up two important things here: migrants and ice cream! We started with two Palm Warblers in a low tree which led to the finding of a superb male Cape May Warbler. In some taller trees we had a very nice collection of warblers come to our pishing: Cape May, Worm-eating, Prairie (3), Black-throated Blue (3) and Blackpoll (3) Warblers and Northern Parula (2). Also here we had great views of a pair of White-eyed Vireos. Nearby lies Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park, another area of dry hardwood woodland. Here we admired three more male Cape May Warblers, Prairie Warbler, four White-eyed Vireos, a flypast White-crowned Pigeon and, on pilings in the river, 15 Spotted Sandpipers. The finding of a flock of six Indigo Buntings necessitated a stop at a likely-looking area of grassland and trees. In the few minutes we stayed here we added four Bobolinks, Prairie Warbler, Grey Kingbird and another male Painted Bunting. Heading back to the motel we made one final stop when we saw a nighthawk on a telegraph wire. It turned out to be a Common Nighthawk and as we checked the immediate area we found another three roosting birds plus Eastern Meadowlark and a Red-shouldered Hawk. Unfortunately, we also managed to lock ourselves out of one of the vans here but it was soon remedied by Paula's American Automobile Association membership!

**Day 7** Today we drove from Florida City all the way down to Key West, stopping at various points along the way. The first stop on Key Largo was unscheduled when White-crowned Pigeons were seen by Sveta flying across the road. Whilst parked in the carpark of a fast food restaurant enjoying great views of at least 25 White-crowned Pigeons, we also found three Common Mynas, a Northern Flicker and another Belted Kingfisher, whilst overhead soared a Magnificent Frigatebird. Marathon Key was next, where we had amazing views of Burrowing Owl down to just a few feet on a golf course! The southern end of the bridge to Missouri Key held a few migrants in the bushes: four Palm Warblers, Common Yellowthroat, a male American Redstart, Prairie Warbler, Grey Kingbird and another male Painted Bunting. We recorded our first American Herring Gull here and watched from very close range an immature Peregrine Falcon eating a recently-caught Rock Dove. On Ohio Key, we found a flock of waders comprising Semipalmated Plover, Willet, Grey Plover, Dunlin, Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers and some dowitcher spp. Next, we diverted on to Big Pine Key to take a look at seven Pilot Whales reported on the news, suffering from a virus and being cared for by a group of people. On No Name Key we found three of the tiny White-tailed Deer subspecies restricted to the Florida Keys, plus Black-whiskered Vireo, four Prairie Warblers and two male Cape May Warblers. At Saddlebunch Key we searched the mangroves finding our first Rose-breasted Grosbeak, but this was soon followed by one of the birds of the trip. First we heard it, then there it was, a Mangrove Cuckoo, but this wasn't the usual brief view, it showed extremely well for at least ten minutes, totally uncharacteristic of this extremely difficult bird. Finally, we reached Key West and checked into our very nice hotel. Of course, we were quickly out birding again, this time to Fort Zachary Taylor State Park. We set up 'scopes to view passing seabirds, much to the interest of the locals and holiday makers sunning themselves on the beach. Terns were abundant with Royal, Sandwich and our target bird Roseate Tern being easily seen. The sun was still above the horizon so we headed to the edge of Key West Airport. Pools of water held a normal and a white-phase Reddish Egret, White Ibis and 13 Semipalmated Plovers, whilst nearby in some trees we found Palm and Prairie Warblers and Common Yellowthroat. At sunset, we watched skywards looking for nighthawks.

We saw three in all, one of which was a probable Antillean, but it was a long way off and not calling so, commendably, we didn't count it!

**Day 8** Today was our eagerly anticipated boat trip to the Dry Tortugas National Park. Two close Grey Kingbirds in the carpark were a good start and as the boat left the harbour 50+ Black Skimmers sat on the harbour arm. The trip to the Tortugas took about two-and-a-half hours and we spent it all on deck watching for passing seabirds. Magnificent Frigatebirds began to appear, including one harrying an Osprey as it carried a fish. Flying Fishes took our attention for a while but birds soon took over again when our first Sooty Tern flew past, soon followed by Brown Noddies. Garden Key came into view and we picked up a Brown Booby flying past the boat. The Captain took the boat over towards Hospital Key so we could view the Masked Booby colony, 27 birds were seen on this small, sandy island. Alighting from the ship at Garden Key we walked north to the north coaling dock, a series of old wooden pilings. The small bushes we checked on the way held male and female Blue Grosbeaks, many Palm Warblers, male and female Blackpoll Warblers and two Black-and-white Warblers. The pilings were covered in Brown Noddies but, as yet, we had no sign of the reported Black Noddy. Bush Key is joined to Garden Key by a sandy ridge and we walked to the fence to view the colony of thousands of Brown Noddies and Sooty Terns – a truly fantastic sight. And, in the distance, we could see the occasional 'strawberry' of a displaying male Magnificent Frigatebird. Around the walls of the fort flew Barn and Northern Rough-winged Swallows, and in a tree by the boat dock was found a female Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Inside the fort walls is an area of open grass scattered with trees and bushes. Migrants abounded with Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Hooded, Blackpoll and Black-and-white Warblers, Grey Catbirds, a Red-eyed Vireo, two Eastern Kingbirds and a Caribbean race Mourning Dove. Three Merlins put in appearances as did an American Kestrel whilst Cattle Egrets walked the grass in search of food and Magnificent Frigatebirds dived over our heads, sometimes coming within feet of us. Outside the walls, in the trees of the campground were more migrants: Prothonotary, Cape May and Tennessee Warblers, Ovenbird, Indigo Bunting and yet another male Painted Bunting. As we ate lunch, word came that the Black Noddy had been seen. Some dropped everything and rushed to the north dock only to find that the bird had gone! However, a few minutes later Martin picked it out as it flew in again and settled with the Brown Noddies. The differences between the two species were quite subtle, as the Black Noddy was very worn and quite brown! Brilliant spotting Martin. On the boat trip back we had five more Brown Boobies, five Northern Gannets and a Great Blue Heron. On entering the harbour a bird that had wintered here, a rarity from the far north-west of the US, put in an appearance – a totally unexpected Slaty-backed Gull! A great end to a truly memorable day.

**Day 9** First, we checked out the harbour, watching various birds fly past. At least 30 Roseate Terns were seen, along with 110 Black Skimmers, Sandwich, Royal and Least Terns, Brown Pelican, Magnificent Frigatebird and, of course, Laughing Gull. Clarence Higgs Park was our next target, a well-used park with a few trees. Not much here so we walked to the beach to check roosting terns and gulls. The highlight here was a close flypast by an Osprey. Next, we visited the Indigenous Flora Park where we found a few migrants. As we walked around we picked up Worm-eating, Blackpoll and Palm Warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula and a couple of Grey Catbirds. In a nearby small but mature garden we added male American Redstart and male Cape May Warbler. Heading north along the new highway US1, we deviated along some of the old route to a lagoon to look for waders. We found Black-bellied Plovers, Dunlin, a Greater Yellowlegs, three Wilson's Plovers, a spotted Spotted Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitchers, Willets and two Least Sandpipers. Now we were on the hunt for the Cuban race of Yellow Warbler, a bird of the mangroves of this area. No luck with this species but as we headed back to the vans we came across a true gem: a bright, male Blackburnian Warbler – we spent a long time watching this bird down to a couple of metres. By now our drive had taken us to Big Pine Key where we stood in an open area waiting for nighthawks. We saw just three: two Common Nighthawks and our target bird an Antillean Nighthawk, albeit brief views. We made a quick final stop at Marathon Airport to see if we could improve on our views of Antillean Nighthawks around the floodlights but there were no nighthawks present at all.

**Day 10** Once more we searched for 'Cuban' Yellow Warbler close to the bridge across to Key Largo. We did briefly hear one singing but it didn't deign to put in an appearance, as it was quite windy. Leaving the Keys, we headed back to the Everglades with our first stop being at Shark Valley. Here, as we both watched and avoided American Alligators, we had great views of a pair of close Red-shouldered Hawks and a juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-heron. At the nearby Miccosukee Restaurant we watched Snail Kites flying over the marshland, at one point joined by a Swallow-tailed Kite! Plus, as ever, various herons and egrets and a nice Northern Flicker. After driving west to Fort Myers we went to a sandy beach. Waders were seen in good numbers including Western and Least Sandpipers, Semipalmated and Black-bellied Plovers, 12 Wilson's Plovers, four very white-looking Snowy Plovers and three Piping Plovers. We also had a Black Skimmer skimming, a superb, close, low-flying Swallow-tailed Kite, Red Knots, Sanderling, Willet and various terns, gulls and herons.

**Day 11** The day began with a true downpour. Rain just kept falling very, very heavily, and the motel car park became a river. We delayed starting for about an hour then drove to 'Ding' Darling. There were not many birds about, mainly due to the tide being high, but the information centre and shop were well patronised. A drive around gave us our first Solitary Sandpiper, a few egrets and a couple of Pied-billed Grebes. At Bailey Tract we picked up some nice birds in the early stages of our walk, including Chimney Swifts, Common Yellowthroat, Great Crested Flycatcher, Palm Warbler, Pileated and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Red-shouldered Hawk, Green and Little Blue Herons, Roseate Spoonbill, an adult Yellow-crowned Night-heron, 17 Snowy Egrets, Mottled Duck and the slightly surreal sight of a Magnificent Frigatebird soaring over woodland. We then found what could be called a small fall of migrants comprising male Prairie and Magnolia Warblers, two Grey Catbirds and our first Veery. The latter bird was sometimes

very hard to locate as it fed deep in the bushes. We could hear Carolina Wren singing but finding the bird was another matter – one brief flight view was had as it shot across the path. Lunch was taken near Sanibel Lighthouse. The beach here held Sanderling in all possible plumages and Ruddy Turnstones. Northern Gannets were seen flying past the shore, along with a lone Magnificent Frigatebird. Northern Flicker, Red-bellied, Downy and Pileated Woodpeckers were found, soon followed by a Great Crested Flycatcher, three Indigo Buntings and a Blue Grosbeak. At the point we watched 6–8 Bottlenose Dolphins moving back and forth in the water only a few metres from the shore. Although the tide was still too high we made a quick stop again at 'Ding' Darling, picking up Roseate Spoonbill, Great and Snowy Egrets, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Black-whiskered Vireo and Prairie Warbler. Next stop was Fort Myers Beach. Peter Lansdown said he'd been here about ten years ago and seen American Avocet and that this was the best place for them. Not deterred by the ten-year gap, we walked the sandy beach with the sea one side and a lagoon the other. The sky was getting greyer and greyer and the wind was picking up. Despite these adverse conditions we did well: five Killdeers, two Reddish Egrets, a Great Blue Heron, 23 close Roseate Spoonbills looking exceptionally nice when the sun shone, a lone Solitary Sandpiper, a pair of Mottled Ducks with six ducklings, a White Ibis and a summer-plumaged Spotted Sandpiper. We reached the ten-year-old American Avocet site and found six American Avocets, quite remarkable! We also had our first (two pairs) American Oystercatchers, two Semipalmated Sandpipers and three Wilson's Plovers.

**Day 12** Today we headed back east to Corkscrew Swamp. As we approached the area we saw Wood Stork, Glossy Ibis, Great and Snowy Egrets feeding in a roadside ditch. At Corkscrew Swamp, White-eyed Vireos could be heard calling but were not always easy to see, Red-shouldered Hawks called loudly and flew through the trees, sometimes settling on branches quite close to us, a Pileated Woodpecker showed down to about two metres, Northern Parulas were abundant, Tufted Titmouse and Blue-grey Gnatcatcher were added to the trip list and a Yellow-billed Cuckoo showed well in the trees. As well as seeing watersnakes, we also experienced the wonderful sight of a family of Otters playing in the channels and they seemed quite unconcerned about our presence as they swam under the boardwalk. From a viewing platform we watched 50+ Wood Storks and a few Anhingas soaring on thermals and two Swallow-tailed Kites hunting over marshland. Back in the swamp we had very close Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-herons, Least Bittern, Little Blue Herons, Black-and-white Warbler and about 15 centimetres worth of bright green Sphinx Moth chrysalis. Having completed the boardwalk we were given some useful information by locals and drove to Eagle Lake. We were told it was only about a 20-minute drive but 45 miles later we arrived somewhat bemused to find a sports ground with hundreds of people around. Leaving the vans, we walked through the throngs of people watching baseball matches and prize giving ceremonies to find an area of shallow water with small islands and patches of mud. There were birds everywhere! Waders were represented by Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary and Least Sandpipers, Killdeer and Black-necked Stilts. Larger wading birds included a flock of 73 American White Pelicans with a few Brown Pelicans, 78 Glossy Ibises, White Ibises, Great, Cattle and Snowy Egrets, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Wood Storks and Roseate Spoonbill. As we walked around the area we also picked up two Stilt and a White-rumped Sandpiper. A Bald Eagle sat magnificently atop a nearby tree whilst another flew around in the distance, seven Mottled Ducks fed at the water's edge and a Northern Flicker called loudly from a treetop. A Gull-billed Tern and a few Black Skimmers joined the six Caspian Terns sitting on a small island. We did have one target bird to get here but first we had to admire the male Bobolink feeding in the grass by the path. Then a flock of dark birds flew to nearby bushes and some of us managed to find that target bird: Bronzed Cowbird. There was more than one around but they were very flighty. Finally, one obliged by landing on a fence so all could admire it. After this superb couple of hours we drove back to Corkscrew Swamp where we saw most of the same species as had been seen that morning, plus three young Eastern Screech-owls peering sweetly from their nest hole in a tree by the side of the boardwalk.

**Day 13** Birding started well, as we were about to get into the vans in the motel carpark, two Brown Thrashers were found. First stop of the day was in the Babcock area. As we entered the preserve we had another two Brown Thrashers on the road and were soon listening to and watching singing Eastern Towhees. Two Eastern Bluebirds were soon located and then we heard singing Bachman's Sparrow and quickly located a nice male in a nearby tree. Another Bachman's Sparrow was found, quickly followed by first one then a second Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Other birds seen included Eastern Meadowlark, Pine Warbler, Great Crested Flycatcher, Sandhill Crane and Red-bellied Woodpecker. Farther on, we made another stop and picked up Brown-headed Nuthatch and Common Ground-dove plus Common Yellowthroat and Blue Jay. Continuing our journey east, we made several stops in a more prairie-like habitat where, as well as the common species, three Northern Caracaras, numerous Turkey and Black Vultures, four Swallow-tailed Kites, two Red-shouldered Hawks and Burrowing Owls were seen. Now heading north towards Orlando, we birded around Avon Park specifically looking for Short-tailed Hawk. Stopping in some scrubby habitat, we spotted some distant Florida Scrub-jays. They clearly heard us and were used to humans because they flew straight towards us. Within minutes some people had Florida Scrub-jay perched on their hands as these trusting birds assumed we were food-providing tourists!

**Day 14** Outside the hotel in Orlando we found our first Mallards! Driving south, we stopped by a small pinewood where we admired two fine Red-headed Woodpeckers along with the much more common Red-bellied Woodpecker. Eastern Meadowlark, Blue Jay and Eastern Bluebird were also found in the wood and nearby were Sandhill Cranes and Wood Storks, as well as a Bald Eagle feeding on a large snake. A mile or so further on we screeched to a halt as the shout of 'Turkey' went up. A lone female stood in a field so we got out to view her and then noticed another seven birds further away in the same field. Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area was our next destination and we started well as we drove in with close views of Northern Bobwhite (we got even better views here later on). This is another area of pine woodland and we again saw the habitat specialties of Brown-headed Nuthatch, Red-cockaded Woodpecker (we even saw the red cockade!) and Bachman's Sparrow. A little further on we watched a

Northern Harrier soaring over open prairie and found an out-of-habitat Bachman's Sparrow. We were still hunting for another two Florida specialties with which we had had no luck so far: Short-tailed Hawk and the Florida race of Grasshopper Sparrow. Our luck soon changed however; stopping near a wood a dark-phase Short-tailed Hawk flew overhead. Unfortunately however, the second van had just stopped to watch Florida Grasshopper Sparrow. The hawk disappeared before the second van could catch up but the first van did get to see the sparrow. Unfortunately, despite having lunch overlooking the wood, the second van never saw the Short-tailed Hawk, although we did all enjoy close views of Eastern Towhees, Black-and-white Warblers, Northern Parulas, American Redstarts, Pine Warblers, White-eyed Vireos and Carolina Wrens. After lunch, we drove the road to Kissimmee Lake and back. On the way out, we found two more Wild Turkeys, 11 Sandhill Cranes and another Northern Bobwhite, whilst on the way back, when we stopped to check the place we'd seen the turkeys on the way out, a Yellow-throated Warbler flew in and started singing, much to everyone's delight. The final stop of the day was at Brinson Park, the bulk of which is a huge lake. 'Scoping the area, we found a flock of 24 Ring-necked Ducks, eight scattered Pied-billed Grebes, two American Coots and a pair of Wood Ducks. Also present were Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Forster's Tern, Black-necked Stilt, Osprey, nesting Sandhill Crane, Purple Martin, Northern Rough-winged Swallow and two Monk Parakeets.

**Day 15** We had the morning of this our final day to do some birding. Back at Brinson Park we saw nesting Sandhill Crane, and even cranes walking in the road and people's gardens! We had an adult and two juvenile River Otter, the pair of Wood Ducks (this time with three young), at least ten Ospreys, Swallow-tailed Kite, the usual herons and egrets and two Monk Parakeets again. The end of Birdfinders' first (but not the last!) Florida tour where we had seen all the specialities and much more and enjoyed a great time with a marvellous group.

**Day 16** Arrival back in the UK.