

Florida

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Participants

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Leader

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La Sagra's Flycatcher

Day 1: After an anxious time passing through immigration and customs in Detroit, the connecting flight to Orlando was considerably more relaxed and we landed ahead of schedule. James was in the arrivals hall to meet us and, with the vehicle already parked and waiting, it was just a question of the collecting the checked bags and we were on the road. Being Super Bowl Sunday, it was relatively traffic free as we sped towards Cocoa Beach on the Space Coast Highway. In the fading light the only birds of note were Snowy Egrets and White Ibises. We arrived at the motel in good time for a meal at local restaurant, followed by a good but short night's rest.

Day 2: The Space Shuttle was scheduled to launch from the Kennedy Space Center at 04:30 (or so we'd been led to believe) and would have been visible from Cocoa Beach. The waitress at the previous evening's meal had told us launch time was 04:30, but every one else in the motel knew better and had gathered for a 04:15 launching! Needless to say we dipped on the Space Shuttle, but Lynne heard it and even felt the motel shaking as it took off. Birding got underway just before breakfast. Despite the urban setting birds seemed to be everywhere with White and Brown Pelicans, Fish Crow, Common Grackle, Osprey (with fish), and thousands of American Robins and hundreds of Tree Swallows streaming overhead. In a MacDonald's parking lot a very close Cooper's Hawk passed overhead, and Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers were in the shrubs. After breakfast, we moved onto nearby Jetty Park, Port Canaveral and familiarised ourselves with numerous sea and shore birds that would become common place at most of our coastal stops during the tour: Common Loon (Great Northern Diver), Northern Gannet, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls, Royal and Forster's Terns, Fish Crow and Boat-tailed Grackle. James with his penchant for gulls picked out Great Black-backed, American Herring and Bonaparte's Gulls (35 birds that turned out to be the only ones of the tour).

Vierra Wetlands was our next port of call. On the way we had a Wood Stork cruising over Interstate 95, seemingly a taste of things to come. Killdeers and American Robins greeted us as we approached the first of the impoundments at Vierra. The place was full of birds and we spent three very pleasant hours in warm sunshine enjoying the birds and the general ambience. Our main quarry was a long staying Masked Duck, a rarity from southern climes. Despite a thorough check of the appropriate area, there was no sign of him. However, we enjoyed close-up views of many excellent wetland birds including Pied-billed Grebe, Anhinga, Tricolored, Little Blue, Green and Great Blue Herons, American Bittern, White and Glossy Ibis, Wood Stork, Mottled Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Sandhill Cranes and at least half-a-dozen Limpkins. A Northern Caracara foraged with Cattle Egrets in the adjacent sod fields and two American Pipits flew over.

After a relaxed lunch at Denny's, we headed for Merritt Island and the Canaveral National Sea Shore. The Black Point Wildlife Drive was typically crowded with tourists and 'snow birds'. There were more cars than wildlife in most spots, but we ultimately found a couple of corners that produced shorebirds (American Avocet, Black-bellied Plover, Great Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitcher, Western and Least Sandpipers), and water birds (Roseate Spoonbill, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, and Northern Shoveler). A nice find here was a male Eurasian Wigeon, as was a Reddish Egret 'dancing' in the

shallows. Towards the end of the drive several huge American Alligators could be seen hauled out basking on the bank much to the delight of the tourist masses. Hopes of viewing Manatees from the "Manatee Viewing Area" were dashed when we found the entire place closed to the public, but it wasn't a wasted journey by any means. As we headed north through the Canaveral National Sea Shore we stumbled upon five Florida Scrub-jays right next to the road! The birds gave excellent views for a while. With one of the most important birds of the trip comfortably under the belt, we pressed on north with the goal of reaching Daytona Beach at dusk for gulls. We achieved this with about 45 minutes of reasonable light to view thousands of gulls on the rising tide. Walking down the beach and sorting through the birds we found three Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a single first-winter Glaucous Gull. The bulk was composed of thousands of Laughing Gulls, with lesser number of American Herring, Great Black-backed and Ring-billed Gulls. At dusk, most of the gulls flew beyond the breakers to roost just offshore. Several Parasitic Jaegers (Arctic Skuas) could be watched harassing the gulls just offshore. A fine first full day drew to a close and we soon found ourselves back at Cocoa Beach for supper and a good night's rest.

Day 3: Our tours never turn into blatant twitching trips but the thought of passing up another opportunity to try and see the Masked Duck wasn't really acceptable. We loaded up the vehicles and departed early. After passing huge rafts of unidentified sculp loafing on the Banana and Indian Rivers we were back at the Vierra Wetlands before 08:00. Again, it was teeming with birds and the calm, sunny conditions brought many Ring-necked Ducks out into the open giving us some hope that the Masked Duck may appear with them. Despite our best efforts it wasn't to be, but the quality of birding and photographic opportunities here was so good that spirits remained high. A Roseate Spoonbill flew over, and Bald Eagles and Osprey constantly cruised overhead. Again we marveled at the approachability of American Bitterns and nesting Sandhill Cranes. Overall the species profile was very similar to the previous day though we did note our first Purple Martin, Grey Catbird and House Wren of the trip. We departed Vierra in good time for a chance at another rare duck, this time a visitor from the north. A female/immature Harlequin had been found at Sebastian Inlet just a few days before the tour began. It was on our way south so we decided to give it a try. Arrival at the Sebastian Inlet area was greeted by a Magnificent Frigatebird cruising north above the highway, perhaps moving ahead of an approaching storm. Slightly confused directions concerning the Harlequin proved to be no loss as our walk provided fantastic views of Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, Royal and Forster's Terns, and some excellent Black Skimmers. Most intriguing of all, Wood Storks stood at point blank range waiting for handouts from a fishermen's gutting station. The birds were absurdly approachable. After chatting with two local birders, we soon found the Harlequin swimming and then sitting just in front of the park headquarters. Like many of the birds we'd already seen in Florida, it gave superb views and exceptional photographic opportunities. It was also rather unexpected, and the second of many new species that we added to the Birdfinders Florida tour list. We later scanned the breakwater for a reported Purple Sandpiper, but couldn't find it in worsening weather conditions. We retired for an excellent lunch nearby just as heavy rain set in for the remainder of the afternoon. After lunch, we continued south finding several Red-shouldered Hawks and then, surprisingly, a Broad-winged Hawk perched on roadside wires. The latter typically winters in South America and was yet another addition to the winter tour list. The rain and the drive to Lantana pretty much closed our birding for the day. After a seafood supper we settled down for an interesting night at the motel!

Day 4: The previous day's rain had cleared, the new cold front bringing cool, windy but clear conditions that ultimately turned into a pleasantly warm day. A relaxed breakfast at Denny's was in order but not without first noting Red-bellied Woodpeckers in the parking lot. Later we headed south to Fort Lauderdale eventually finding the appropriate section of Old Griffin Road in an attempt to follow up a report of Smooth-billed Ani. En route we saw some free-flying (but non-countable) Egyptian Geese and had rather good views of American Kestrel and Loggerhead Shrike. Having arrived at the 'ani site' (actually a piece of wasteland behind a garage) the situation didn't look that promising but perseverance paid dividends giving us two excellent species – Short-tailed Hawk and Monk Parakeet. The hawk, in particular, was a stunner, a beautiful light morph that gave several prolonged views overhead. The Smooth-billed Ani was a no show so we pressed on south towards Miami Beach. Our target here was a Red-footed Booby, a bird apparently found distressed on a local beach and then taken in for rehabilitation. It apparently recovered well and had been released into the wild but continued to come to the rehabilitation center to rest after foraging out in Biscayne Bay. After checking several overlooks in Biscayne Bay we decided to check the rehab center itself and soon found the booby along with scores of Brown Pelicans resting on the rehab center cages! Perhaps this wouldn't be a tick for the purist, but is still very much countable by ABA listing rules. Not so countable but impressive all the same, was a huge Green Iguana scavenging around the rehab cages. We spent the remainder of the afternoon in Bill Baggs/Cape Florida State Park, reached via the Rickenbacker Causeway after an interesting drive through downtown Miami. We also had another target in mind, this time a La Sagra's Flycatcher – a real rarity from the Caribbean and West Indies. Recent sightings seemed to indicate that late afternoon wasn't a bad time to try but by 17:30 we had not a sniff of the flycatcher and threw in the towel. However, not all was lost. The nature trails around the park produced many interesting species including Broad-winged Hawk, Common Ground-dove, Eastern Phoebe, Great Crested Flycatcher, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Northern Parula, Prairie Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and a fine Painted Bunting. It was a drag heading south through Miami and Coral Gables in rush hour traffic but Homestead (actually Florida City) felt a bit more like a home as we settled down to three nights in a decent motel and a broad choice of dining establishments close by.

Day 5: A calm sunny day, perfect for our much-anticipated day in Everglades National Park. Things started well with about four Common Mynas (now ABA countable) with the Boat-tailed and Common Grackles on the tarmac at the local gas station. As we approached the Everglades, Red-shouldered Hawk, American Kestrel and a Merlin graced the roadside wires. Once inside the park

we tackled the toughest part of the day first, primarily an attempt to avoid mosquitoes and heat haze. We embarked on the 3.5 mile round walk down Snake Bight Trail with optimism and found some good birds almost immediately: Hermit Thrush, Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart, Northern Waterthrush, Prairie Warbler and later, a fine Yellow-throated Warbler – not a bad haul for mid-February! The boardwalk at the end of the trail gave some views of expansive mudflats at low tide. It was full of birds, including clouds of shorebirds wheeling around trying to elude a Peregrine cruising overhead. Of the birds identified, Dunlin, Western Sandpipers and Semipalmated Plovers appeared closest to the boardwalk. Great Blue and Little Blue Herons were also here, along with several ‘dancing’ Reddish Egrets. Perhaps most surprising was a party of three Lesser Black-backed Gulls. We tried for Caribbean Flamingo but the closest we got was several distant Roseate Spoonbills. The fabled mosquitoes of Snake Bite Trail were almost non-existent, except for poor old Ron who managed to get a dozen or so bites while the rest of us had no trouble at all! On to Flamingo then where we had a pleasant picnic lunch with Wood Storks, Ospreys and Bald Eagles overhead, and Willets and Marbled Godwits streaming past over Florida Bay. We later found the Willets and godwits at rest in front of the visitor center. Scouring the campgrounds and visitor center area for Shiny Cowbirds didn’t work for us, though we did have flight views of a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, the only one of the tour. Two non-avian highlights, both in the vicinity of the marina included an American Crocodile hauled up on a bank at close range and our first and only West Indian Manatees of the tour foraging in the harbor. We watched the latter whilst enjoying ice cream, snacks and coffee from the local grocery store. Later in the afternoon we followed up a report of a Worm-eating Warbler at West Lake but found very few birds overall, though an adult male American Redstart was a bonus, a bird well seen by William. Mahogany Hammock gave us incredible views of two Barred Owls grappling with a rat. The hardwood hammock was full of Grey Catbirds and Lynne did well to spot a Brown Thrasher. The drive out yielded Limpkin, Wood Stork and several hundred Tree Swallows over the road, which pretty much closed our birding for the day. Back to Homestead for supper and a good night’s rest.

Day 6: The day dawned calm, mild and cloudy. We left Homestead early for the quiet leafy suburbs of Kendall. Even before we’d pulled over to start birding, there was a sudden cry of “oriole” and a strong candidate for Spot-breasted Oriole flew across the road right in front of our vehicle. The plot thickened as one, two and then six Baltimore Orioles appeared in the treetops, all were female/immatures and surely not the oriole that flew in front of the car? Distractions began to abound. Suddenly on nearby wires two Red-whiskered Bulbuls appeared, then a White-crowned Pigeon above the yard across the road, and then another White-crowned Pigeon, and then another! Only a few yards away several White-winged Doves appeared but of the desired oriole, there was no sign. We decided to walk the streets finding Northern Mockingbird and Downy Woodpecker, and then a singing oriole. This bird superficially resembled Hooded Oriole but closer inspection revealed the diagnostic breast blotches of Spot-breasted Oriole. The bird posed for a good ten minutes before we decided to walk back around to our original viewing spot with the hope of achieving better light. More distractions came in the form of large flocks of Mitred Parakeets. By the time we got back to the oriole it had moved on but in its place, seven White-crowned Pigeons and perhaps as many six Red-whiskered Bulbuls! It had really been a stellar morning with almost all our key birds seen before breakfast.

Next we headed back out to Bill Baggs/Cape Florida State Park and concentrated on the favored area for the La Sagra’s Flycatcher once more. Again we saw flycatchers: two Great Crested and two Eastern Phoebes, but the La Sagra’s eluded us to the point where we really began to question whether it was still around. On the plus side we improved our tally of Painted Buntings (3) and had a pleasant harbourside lunch at the Boat Side grill where a few of us experienced Cuban coffee for the first time, and apparently the last time for Ron! We found no new birds for the list, though the group narrowly missed a Yellow-breasted Chat when James found a (leader only) bird near the parking area. We closed the day with a visit to Miami University campus for exotics. The campus was bustling with students as one might imagine but straight away we found an impressive Blue-and-yellow Macaw (non-countable) teed up in a leafless tree. Grahame continued to draw our attention to each and every Muscovy Duck that we came across but it was really parakeets that we wanted to see. We’d all but given up and almost climbed into the vehicle when a couple of Yellow-chevrons Parakeets screeched as they sped overhead and landed in a palm near the bus terminal. The birds vapourised into the palm with admirable camouflaged, but eventually we enjoyed good views and shared experience with a couple of interested students. Both birds disappeared into a nest hole. At the same time a stunning male Spot-breasted Oriole flew past and landed near the bus stop, an opportunity that Ron seized and producing some excellent images. As a note, it’s worth mentioning that Yellow-chevrons Parakeet was added to the ABA Checklist in 2002 but subsequently removed in 2007. Despite a healthy population in Florida, it’s never been considered a countable exotic in the state.

Day 7: The day began calm and pleasant. Common Mynas were again present at our local gas station in Florida City and as we headed south toward the Keys, a brief stop on the Card Sound Road produced a large flock of 60 Cedar Waxwings, plus hundreds of Tree Swallows and American Robins. Our first major stops of the day were in Key Largo where again we had luck with Short-tailed Hawks (light and dark morphs), and found our first identifiable hummingbirds with several Ruby-throated Hummingbirds feeding on garden flowers. Overhead, two Magnificent Frigatebirds glided effortlessly towards the Atlantic. Great Crested Flycatcher, North Cardinal, Grey Catbird, and Painted Bunting all gave good views in the same area. We pressed on enjoying the scenery, stopping whenever we saw gatherings of birds. One such spot on Colony Key had a nice concentration of close shorebirds including Semipalmated Plover, Least and Western Sandpipers and Short-billed Dowitcher. However, the highlight picked out by Lynne, was the first Great White Heron of the tour. This is the rare white form of Great Blue Heron occurring specifically in Florida. It was quite late by the time we reached Stock Island and Key West, so late in fact that the Botanical Gardens had closed its gates for the day so we birded from the parking lot outside the fence! It didn’t seem particularly promising at first but we soon

began to find birds including Pied-billed Grebe, American Kestrel, Red-bellied Woodpecker and the first Yellow-bellied Sapsucker of the trip. Three Red Junglefowl (non-countable) kept us company throughout our time here, part of a thriving population of over two thousand birds in the Key West area. Supper was taken at the Hurricane Hole, and the night in Key West.

Day 8: The day dawned cold and windy, hardly ideal for a Valentine's Day cruise to the Dry Tortugas. However, our party had been well primed the night before and with a forecast of 6–10 ft seas we were ready for a rough crossing. Many of the day-trippers were not so ready and later contributed their own chum to the trip, actually breakfast that was served on board just before we set sail! Expectations were not particularly high for pelagic-type birds on the crossing, but we had barely started the journey before a Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua) had been spotted. A little later, there was a good prolonged view of a Pomarine Jaeger (Pomarine Skua) and along with multiple Northern Gannets and Magnificent Frigatebirds, we were kept busy for much of the journey. A nice surprise about half-way between the mainland and the Tortugas was a Brown Booby passing close to the stern of the boat. As we approached Middle Key, and then Hospital Key, hordes of seabirds came into view and in rapid succession we had Sooty Tern, Brown Noddy, Masked and Brown Boobies before docking at Garden Key. With about four hours to explore, we scoured Garden Key and Fort Jefferson for interesting species in addition to the birds that we'd really come to see. The highlight was easily a Burrowing Owl that had taken up residence inside one of the buildings, but there was also a Wilson's Snipe, Killdeer, and plenty of Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers. Of course, the real joy of this trip is being able to watch thousands of Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies on their breeding grounds on Bush Key and the effortless, mesmerising flight of Magnificent Frigatebirds cruising overhead throughout our time on the island. Three Sandwich Terns were also resting on Bush Key, our first of the tour. As we left Garden Key, a Peregrine followed the boat out to sea and the Captain swung by Hospital Key for better views of the Masked and Brown Boobies. Although marginally better than on the inbound journey, the birds could hardly have been described as close but we did have an incredibly close Masked Booby fly right past the boat. The return journey to the mainland was much more comfortable and Grahame even found time to snooze without missing anything. We returned to the Hurricane Hole for another enjoyable supper.

Day 9: During the morning we drove through Key West checking for kingbirds and flycatchers on wires but found neither. The best bird was a roadside Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. So we headed for Fort Zachary Taylor State Park not really anticipating too much at this season (it's normally known as a migration hotspot) but even so it was quieter than expected. A Great White Heron and several Blue-winged Teals could be found in the moat of the Fort, and an American Kestrel gave excellent close up views. Over the sea, a distant Magnificent Frigatebird and a much closer Sandwich Tern were the best birds. And so we began our journey back north on the way following up a report of possible Black-whiskered Vireos singing on Middle Torch Key. We found the site without a problem but certainly didn't hear any singing vireos of any kind. On the plus side we did well for raptors with a couple of Short-tailed Hawks (one light, one dark), two perched Broad-winged Hawks and our first Red-tailed Hawk of the tour. A few passerines were found including Northern Cardinal, American Redstart, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and a delightful Prairie Warbler. Sugarloaf Key held a very similar species selection, but also a nice Black-and-white Warbler, all this during a very optimistic effort for Mangrove Cuckoo. We had no luck with the cuckoo. The remainder of the day was spent pushing north leaving the Keys behind and returning to Florida City once more. The fifth Short-tailed Hawk (light morph) of the day was seen over Key Largo. After checking into our motel early, we decided to head up Florida's Turnpike to Cutler Ridge and try for (West Indian) Cave Swallows. Surprisingly, and unlike our previous February visit, the birds were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps a steady series of unseasonably cold nights had been enough to push them out, but whatever the reason the birds couldn't be found. We rounded off the day with an evening visit to Castellow Hammock Nature Park where the highlight was excellent and prolonged views of an Ovenbird feeding in the open. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Painted Buntings were also present. Dinner was taken at a local Italian restaurant.

Day 10: It has to be said that the morning was a complete gamble. We left the motel early in heavy rain and drove directly to Bill Baggs/Cape Florida State Park for our third and absolute last shot at the La Sagra's Flycatcher. Overnight rain continued into the morning and finally stopped for good around 09:00. The only folks in the park at that time were the staff and several birders. On reaching the favoured and, by now, very familiar area for the La Sagra's we decided to split up to spread more pairs of eyes and ears along the various trails. The tactic worked. At about 09:30, Lynne, Ron and Grahame heard a steady series of sharp call notes coming from dense cover close to the trail. They hadn't seen a flycatcher at that point, but the calls were sufficiently distinctive for them to warrant rounding up James and William who were elsewhere on the trails. Of course, the buzz of activity around our group attracted all the birders on the trails and before long we had a small entourage keenly listening and watching. Fifteen minutes later the bird called again, another series of sharp notes and James was instantly sure it was the right bird. Then glasses up, heart thumping and James had a visual confirming beyond doubt that we had the right bird. But it was flighty, keeping low and not sitting up like a typical flycatcher, perhaps because of the wind. The bird eluded everyone else in our party and moved a bit further south. It called briefly once more followed by what seemed like an extended period of silence. During this time William produced a Magnolia Warbler, an excellent find in winter. Afraid of losing touch with the La Sagra's, we spread out once more but soon afterwards the La Sagra's betrayed its presence with an extended series of calls. James had another visual, and this time Lynne, Ron and William got on the bird but it remained flighty. A few more call notes followed, and then, finally, the bird shuffled up a thin spindly branch and sat in the sun for three or four minutes allowing exquisite views for all - and there was much rejoicing! It was a bird we really deserved to see.

After a brief, unsuccessful search for a Chuck-wills-widow that had been reported the previous day we headed for Miami and settled for a relaxed brunch at Denny's. We later spent an hour around the Baptist Hospital grounds in Kendall hoping for White-winged Parakeet, but saw only Mitred Parakeets. However, we did see these well and in large numbers with at least 75 birds in large, noisy groups. Overhead, a dark-morph Short-tailed Hawk soared high above a Sharp-shinned Hawk with an American Kestrel feeding from waste ground near the parking lot. It was time to move on with a rather long drive to Punta Gorda still on the agenda. However, we still reserved time for an excellent stop along the Tamiami Trail, which produced fantastic views of foraging Snail Kites, about five birds in all. The birds were a joy to watch in perfect late afternoon light, some of them landing and extracting snails from shells just meters away. Several Limpkins, Belted Kingfishers and Common Grackles were also in the area. The final part of the day was dedicated to burning up the miles, but as we approached Punta Gorda we did see a nice Great Horned Owl perched up in open pine woodland close the road.

Day 11: The day began cool, crisp and clear. We left the motel early with a plan to arrive at Corkscrew Sanctuary before the crowds, somewhat motivated by a report of Shiny Cowbird, a key bird for any visit to Florida. Reports had come from the feeders around the visitor center but before entering the center we tried the feeders near the parking lot, finding loads of Common Grackles and Brown-headed Cowbirds (mostly females), and a nice transitional-plumaged male Indigo Bunting. However, the birds were constantly disturbed by passers-by and we gave up, electing instead to try the feeders viewable from inside the center. Within minutes Grahame had found a male Shiny Cowbird! First we watched from inside the center and then moved outside preferring to enjoy the bird without being obscured by a dirty window! As we watched, almost unbelievably, a second male Shiny Cowbird appeared. The birds visited on and off for the next fifteen minutes before settling down for a rest period in the pines. The morning hours would be premium on the rest of the sanctuary so we entered the boardwalk for an absolutely spectacular bird-rich walk. The views of many species were just phenomenal with close-up looks at Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Tufted Titmouse, Pine Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, White-eyed and Blue-headed Vireos. On reaching the observation deck we decided on an extended watch for raptors, especially since our previous February tour had produced an early Swallow-tailed Kite from this very spot. Indeed, every volunteer on the sanctuary seemed to be waiting for the first kites of the year, apparently two days late by local accounts. Perhaps the succession of cold nights and cold northern winds had been suppressing their arrival? Despite a good effort we found no kites, but did see our tenth Short-tailed Hawk (dark morph) of the trip along with plenty of Red-shouldered Hawks and some Wood Storks. Returning to the visitor center was a slow affair. It was close to noon and the boardwalk was filling up with families and busloads of tourists. Everyone wanted to know what we'd seen and why we needed such impressive equipment! It's funny how our standard birding gear ('scope, bins, camera) attracts so much attention in such places. One lady even tried to show us a 'chickadee' that would have been a nice addition to the trip list – the bird in question was a stunning male Yellow-throated Warbler! We lunched at the visitor center keeping an eye on the feeders. Incredibly, the Shiny Cowbirds had increased to five (four male and one female) and Painted Buntings, mostly resplendent males, were constantly present. Two marauding Raccoons also tried the feeders at one point.

We departed Corkscrew after a really fine morning and made an effort to patrol the country roads north of the swamp to scan for raptors, especially aiming for Swallow-tailed Kite. Osprey, Turkey and Black Vultures, Northern Caracara, American Kestrel and Peregrine were all found. It was a delightful breezy afternoon for soaring raptors, but alas, no kites appeared. The day was drawing to a close. We aimed for a new site, the North County Waste Water Treatment facility, just north of Naples. It was best viewed from the road where a bridge gave us an elevated overlook onto scores of waterfowl, mostly diving ducks. The bulk were Lesser Scaup, with a party of six Greater Scaup feeding completely separately on an adjacent pond. Spotted and Least Sandpipers fed busily around the black plastic edges of the ponds but the real attraction was a long staying (apparently first-winter male) White-winged Scoter that we located with little trouble. It was yet another write-in on the tour list and a good inland record in Florida. The day ended at Naples City Marina where we searched in vain for Budgies – that's right, Budgerigars! Grahame, with his penchant for exotics, had met a boat owner who'd been complaining about a flock of Budgerigars in his rigging! By the account it sounded like a reasonable flock, perhaps 30–50 birds. On arrival, the scale of the marina was a surprise – it was huge, and very up-market. Moreover, despite scanning plenty of boats and the nearby neighborhood, there was nary a Budgie to be seen. On the way back to Punta Gorda we stopped for an enjoyable meal and reflected on the events of the day, especially the wild Budgerigar chase!

*Despite having some fortune with an early Swallow-tailed in 2008 (February 18th), February 2010 was cooler than average in Florida. We later found out that no Swallow-tailed Kites had been reported until February 24th when three were seen at Ding Darling NWR.

Day 12: By Florida standards, the start to the day was distinctly cold but it was pleasant enough for us with constant sunshine, actually becoming quite warm later. We dedicated the entire morning to some splendid open piney woods habitat at the Babbcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area. It was a fine morning with a host of excellent species: Green Heron, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern (Yellow-shafted) Flicker, Hairy Woodpecker, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Eastern Bluebird, Swamp Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow (possibly the Florida form) and the pale-eyed form of Eastern Towhee. Of interest was the large numbers of ground feeding Yellow-rumped, Pine and Palm Warblers. They seemed to be everywhere. The Palm Warblers were composed mainly of the yellow eastern sub-species, and this area was the only point in the entire tour where yellow Palm Warblers were more abundant than the paler, duller western form. A major surprise was the absence

of Bachman's Sparrows. In February 2008, we'd found them easily but this morning it was certainly a major disappointment to miss them. We still, however, had a second chance later in the tour.

In the second half of the day we headed south towards Naples and spent the afternoon and early evening at a superb wetland – the Eagle Lake Mitigation area. It was full of common water birds, approachability of Florida's birds enjoying fine views of Great White Heron, Anhingas, Glossy Ibises, Wood Storks, and Black-crowned Night-herons. As the evening drew to a close, bird activity increased and Ron did well to pick out a Sora in the marshes, and there was a Solitary Sandpiper (rare in winter) close-by. On meeting an American birder and his partner, we learned that they'd just seen two Bronzed Cowbirds with Common Starlings on the ball fields. Despite spending a good hour searching through Common Starlings and Red-winged Blackbirds, the only cowbirds we could find were Brown-headed – rather unfortunate since the Bronzed would have given us a cowbird sweep. That much said, the same American birder had never heard of a Budgerigar, let alone knew of any current sites where they might be seen! Grahame had been bold enough to ask him about Budgies which resulted in some rapid thumbing through the Sibley guide for pictures. It was the first time any of us had met someone who didn't know what a Budgie was. He may have just been thrown off by the accents, or maybe he just couldn't accept that a bunch of Brits had flown all the way to Florida to look for Budgies! He was certainly dumfounded by the question. By way of explanation, Budgerigars are actually countable in North America by virtue of a small (but formerly much larger) population on the central Florida Gulf Coast.

Day 13: We headed south from Punta Gorda once more hoping to spend the morning at Ding Darling NWR. In actual fact, our hopes were dashed on arrival as the refuge was closed for maintenance, apparently a Friday tradition at Ding Darling. Disappointed, we rallied for alternatives and managed to walk some of the trails having excellent views of a Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Red-shouldered Hawk, and Black-and-white Warbler. Still, we couldn't get to the spots we wanted namely the drive loop, so we headed back across the Sanibel Causeway to Bunch Beach stopping briefly for a Common Loon (Great Northern Diver) en route. Bunch Beach was a fine alternative to Ding Darling producing many close feeding shorebirds, including our first Piping Plovers. Also new to the tour was a distant but clearly identifiable American Oystercatcher, and there were several Marbled Godwits. The views of Reddish Egrets and Black Skimmers were simply exceptional. After lunch we pressed on north ultimately heading for Orlando. A detour to Holmes Beach in late afternoon was a real bonus. We quite quickly found two exotics – Black-hooded and Blue-crowned Parakeets. We enjoyed them in perfect late afternoon light and felt grateful to the local birder at Bunch Beach who'd given us tips on where to search. Holmes Beach wouldn't have figured in our plans otherwise. As yet, both of these parakeets are uncountable but that may change at some point in the near future as it did with Common Myna in 2008. The day ended with a steady drive to our motel in Orlando.

Day 14: Some early rain dispersed unveiling a beautiful, warm sunny day. We spent almost all day in the Three Lakes Wildlife Management area. Our goal species was Bachman's Sparrow and thankfully we secured one at the very first birding stop of the morning! This bird sat and up for a while and gave extended views, much to everyone's relief. In the same area, Eastern Bluebird, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Pine, Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Savannah Sparrows and Eastern Towhee (pale-eyed birds again). Much of the remainder of the morning was spent from an observation tower overlooking Lake Jackson. After the Bachman's Sparrow our only goal was to scan to try and dig up some interesting birds, perhaps a Swallow-tailed Kite or two! Wood Ducks (3), Limpkins (5), Snail Kite (8), Cooper's Hawk, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet (2 in the trees below the tower) were all recorded but alas no kites. The approach road to the tower had given us the first Wild Turkeys of the trip and another four could be seen from the tower. Throughout the morning, Bald Eagles soared and James eventually tallied 23 individuals for the day. In late afternoon we returned to a small area of dry prairie where, in February 2008, we twice flushed a Yellow Rail whilst attempting to find Grasshopper Sparrows. There was no such luck this time, though our group members scored ten out of ten for effort. We did flush three Grasshopper Sparrows, likely the resident Florida race, from the same area. Our final birding of the day was on the shores of Lake Kissimmee where we found our first American Purple Gallinules, a bird that surprisingly had eluded us throughout the tour. Two Sandhill Cranes had blocked the approach road and were still present on the way back but there was no sign of the resident, re-introduced Whooping Cranes known to frequent the area. A local had told us to try a farm about a mile up the road, and after a little searching, there amongst the cows and horses was a lovely adult Whooping Crane! It was fitting end to the day, and actually the last notable bird of the tour.

Day 15: A relatively early pre-dawn drive saw us arrive at the airport in good time to check-in for our respective flights home.

Day 16: Morning arrival back in the UK at the end of the tour.

The tour concluded with 180 bird species being seen, a new winter tour record, and 2330 miles driven. Special thanks Lynne and Ron Demaine, Grahame Walshe and William Webb for their excellent bird finding and camaraderie throughout the trip.

James P. Smith
Amherst, MA
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