



## **Florida Winter Birding Break Trip Description and Itinerary**

Welcome to the Partnership for International Birding's Florida Winter Birding Break. January is a great time to visit south Florida – not only to get away from colder temperatures found to the north, but also because of the addition of the large number of birds that spend the winter there. You will have plenty of opportunities to scan wetlands and ocean beaches for ducks, grebes, loons, herons, shorebirds and gulls. Fields and woodlands will host a wide variety of warblers, sparrows and more.

Our general schedule for each day will be as follows.

- Sunrise will be around 7:15 AM. We should try our best to be in the field as close to that time as possible, as bird activity is highest in the early mornings. We will continue birding until lunch.
- We will try to eat picnic style lunches, when possible. This saves on time that would otherwise be spent in restaurants.
- Birding will continue through the afternoon, as birding is good throughout the day in winter in south Florida.
- Sunsets are close to 6:00 PM, and soon after that we will return to the hotel most days.

The weather is mostly excellent during this time of year. Outside temperatures for mid-January range from highs in the mid-70 degrees Fahrenheit (and it can get into the 80's) to lows in the 40's and 50's (in the late evenings and early mornings). It can get into the 30's on a rare occasion. While rain is possible, in recent years there has only been a

trace amount of rain during this time. The average for January is less than 2 inches of rain. If we do get rain, we will try to use that time for driving from one place to the next. You should consider bringing a small umbrella, as a light rain can make for very good birding conditions.



## **Day 1: Arrival into Fort Myers and PM Birding**

Birding opportunities today will depend on your arrival time at the Fort Myers Airport. The actual schedule for birding on this arrival day will be determined based on the group's flight schedules. There are plenty of good birding sites not far from the airport, and we will most likely concentrate on these places today.

Overnight in Fort Myers.



## **Day 2: Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area, Oscar Scherer State Park and Myakka River State Park.**

We will need to make an early departure from the hotel this morning, as it is important to arrive early for the best chance to see Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. We will travel about 30 minutes to Babcock/Webb Wildlife Management Area. The habitat here includes pinewoods, marsh and open water. Target birds include Red-cockaded

Woodpecker, Red-headed Woodpecker, Mottled Duck, Least Bittern, King Rail (difficult), Brown-headed Nuthatch, Sedge Wren, Pine Warbler and Bachman's Sparrow.

After birding here for two hours or so, we will head north to Oscar Scherer State Park. The park features woodland bordered by brushy scrub. This is a perfect place to find Florida Scrub-Jays, as well as a nice mix of woodpeckers, songbirds and waterfowl.

We will finish our birding today at Myakka River State Park, where hammocks, marshes and lakes dominate the landscape. The oak and palm hammocks are great places to find wintering songbirds. Many species of ducks, waders and shorebirds are also possible here, including Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Glossy Ibis, Limpkin and Sandhill Crane.

As we drive throughout the day, we should keep our eyes open for Burrowing Owls and Crested Caracaras. Both species are possible throughout this area.

We will plan to get back to the hotel by about 5:00 PM. Shortly after arrival, we will meet in the lobby to review the day's bird checklist and review the plan for the next day. After this, we will head for dinner.

After dinner, we will visit a grocery store to purchase lunch items for Tuesday, so we can eat lunch in the field, while still watching birds.

Overnight in Fort Myers.



### **Day 3: Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge**

Once again, an early departure is best, and we hope to leave the hotel by 6:30 AM. Our first destination will depend on the tides, so this will change with each trip.

One likely first destination is one of the true birding “jewels” of North America --- Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Situated on the back bay side of Sanibel Island, Ding Darling (named for J.N. “Ding” Darling, a writer and conservationist of the first half of the twentieth century) is a complex of marshes, lakes, ponds and mangroves that hosts virtually every wading bird to be found in Florida, plus a wide variety of shorebirds in the winter. The mangroves are home to the rare and elusive Mangrove Cuckoo, and the drier upland areas can have an interesting array of wintering songbirds. At low tide, many birds will be out in the open, feeding in the tidal pools along the five-mile Wildlife Drive.

When we have seen enough of the main preserve at Ding Darling (and this may prove impossible), we will take a look at the Bailey Tract of the refuge. The Bailey Tract is a different habitat altogether - a group of ponds surrounded by prairie and ringed in part by a canal.

We will finish our day at the Sanibel Lighthouse, a historic structure surrounded by woodlands on one side and beach on the other.

We will once again try to get back to the hotel at about 5:00 PM. After arrival, we will meet in the lobby to review the day’s bird checklist and review plans for the next day. Afterwards, we head for dinner.

Overnight in Fort Myers.



#### **Day 4: Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Preserve, and PM at Shark Valley in Everglades National Park**

We check out of the hotel today in order to move to the Atlantic side of Florida for some key birding opportunities.

Today we will be visiting Corkscrew Swamp, a National Audubon Society sanctuary that encompasses the largest remaining stand of baldcypress in North America. As we walk

a two-mile boardwalk through the swamp, we may see Wood Storks (which have a large breeding colony here), Barred Owl, Limpkin and many herons and egrets. This is also an overwintering site for a variety of warblers, vireos and occasionally a Painted Bunting. The plant population alone is well worth a visit; the cypress trees are hung with a huge number of fascinating epiphytes. Alligators watch quietly from the water a few feet below the boardwalk, waiting for a misstep by a careless birder....

After spending the morning at Corkscrew, we will eat our picnic lunch and then begin the drive to the Shark Valley entrance of Everglades National Park. No trip to south Florida would be complete without seeing at least a part of this vast "River of Sedge" ecosystem.

We need to arrive at Shark Valley by 2:30 in the afternoon, so that we can enjoy a two-hour tram ride which begins at 3:00 PM. This ride will give us easy access to areas where we will look for Anhinga, Glossy Ibis, Snail Kite, Short-tailed Hawk, and Purple Gallinule. We may also see the Great White Heron, a white form of Great Blue Heron, which may be a separate species. Wintering songbirds are likely in the mangroves. We should not miss seeing American Alligators.

After the tram ride, we will leave the Everglades and begin the drive toward our hotel in Fort Lauderdale (an hour and 15 minute drive). Once at the hotel, we will review our bird checklist for the day and make plans for the following morning, before heading out for dinner.

Overnight in Fort Lauderdale.



## **Day 5: Wakodahatchee Wetlands and Green Cay Nature Center; PM Return to Fort Myers**

After breakfast, we will make a half hour drive to our first destination today. We will be visiting two fabulous birding areas this morning - Wakodahatchee Wetlands and Green Cay Nature Center. Both of these offer amazing opportunities for birding and bird photography.

Wakodahatchee is a reclaimed water treatment facility, helping to clean two million gallons of water every day. Green Cay is a constructed wetland and educational facility.



Both of these offer an extensive boardwalk system, which allows you to get close to a large number of birds. Expect up-close looks at Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Mottled Duck, Egyptian Goose, Wood Stork, Least Bittern, Roseate Spoonbill, Sora, Purple Swamphen, Purple Gallinule and Limpkin. Neotropic Cormorants have been wintering here in recent years. Monk Parakeets, Painted Bunting, wintering warblers, and other songbirds are possible in the trees.



Wakodahatchee Wetlands

We will be in no rush to leave these sites; however, we will eventually need to return to Fort Myers, about 2.5 hours west.

After eating a picnic style lunch, we will begin the drive. Along the way, we will pass the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee, the second-largest lake in the lower 48 states. We'll take some time to stop and scan the lake. Additional stops can be made for any target species possible along the drive, such as Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Crested Caracara and Common Myna.

Once we are back in Fort Myers, we will check in to the hotel and then go to dinner. Bring your bird checklists, so that once we order our meals, we can review the list and discuss plans for the next morning.

Overnight in Fort Myers.



## **Day 6: More Birding from Fort Myers: Fort Myers Beach and Harns Marsh**

Today we will visit additional great birding destinations, including coastal sites near Fort Myers Beach. This area is very popular with a huge variety of shorebirds. It is possible

to see a dozen or more shorebird species here, including Red Knot, Wilson's Plover, Snowy Plover, Piping Plover, Dunlin and American Oystercatcher. We should also find Black Skimmer and the occasional marauding Merlin.

There are two other notable places which we are likely to visit today (though we may sneak visits to these locales earlier in the trip).

- The first is Six Mile Cypress Slough, which should have a nice assortment of herons, woodpeckers, and songbirds. Barred Owl can often be found here.
- The other destination is Harns Marsh, a marshland "replacement" project that has resulted in a beautiful marsh/pond/prairie complex. In the past we have found Snail Kites here, among many other specialties.

We will likely have more time to visit additional areas during the afternoon, based upon any species which we may have missed.

We will plan to return to the hotel around 5:00 PM. We will meet a half hour later to review the bird checklist, before going out for our final dinner together.

Overnight in Fort Myers.

## **Day 7: Morning Birding; and PM Flights Home**

We will adjust our plans based upon what targets we have not yet seen or upon any rarities reported. We may return to places we have already been, or we may check out some new areas.

Actual birding opportunities will of course depend on the flight plans of the trip participants.