



South Florida in Winter With the Illinois Audubon Society

Feb 18-24, 2020

Tour leader: Josh Engel

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Florida in February. Sunshine, warm weather, palm trees, and lots and lots of birds! It makes a perfect winter getaway for birders looking to escape the snow and cold. This week-long trip went from the Gulf Coast to the Atlantic Coast via the Everglades and Keys, and saw a great selection of the top Florida birds: **Limpkin, Florida Scrub-Jay, Short-tailed Hawk, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Swallow-tailed Kite, Painted Bunting, and White-crowned Pigeon** (and we got some great looks at **manatees!**). These complemented Florida's abundant wading birds, which included **Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, and Reddish Egret** among countless **Tricolored Herons** and others. We were lucky with Caribbean vagrants, too, finding both the wintering **La Sagra's Flycatcher** in the Everglades and a **Thick-billed Vireo** in the Keys, not to mention the western vagrant **Hammond's Flycatcher** at Corkscrew Swamp! Birding trips to Florida also feature a wide range of exotic species that now call Florida home, and on this trip we saw **Yellow-chevroned** and **Monk Parakeets** and **Indian Peafowl** among others. And of course we saw some beautiful Florida sunsets, ate some seafood, and enjoyed the uniqueness of South Florida.

TOP 5 BIRDS AS VOTED BY THE GROUP

- 1. Swallow-tailed Kite**
- 2. Thick-billed Vireo**
- 3. Florida Scrub-Jay**
- 4. Burrowing Owl**
- 5. Painted Bunting**



Feb 18, Day 1. Arrival to Fort Myers

We met up easily in the group's hotel near the airport in Fort Myers and quickly set out to start birding. Our first destination was in the north part of Cape Coral, where a pair of **Florida Scrub-Jays** has called an undeveloped area home for a number of years. At first they didn't want to show themselves, but once they did, they put on a great show, greedily taking the peanuts that we offered them. We also had great looks at **Eastern Meadowlark** here and our first of several common Florida birds, like **Northern Mockingbird, Osprey, and Red-bellied Woodpecker**.

From there we headed to the southern part of Cape Coral. We quickly found **Burrowing Owl**--before we had even really started looking for them! We enjoyed one pair, then headed to our intended destination where three pairs were standing outside their burrows. It was great to have long studies of these beautiful little owls. A number of **Monk Parakeets** were feeding in the grass here as well.

With waning daylight, we rushed over to Lakes Park in Fort Myers. In the little remaining daylight, we enjoyed watching many **White and Glossy Ibis, a Wood Stork**, and many other wading birds, including a flyby **Limpkin**. We rounded out the day with a dinner and a wonderful down-home Southern restaurant near the hotel.



Florida Scrub-Jay. Photo by Josh Engel.

Feb 19, Day 2. Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area and Sanibel Island

We were up early on the first day, hoping to catch some early **Red-cockaded Woodpecker** action. We made good time and arrived to the gorgeous pine forest of Babcock-Webb as the sun was rising. We quickly heard **Red-cockaded Woodpecker** and soon found the bird, getting great views of it calling and foraging before it flew off deeper into the woods. We continued up the road to look for other specialties of the area, **Brown-headed Nutchatch** and **Bachman's**

Sparrow. It was very birdy, with a large flock of **Pine Warblers** foraging actively through the pines. We had nice views initially of **Brown-headed Nuthatch**, but near the end of our walk we got tremendous views. **Bachman's Sparrow** gave us the run-around. We heard one singing, but when we bashed through the grass to track it down, we could never find it again. We enjoyed seeing **Eastern Bluebird**, **Sandhill Crane**, and even a covey of **Northern Bobwhite** on the edge of the road.

From Babcock-Webb we hit the road to Sanibel Island, famed as a vacation spot for most and, to birders, for Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge. On the way to Ding Darling we stopped to check a beach for shorebirds and were treated to some very close **Ruddy Turnstones**, **Sanderlings**, and **Black-bellied Plovers**. Meanwhile, **Sandwich and Royal Terns** and **Brown Pelicans** were feeding just off the beach, and a couple of **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** showed nicely on the beach.



Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Photo by Jane Icenogle.

We picked up lunch and headed to Ding Darling. After eating our picnic, Jane spotted a **Pileated Woodpecker** just off the parking lot, which stuck around for everyone to get great views. Finally we set out on the wildlife drive. Here we got great views of **Reddish Egret**, **various shorebirds**, **American White Pelican**, **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron**, and the array of wader birds that was starting to become familiar, birds like **Tricolored and Little Blue Herons**, **Great and Snowy Egrets**, and **Anhinga**. We tried for Mangrove Cuckoo unsuccessfully before leaving the island. Unfortunately, we got stuck in island-leaving traffic, which cut short out time at our day's final destination, Bunche Beach. Even more unfortunately, as soon as we arrived, the large flock of shorebirds that was sitting on mudflats near the parking lot got flushed, flew off, and didn't return. We did at least get to cap off the day with a beautiful sunset.

Feb 20, Day 3. Corkscrew Swamp and Everglades

We set out early again to head to another world-famous birding destination, Corkscrew Swamp Audubon Sanctuary. It was a beautiful morning. A **Pileated Woodpecker** greeted us in the parking lot, and after just a few minute of waiting, several male **Painted Buntings** showed up at the visitors' center feeders. The boardwalk here never fails to impress. We got great views of birds like **Tricolored Heron**, **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron**, a **Little Blue Heron eating a crawfish**, and **Purple Gallinule**. An incredibly cooperative **Limpkin** was almost too close for photographs. **Alligators** put on a good show as well, with an adult in the water and many little ones sunning themselves on a log. Ginger spotted the wintering **Hammond's Flycatcher**, one of the few ever to be seen in Florida, and it was also super cooperative. There were also good numbers of other passerines, with a nice surprise when Kathy spotted a **Louisiana Waterthrush**. We also had nice looks at **Blue-headed Vireo**, **Tufted Titmouse**, and others.

We had lunch, then headed south towards the Everglades. We stopped at a wetland to look for **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks**, but only some people got flyby views in our limited time. We entered the Everglades to take an airboat ride, which is always an interesting experience. We saw a few birds, including **Bald Eagle**, **Wood Stork**, and **Roseate Spoonbill**. We spent the rest of the drive carefully scanning the grasslands for Snail Kites, but we came away empty-handed.



Painted Bunting. Photo by Jane Icenogle.

Feb 21, Day 4. Everglades National Park

We had a full day to enjoy the beautiful Everglades National Park. We started out birding Anhinga Trail, where besides many of the trail's namesake bird, we had incredible views of **Purple Gallinule** and a nice view of an **American Bittern** with its head sticking out above the grass. From there we went to the Gate 13 area, where a rare Caribbean stray, **La Sagra's Flycatcher**, was spending the winter. We looked but didn't find it. As a consolation prize, most of the group saw a dark morph **Short-tailed Hawk** soaring over the road. It was generally very quiet, so we moved on, stopping at Mrazek Pond before reaching end of the road through the park at Flamingo. Mrazek was, as it often is, full of birds, including a flock of actively foraging

American White Pelicans, a very tame **Wood Stork**, multiple bickering **Belted Kingfishers**, and many other wading birds. Best of all, perhaps, was a **Great White Heron**--the white form of **Great Blue Heron** that is only found in South Florida, Cuba, and the Yucatan--that Jane picked out of a group of **Great Egrets**.

We started out walking a trail around a pond, where a **Black-necked Stilt** was in the water. Even better was when we spotted a pair of **Swallow-tailed Kites**, a much-desired bird. They put on an incredible show for us as they flew all around overhead, allowing us wonderful studies of their elegant plumage and languid flight. Elsewhere in Flamingo, a large flock of **Willetts** was resting on the little remaining sandbar as the tide came in, and we were able to pick out a number of **Marbled Godwits** with them. The **Osprey** nest at Flamingo is always a hit, now with chicks every so often poking up above the lip of the nest. Also a hit there were the **West Indian Manatees**, which we watched as they appeared to try and drink freshwater for a drip in the retaining wall of the old visitors' center. Not only was it interesting behavior, but we got great views of their strangely shaped heads and tails.



Purple Gallinule. Photo by Jane Icenogle.

As we headed back out of the park, we stopped again to try for **La Sagra's Flycatcher** at Gate 13. We were encouraged to arrive and have a departing birder tell us that it was active and calling just five minutes before we arrived. But that sure didn't mean it was still active and calling! It took a lot of patience, but after over an hour of waiting we heard in a call a few times. Then Lin spotted it and a couple of people glimpsed it. Then it disappeared again, so we waited some more. Eventually we heard it again, and this time we tracked it down and it was much more

cooperative and showed beautifully for the entire group. It was worth the wait! We did see some other birds while we waited, including **Prairie Warbler** and **Northern Parula**.

Feb 22, Day 5. Florida Keys.

We started the morning on Key Largo, first looking for **White-crowned Pigeon**, which only a few people saw as they flew across the road. We took a nice walk through a state park as well, where we had great views of many **Northern Parulas**, scope views of a **White-eyed Vireo**, and various other wintering migrants.

We continued down the keys, screeching to a halt when I spotted a **Short-tailed Hawk** over the road. We piled out of the van and it stayed in the area so that everyone got incredible looks. We even saw it pull its wings back and plunge into the vegetation after some prey, but it came up empty-taloned.

We then stopped in at Long Key State Park, where a **Thick-billed Vireo** had been located a few days previously. These vireos are typically found in the Bahamas and other small islands in the Caribbean, but a family group had been found breeding in Long Key last fall. They hadn't been seen since September, until one was seen just a few days before we were there--lucky timing! There were a couple of other birders also looking, including a couple who had seen the bird earlier in the morning. But despite much searching, it wasn't to be found.

We left to have lunch in a local restaurant, checked into the hotel and enjoyed our waterfront rooms, then headed back to Long Key for another attempt at the rare **vireo**. After a bit of searching, we heard it scolding in the scrub, and it only took a little while longer to spot it! We stuck with it for several minutes, until everyone in the group had gotten a good view. It was a lifer for everyone, even the guide! We finished the afternoon walking the rest of the beautiful loop trail, finding a good diversity of butterflies but not too many additional birds. It had been a very exciting afternoon. We ended the day with dinner at a very Keys restaurant, complete with a friendly cockatoo (a Moluccan Cockatoo, for those keeping track) dining at a neighboring table and capped with a key lime pie for dessert.



Thick-billed Vireo is a vagrant from the Caribbean. Photo by Lin Johnston.

Feb 23, Day 6. Florida Keys to Miami.

We again started the morning searching for **White-crowned Pigeons**. Again we were frustrated, with just a few people getting views. We did see a **Magnificent Frigatebird** fly past, as well as **Common Myna, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and lots of doves and pigeons** that were not White-crowned. We moved on back to the Florida mainland, stopping to try for Mangrove Cuckoo, which we didn't find, but we enjoyed hundreds of **Turkey Vultures**, themselves enjoying the bounty of food provided by the nearby garbage dump.

We carried on north, stopping to drive through a neighborhood to look for the resident **Indian Peafowl**, where we quickly found a spectacular male. Our next stop was the Fairchild Tropical Gardens, in particular to look for **Yellow-chevroned Parakeet**. Right in the parking lot we started seeing warblers. Before we knew it, we had seen seven species! This included our first **Yellow-throated, Black-throated Blue, and Tennessee Warblers** (the latter being very rare in winter here), as well as great views of **Prairie, Yellow-rumped, Northern Parula, and Black-and-White**. It was great entertainment while we waited for the parakeets to show up. Eventually we heard them calling from the canopy of a huge ficus tree, not the easiest place to find small green birds! But find them we did, and we got very nice views of this introduced **parakeet**.

From there we cut across the city to the western edge to look for another introduced bird, **Gray-headed Swamphen**. We found it easily and enjoyed watching them awkwardly walking around on a lawn at the edge of a pond. We found more warblers in the trees here, including a male **American Redstart**. We were close to the Everglades wetlands here, so decided to head that way to make one more attempt at finding Snail Kite. We spent a good while scanning and searching, finding our first **Purple Martins** of the trip along with many waterbirds, but no kites. With that, we headed to our hotel. Dinner was at a local Cuban restaurant, where the food was delicious and the key lime pie divine.

Feb 23, Day 6. Miami area and departure.

We had one more morning to get good views of **White-crowned Pigeon**, and after two mornings with little luck in that regard, we were very happy to easily find a flock of them adjacent to a small suburban park. We got excellent views in the early morning light, watching them as they flew between the overhead wires and a large fruiting fig tree. Our first **Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Baltimore Oriole** of the trip were also cooperative here.

We then visited another suburban park, this time to look for a few additional established exotic species. It took a bit of searching to find them, but finally we got excellent views of a pair of dapper **Red-whiskered Bulbuls**. While we were watching them, a flock of **Scaly-breasted Munias** flew in, showing well in the thick vegetation. Spot-breasted Orioles were nowhere to be found, either here or at a site closer to our hotel, so with that, we returned to the hotel, completed our daily checklist one last time, and said our goodbyes.

It was been a wonderful trip, full of laughter, sun, and blissfully warm weather, not to mention some of the best winter birding on offer anywhere in the country.

BIRD LIST. 139 species (including heard only). Taxonomy follows the Clements/eBird Checklist, 2019 update. Former (or alternate) English names are in parentheses. (H) = heard only; (L)=Tour leader only; (I)=Introduced species. The global IUCN red list status is listed for threatened and near-threatened species: CR=Critically Endangered, EN=Endangered, VU=Vulnerable, NT=Near-threatened.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna autumnalis</i>
Egyptian Goose (I)	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>
Muscovy Duck (I)	<i>Cairina moschata</i>
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>
Mallard (I)	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Mottled Duck	<i>Anas fulvigula</i>
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Northern Bobwhite (NT)	<i>Colinus virginianus</i>
Indian Peafowl (I)	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>
Rock Pigeon (I)	<i>Columba livia</i>
White-crowned Pigeon (NT)	<i>Patagioenas leucocephala</i>
Eurasian Collared-Dove (I)	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>
White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus colubris</i>
Common Gallinule (Moorhen)	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>
Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio martinica</i>
Gray-headed (Purple) Swamphen (I)	<i>Porphyrio poliocephalus</i>
Limpkin	<i>Aramus guarauna</i>
Sandhill Crane	<i>Antigone canadensis</i>
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>
Short-billed/Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus/scolopaceus</i>
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>

Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>
Laughing Gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
Wood Stork	<i>Mycteria americana</i>
Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>
Anhinga	<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>
American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>
American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>
Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>
Reddish Egret (NT)	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>
Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>
White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Roseate Spoonbill	<i>Platalea ajaja</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Swallow-tailed Kite	<i>Elanoides forficatus</i>
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>
Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-shouldered Hawk	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>
Short-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo brachyurus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>

Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus varius</i>
Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>
Red-cockaded Woodpecker (NT)	<i>Dryobates borealis</i>
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
Monk Parakeet (I)	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>
Yellow-chevroned Parakeet (I)	<i>Brotogeris chiriri</i>
Hammond's Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax hammondii</i>
Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>
Great Crested Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus crinitus</i>
Brown-crested Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus tyrannulus</i>
La Sagra's Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus sagrae</i>
White-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo griseus</i>
Thick-billed Vireo	<i>Vireo crassirostris</i>
Blue-headed Vireo	<i>Vireo solitarius</i>
Loggerhead Shrike (NT)	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>
Florida Scrub-Jay (VU)	<i>Aphelocoma coerulescens</i>
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>
Fish Crow	<i>Corvus ossifragus</i>
Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>
Purple Martin	<i>Progne subis</i>
Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>
Red-whiskered Bulbul (I)	<i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>
Brown-headed Nuthatch	<i>Sitta pusilla</i>
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>
Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>
European Starling (I)	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Common Myna (I)	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>
Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
Eastern Bluebird	<i>Sialia sialis</i>
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>
Scaly-breasted Munia (Nutmeg Mannikin) (I)	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>

House Sparrow (I)	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>
Bachman's Sparrow (H) (NT)	<i>Peucaea aestivalis</i>
Eastern Towhee (H)	<i>Pipilo erythrophthalmus</i>
Eastern Meadowlark (NT)	<i>Sturnella magna</i>
Baltimore Oriole	<i>Icterus galbula</i>
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>
Common Grackle (NT)	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>
Boat-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus major</i>
Louisiana Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia motacilla</i>
Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>
Tennessee Warbler	<i>Leiothlypis peregrina</i>
Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>
American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>
Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>
Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>
Palm Warbler	<i>Setophaga palmarum</i>
Pine Warbler	<i>Setophaga pinus</i>
Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>
Yellow-throated Warbler	<i>Setophaga dominica</i>
Prairie Warbler	<i>Setophaga discolor</i>
Black-throated Green Warbler	<i>Setophaga virens</i>
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>
Painted Bunting	<i>Passerina ciris</i>

MAMMAL LIST. 5 species. As there is no standard list of names for mammals, the names used here are simply commonly used names. Alternate names are in parentheses. IUCN Red List status listed for threatened and near-threatened species: CR=Critically Endangered, EN=Endangered, VU=Vulnerable, NT=Near-threatened.

North American Raccoon - *Procyon lotor*
 Hispid Cotton Rat - *Sigmodon hispidus*
 Eastern Gray Squirrel - *Sciurus carolinensis*
 White-tailed Deer - *Odocoileus virginianus*
 West Indian (Florida) Manatee (VU)- *Trichechus manatus*



Birding in Red-cockaded Woodpecker habitat. Photo by Josh Engel.



Short-tailed Hawk. Photo by Jane Icenogle.



White-crowned Pigeon. Photo by Josh Engel.