

## Trip Report — Florida Mangroves and Migrants 2024

April 27-May 6, 2024 with Owen Hilchey



Blue skies and puffy white clouds beckoned us to visit the isolated rock known at Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas NP. Photo by guide Owen Hilchey.

Yet another wonderful trip to South Florida! It's a joy to experience such an abundance of birdlife and truly unique habitats right here in our own country. In addition to the wonderful resident wildlife, the excitement of migration and possibility of rarities really keeps things fresh on this tour, providing a perfect combination of predictability and adventure. This year was particularly fun, featuring great experiences with all our major targets and a constant trickle of rarities (some seen, some missed) to keep us on our toes.



One of our Southern Florida specialists is the Black-whiskered Vireo. Photo by guide Owen Hilchey.

Our first life birds came right away, with a Gray Kingbird serenading us on our short walk to dinner on the very first evening. A good reminder to always bring your binoculars!

The following morning, we loaded up for the long drive to Key West and our first real taste of South Florida's birdlife. We spent an hour or so searching in vain for a recently spotted Kirtland's Warbler in Miami. While we dipped on this rare migrant, we were entertained by a multitude of Caribbean wintering migrants, including smashing looks at Cape May Warblers and Blackthroated Blue Warblers. However, that early morning miss seemed to set the tone for the day, with Mangrove Cuckoo, Black-whiskered Vireo, and Antillean Nighthawk all proving elusive. Not all was lost, though as we did manage to locate White-crowned Pigeon, enjoy some delicious seafood, and take in a beautiful and pleasant drive across the islands.

Things looked up on our second full day of birding. A solid push of mostly Caribbean migrants made for an exciting morning on Key West, where we found our first big target for the group: a Black-whiskered Vireo! The bird was singing up a storm at Zachary Taylor State Park among swarms of Black-throated Blue Warblers and American Redstarts! As a bonus, we also spotted a Worm-eating Warbler. The skulking warbler made us work for it but finally afforded good views for the group. The rest of the morning was filled with more migrants, including abundant Palm Warblers, Black-and-white Warblers, and Prairie Warblers. But the real star of the day was our very last bird. Just after dusk, near the Key West airport, a couple of Antillean Nighthawks put on quite the show! The birds were seen stooping, fluttering, and vocalizing right overhead. Everyone was wearing a big smile as we loaded up and headed home for the night.

For many (including the guide), the trip to Dry Tortugas National Park is a highlight of this tour, and this year did not disappoint. After an uneventful boat ride to the island, we were met, as usual, with a cloud of noisy terns as we stepped off the boat. Within minutes, we had our scopes aimed at a gorgeous pair of Bridled Terns, while Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies zoomed about everywhere we looked. Once satisfied with the Bridled Terns, we headed into the massive Fort Jefferson, climbed the spiral staircase to the top, and quickly spotted our next target: Black Noddy! This year, we managed to find three of these sought-after birds on the old pilings among the endless crowds of Brown Noddies. A couple of Roseate Terns joined the party, and we even spotted a very distant buteo perched on a far beach. Any buteo on the island is a good bird, but unfortunately, this one was too far away and obscured by heat haze for a confident ID. The rest of the afternoon was spent soaking up the sounds (and smells) of the terns and making loops through the fort's courtyard in search of migrants. The prevalence of mostly Caribbean and northern South American wintering migrants continued, with many of the same species as the day before. Bobolink and Bank Swallow were great additions to the list.

On Wednesday morning, we said our goodbyes to the Keys and started our way back up the long highway toward the mainland. But before leaving the island life behind entirely, we had some unfinished business: Mangrove Cuckoo! Within the first few hours of the morning, our persistence paid off and then some. We enjoyed up-close and personal looks at an extremely cooperative Mangrove Cuckoo on Sugarloaf Key. After 15 minutes or so, we walked away from our target bird, but that wasn't good enough for the cuckoo. As soon as we got in the car, it flew across the road in front of us, landing right next to the vehicle! The bird crept and crawled through a sparse mangrove tree in search of a morning meal while we simply rolled down the windows and soaked it in! The rest of our travel day was uneventful, with a quick stop for Cave Swallow. In the evening, we were treated to a beautiful drive through Everglades National Park, with several great Swallow-tailed Kite sightings and a fruitless search for a lingering (and elusive) American Flamingo.



A Florida Scrub-Jay peers around a bush to check out who came for a visit! Photo by guide Owen Hilchey.

The next morning, we headed back to the Everglades, this time focusing mainly on the endangered Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow. This endangered subspecies is found only in southern Florida in a handful of locations. It took several stops, but we finally caught up with this little sparrow in the wet grasslands, and it rewarded us with several minutes of clear, close views and a delightful bout of song. We then loaded up and headed across the peninsula for a day of mostly driving. We did stop for smoothies and fresh fruit (this desert-dwelling guide does not pass up opportunities for fresh mangoes) and admired some adorable urban Burrowing Owls on Marco Island. Once we arrived in Fort Myers, I had a special surprise for the group: a long-staying American Flamingo was on the table as long as we could find a boat to take us into the bay. Luckily, a friend in town had just the boat for the job and graciously offered to take the group out for a sunset cruise around Black Skimmer Island, where we got up close with our pink-legged friend, along with a multitude of herons and egrets on the island rookery. What a treat!

Friday morning, we were up before dawn for perhaps my favorite experience of this tour. Arriving in the dark at Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area and waking up with the longleaf pine savanna is a magical experience every single time. The sun rises through the pines while a symphony of Chuck-will's-widows and booming Common Nighthawks slowly fades, replaced by Northern Bobwhite whistles, Sandhill Crane trumpets, and our target species for the morning: Red-cockaded Woodpecker. We enjoyed our fill of this endangered pineland specialist, along with Brown-headed Nuthatch, and left with happy checklists and happy souls! After a short drive west to a drier stand of pines, we made acquaintance with another pineland specialist: the Bachman's Sparrow. It posed confidingly for several minutes before it was time to move along. Our good luck continued an hour later with a small group of Florida Scrub-Jays squabbling over acorns on the road right next to our car. With the morning targets all wrapped up, we spent the rest of the day leisurely birding cypress forests and beach habitats. The heat of the day meant birding was slow, but we did briefly catch up with a locally rare wintering MacGillivray's Warbler near our hotel at Six Mile Cypress Slough.



Crushing photo of a very difficult bird to see: a Seaside (Cape Sable) Sparrow. Congrats to our group for this experience. Photo by guide Owen Hilchey.

Our second-to-last full day took us from Fort Myers back to the Miami area. It was a long day of driving, bookended by some special birding stops. First up was Harns Marsh, where an abundance of Snail Kites were utilizing a nearby canal to gobble up apple snails. We watched several of these unique raptors cruise overhead, dive into the shallow water to grab a snail, then float back to a nearby beach for breakfast. After eating the snail, they would toss the empty shell onto a growing pile on the sand. At the marsh itself, we caught up with two birds that feel more like dinosaurs than birds sometimes: Limpkin and Wood Stork. The Limpkin shared in the apple snail feast, trumpeting loudly while trying to keep track of their chicks, which awkwardly paraded around the marsh's edge. In the evening, on the other side of the peninsula, we walked the boardwalks at Wakodahatchee Wetlands, struggling to keep our jaws off the floor as we gawked at all manner of stinky, beautiful herons, egrets, and storks tending nests and nestlings mere

feet away. Particularly exciting were incredible looks at a Least Bittern stalking through the marsh beneath our feet and an endearing Purple Gallinule balancing precariously on thin reeds, stretching its neck as far as possible to grab a seedstalk—who knew they had such reach!

The itinerary for this trip leaves a full day in the Miami area at the end to clean up missed targets or chase rarities. This year, we managed both! Over dinner the night before, we realized that while we'd seen a flamingo, we hadn't yet encountered our much more regularly pink-feathered friend, the Roseate Spoonbill. To rectify this, we headed to the boat ramp at Loxahatchee just after dawn to watch egrets, herons, ibises (and hopefully spoonbills) fly out over the marshes from our vantage point on the canal. Our plan was a massive success, with lovely looks at most of the possible waders flying across the sunrise-lit sky, including a dozen or so spoonbills. As a bonus, an extremely friendly pair of Sandhill Cranes attended the boat launch, walking right up to us and trumpeting their hellos. The birds were so close I had to plug my ears!



Thanks everyone for a fun trip to Southern Florida! I hope to see you again soon on another Field Guides tour. Photo by Owen Hilchey.

Once the ringing in our ears stopped, we didn't have much else to do but chase the long-staying Yellow-headed Caracara in Miami. Unfortunately, this bird wanders widely, and predicting where (or if) it would show up proved challenging. Somewhat unsurprisingly, we never found this local celebrity. But the birding gods weren't done with us yet. At lunch, I checked my phone to see what else we could track down and as luck would have it, at that very moment, I received word that someone had found a couple of White-cheeked Pintails in a flooded field about an hour away! This largely tropical duck species is common in the Bahamas but gets blown off course to Florida occasionally. The handsome duck would be a lifer for everyone on the trip including the guide(!) so we quickly finished lunch and loaded up for the chase. The unexpected trip turned out perfectly. Not only did we see the pintails, but we were also greeted with a host of new shorebirds for the trip, including several hundred Stilt Sandpipers and a breeding-plumage Red

Knot. We even managed not to get the car stuck (not everyone who chased the duck that day was so lucky). We got back to Miami just in time for our dinner reservation at the same Cuban restaurant near our hotel where we'd kicked things off.

All the driving back and forth across this surprisingly large state was well worth it this year. We managed some of my personal best looks at major targets, including Mangrove Cuckoo and Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow, and had a great list of rarities including lifers for all, even the guide! Perhaps most importantly, the group was a joy to bird with: great-humored, excellent company, and everyone got along famously. Hope to see you all on another trip soon!

You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link: <a href="https://ebird.org/tripreport/233955">https://ebird.org/tripreport/233955</a>

Owen Hilchey





## Field Guides Birding Tours - Florida: Mangroves & Migrants, 2024 (guide Owen Hilchey)



27 Apr - 5 May 2024 (9 days) Public



Florida, United States

Broward | Charlotte | Collier | Glades | Lee | Miami-Dade | Monroe | Palm Beach

Anonymous eBirder, Jesse Fagan

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For a narrative summary of this tour, including a Field Guides photo gallery and additional...

DATA FOR: Group (all people) ▼



**Species Observed** 



Checklists

**Species with Photos** 

## **Species Observed**

Show all details

12	Black-bellied Whistling-Duck Dendrocygna autumnalis	•	<b>1</b> 2
17	Egyptian Goose Alopochen aegyptiaca *	•	<b>a</b> 1
9	Muscovy Duck Cairina moschata *	•	<b>1</b> 3
4	Wood Duck Aix sponsa	•	<b>a</b> 1
2	Blue-winged Teal Spatula discors	•	<b>a</b> 1
18	Mottled Duck Anas fulvigula	•	<b>1</b> 5
2	White-cheeked Pintail Anas bahamensis	<b>&gt; 2</b>	<b>a</b> 1
1	Red-breasted Merganser Mergus serrator	•	<b>a</b> 1
2	Northern Bobwhite Colinus virginianus	•	<b>a</b> 1

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7	Rock Pigeon Columba livia *	▶ 🚺 2
14	White-crowned Pigeon Patagioenas leucocephala	▶ 🚮 3
31	Eurasian Collared-Dove Streptopelia decaocto *	▶ 🗐 7
1	Common Ground Dove Columbina passerina	<b>→ 폐</b> 1
4	White-winged Dove Zenaida asiatica	▶ 🗖 2
51	Mourning Dove Zenaida macroura	▶ 🚮 13
3	Mangrove Cuckoo Coccyzus minor	▶ 💌 2 📑 2
11	Common Nighthawk Chordeiles minor	<b>→ ii</b> l 1
3	Antillean Nighthawk Chordeiles gundlachii	<b>→ m</b> 1
5	Chuck-will's-widow Antrostomus carolinensis	<b>→ 폐</b> 1
6	Chimney Swift Chaetura pelagica	▶ 🗖 3
5	Clapper Rail Rallus crepitans	<b>→ m</b> 1
21	Common Gallinule Gallinula galeata	▶ <b>1</b> 6
2	Purple Gallinule Porphyrio martinica	▶ 🖾 2 🚺 1
7	Gray-headed Swamphen Porphyrio poliocephalus *	▶ 🗖 2
5	Limpkin Aramus guarauna	<b>▶ ₪</b> 1
11	Sandhill Crane Antigone canadensis	▶ 🗷 2 🚺 4
70	Black-necked Stilt Himantopus mexicanus	<b>• 1</b> 4
59	Black-bellied Plover Pluvialis squatarola	▶ 🗐 5
1	American Golden-Plover Pluvialis dominica	<b>→ 📶</b> 1

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9	Killdeer Charadrius vociferus	▶ 🗻 3
10	Semipalmated Plover Charadrius semipalmatus	▶ 🖪 3
13	Short-billed Dowitcher Limnodromus griseus	<b>)</b> 🚮 1
28	Long-billed Dowitcher Limnodromus scolopaceus	<b>)</b> 📶 1
4	Spotted Sandpiper Actitis macularius	<b>▶ 1</b> 3
10	Solitary Sandpiper Tringa solitaria	<b>1</b> 2
19	Lesser Yellowlegs Tringa flavipes	<b>1</b> 2
1	Willet Tringa semipalmata	<b>→ 🗐</b> 1
2	Greater Yellowlegs Tringa melanoleuca	<b>→ 1</b> 1
14	Ruddy Turnstone Arenaria interpres	<b>▶ ■</b> 3
1	Red Knot Calidris canutus	<b>)</b> 🚮 1
400	Stilt Sandpiper Calidris himantopus	<b>)</b> 🚮 1
18	Sanderling Calidris alba	<b>▶ ■</b> 3
10	Dunlin Calidris alpina	<b>)</b> 🚮 1
1	White-rumped Sandpiper Calidris fuscicollis	<b>)</b> 🚮 1
27	Least Sandpiper Calidris minutilla	▶ 🗖 2
69	Semipalmated Sandpiper Calidris pusilla	<b>▶ ■</b> 3
49	Laughing Gull Leucophaeus atricilla	▶ 🖪 8
1004	Brown Noddy Anous stolidus	<b>1</b> 2
3	Black Noddy Anous minutus	<b>▶ ⊠1 1</b> 11

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6026	Sooty Tern Onychoprion fuscatus	▶ 🖪 3
10	Bridled Tern Onychoprion anaethetus	<b>▶ ₪</b> 1
25	Least Tern Sternula antillarum	▶ 🗖 5
1	Forster's Tern Sterna forsteri	<b>→ 📶</b> 1
3	Roseate Tern Sterna dougallii	<b>→ 📶</b> 1
8	Royal Tern Thalasseus maximus	▶ 🚮 3
1	American Flamingo Phoenicopterus ruber	<b>→ 📶</b> 1
211	Wood Stork Mycteria americana	▶ 🖪 3
183	Magnificent Frigatebird Fregata magnificens	▶ 🗖 4
3	Brown Booby Sula leucogaster	<b>→ 📶</b> 1
62	Masked Booby Sula dactylatra	<b>→ 📶</b> 1
113	Anhinga Anhinga anhinga	▶ 🗖 4
67	Double-crested Cormorant Nannopterum auritum	▶ 🗖 3
144	White Ibis Eudocimus albus	▶ 🗻 10
24	Glossy Ibis Plegadis falcinellus	▶ 🜓 5
17	Roseate Spoonbill Platalea ajaja	<b>→ 폐</b> 1
5	Least Bittern Botaurus exilis	▶ 1 1 2
3	Yellow-crowned Night Heron Nyctanassa violacea	▶ 🖪 3
8	Black-crowned Night Heron Nycticorax nycticorax	▶ 🗖 2
20	Little Blue Heron Egretta caerulea	▶ <b>1</b> 6

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59	Tricolored Heron Egretta tricolor	▶ 🗻 8
1	Reddish Egret Egretta rufescens	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 1
67	Snowy Egret Egretta thula	▶ <b>1</b> 6
15	Green Heron Butorides virescens	▶ 🗖 6
73	Western Cattle-Egret Ardea ibis	▶ 🗻 8
99	Great Egret Ardea alba	<b>→ 🗻</b> 11
46	Great Blue Heron Ardea herodias	▶ 🚮 10
2	American White Pelican Pelecanus erythrorhynchos	▶ 🗖 2
87	Brown Pelican Pelecanus occidentalis	▶ 🖪 8
63	Black Vulture Coragyps atratus	▶ 🖪 8
62	Turkey Vulture Cathartes aura	▶ <b>1</b> 6
17	Osprey Pandion haliaetus	▶ 🖪 8
4	Swallow-tailed Kite Elanoides forficatus	▶ 🗖 2
3	Sharp-shinned Hawk Accipiter striatus	<b>▶ 📶</b> 1
1	Cooper's Hawk Astur cooperii	<b>▶ 📶</b> 1
9	Bald Eagle Haliaeetus leucocephalus	▶ 🗖 2
13	Snail Kite Rostrhamus sociabilis	<b>▶ ■</b> 1 <b>1</b> 2
4	Red-shouldered Hawk Buteo lineatus	▶ 🗖 2
1	Eastern Screech-Owl Megascops asio	<b>→ 副</b> 1
2	Red-headed Woodpecker Melanerpes erythrocephalus	<b>→ m</b> 11

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22	Red-bellied Woodpecker Melanerpes carolinus	<b>→ 🗐</b> 11
4	Downy Woodpecker Dryobates pubescens	▶ 🗊 4
3	Red-cockaded Woodpecker Dryobates borealis	<b>▶ ■</b> 1
2	Pileated Woodpecker Dryocopus pileatus	▶ 🗖 2
1	Northern Flicker Colaptes auratus	<b>▶ ■1</b> 1
2	Crested Caracara Caracara plancus	<b>▶ ■</b> 1
3	American Kestrel Falco sparverius	▶ 🗖 2
1	Merlin Falco columbarius	<b>▶ ■</b> 1
1	Peregrine Falcon Falco peregrinus	<b>▶ ■</b> 1
2	Monk Parakeet Myiopsitta monachus *	<b>→ 1</b> 1
15	Great Crested Flycatcher Myiarchus crinitus	▶ 🗊 7
2	Western Kingbird Tyrannus verticalis	<b>→ </b>
7	Gray Kingbird Tyrannus dominicensis	▶ 🖪 3
2	White-eyed Vireo griseus	▶ 🗊 2
4	Black-whiskered Vireo Vireo altiloquus	▶ 1 13
4	Loggerhead Shrike Lanius Iudovicianus	▶ 🗖 2
20	Blue Jay Cyanocitta cristata	▶ 🗊 7
3	Florida Scrub-Jay Aphelocoma coerulescens	<b>→ 四</b> 1 <b>1</b> 1
33	American Crow Corvus brachyrhynchos	<b>▶ 1</b> 3
22	Fish Crow Corvus ossifragus	▶ <b>1</b> 5

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2	Tufted Titmouse Baeolophus bicolor	<b>→ 1</b> 1
1	Bank Swallow Riparia riparia	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 1
1	Tree Swallow Tachycineta bicolor	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 1
41	Purple Martin Progne subis	▶ 🗖 3
2	Northern Rough-winged Swallow Stelgidopteryx serripennis	▶ 🗖 2
23	Barn Swallow Hirundo rustica	▶ 🗖 4
12	Cave Swallow Petrochelidon fulva	<b>→ 1</b> 1
1	Brown-headed Nuthatch Sitta pusilla	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 1
4	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher Polioptila caerulea	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 1
3	Carolina Wren Thryothorus Iudovicianus	▶ 🗖 2
15	European Starling Sturnus vulgaris *	▶ 🚮 5
4	Common Myna Acridotheres tristis *	▶ 🗖 2
12	Gray Catbird Dumetella carolinensis	▶ 🚮 5
1	Brown Thrasher Toxostoma rufum	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 1
24	Northern Mockingbird Mimus polyglottos	▶ <b>1</b> 9
1	Eastern Bluebird Sialia sialis	<b>▶ ⋒</b> 1
39	House Sparrow Passer domesticus *	▶ 🚮 5
3	Bachman's Sparrow Peucaea aestivalis	<b>→ m</b> 1 1
1	Seaside Sparrow Ammospiza maritima	▶ 🗷 2 🗐 1
2	Eastern Towhee Pipilo erythrophthalmus	<b>▶ 1</b> 2

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10	Bobolink Dolichonyx oryzivorus	▶ ■ 2
5	Eastern Meadowlark Sturnella magna	<b>1</b> 2
117	Red-winged Blackbird Agelaius phoeniceus	▶ 🚮 10
1	Shiny Cowbird Molothrus bonariensis	<b>)</b> 🗐 1
2	Bronzed Cowbird Molothrus aeneus	<b>1</b> 2
16	Brown-headed Cowbird Molothrus ater	▶ 🗖 4
82	Common Grackle Quiscalus quiscula	▶ 🗖 7
139	Boat-tailed Grackle Quiscalus major	▶ 🖪 14
4	Ovenbird Seiurus aurocapilla	▶ 🚺 2
1	Worm-eating Warbler Helmitheros vermivorum	<b>)</b> 📶 1
2	Northern Waterthrush Parkesia noveboracensis	<b>1</b> 2
20	Black-and-white Warbler Mniotilta varia	▶ <b>1</b> 6
1	MacGillivray's Warbler Geothlypis tolmiei	<b>)</b> 📶 1
61	Common Yellowthroat Geothlypis trichas	▶ 🚮 10
3	Hooded Warbler Setophaga citrina	▶ 🚺 2
31	American Redstart Setophaga ruticilla	▶ <b>1</b> 6
30	Cape May Warbler Setophaga tigrina	▶ <b>1</b> 7
19	Northern Parula Setophaga americana	▶ <b>1</b> 9
2	Magnolia Warbler Setophaga magnolia	▶ 🗖 2
11	Blackpoll Warbler Setophaga striata	▶ 🚺 5

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18	Black-throated Blue Warbler Setophaga caerulescens	•		16
29	Palm Warbler Setophaga palmarum	•		<b>1</b> 4
3	Pine Warbler Setophaga pinus	•		13
10	Prairie Warbler Setophaga discolor	•		16
1	Summer Tanager Piranga rubra	•	i	<b>1</b> 1
41	Northern Cardinal Cardinalis cardinalis	•		9
5	Indigo Bunting Passerina cyanea	•		12
EXOTIC: PROVISIONAL				
3	Indian Peafowl Pavo cristatus *	•		<b>1</b> 1
5	Red Junglefowl Gallus gallus *	•		<b>1</b> 1
5	Yellow-chevroned Parakeet Brotogeris chiriri *	•		1 1

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