

Birding on the Hidden Coast

Where to find the best birding experiences

Capt. Doug Maple points out an eagle nest filling all the space between two upper limbs of a pine tree towering above the scrub of Atsena Otie Key. "Bald Eagles are increasing steadily," he says.

Standing at the helm of the Tidewater Tours flat water boat, he goes on to explain that bald eagles are extremely territorial and each requires about a mile of space to call its own. They also live to about 40 years of age. Their only real enemy besides human development is the Great Horned Owl, a much smaller bird but one with immense power in its talons.

"Osprey are doing so well we don't take a census anymore," he adds.

We are on the east end of the island, just a mile off the Cedar Key waterfront, watching for raptors while waiting for the tide to come up a few more inches so we can proceed into the extreme shallows of the Shell Mound area for an afternoon birding tour.

The Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge, which includes 13 islands around the town of Cedar Key, is one of the richest and most accessible habitats for water bird watching on the Hidden Coast. Touching this area is Shell Mound, another incredibly rich area for water birds and part of the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, which stretches north to encompass several upriver miles of the Suwannee River and coastal creeks as far up as Fishbone Creek. North of the refuge, the tidal marshes and their adjacent uplands stretch onward 50 miles or more to the Aucilla River with much of the coastal land managed as part of the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area. South of Cedar Key is the wild and beautiful Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park, accessible only by water.

In all, the Hidden Coast is a 100 or more miles of ideal coastal and near coastal bird watching habitat, where public lands create one of the longest and wildest continuous coastal wetlands in the United States.

As the tide inches up, Capt. Doug turns our boat north towards Dog Island and after an exciting encounter with a group of dolphins, we begin to thread our way through oyster bars where birds of all sizes, including Sandpiper and Plover, are beginning to gather to escape the rising tide. After passing under SR24, we continue

picking our way through oyster bars, then follow a tidal creek estuary where we see a Bald Eagle perched high in a dead tree and a stunning white Great Egret settling down in the marsh.

At Shell Mound we see many more species, then head out to Derrick Key, a spit of land where a few remaining White Pelicans are gathered with their smaller brown brothers. At our approach a flock



to see in the warmer months. Nesting begins at the Seahorse Key rookery in late March and thousands of White Ibis, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Yellow and Black Crowned Night Herons, Tri-colored Herons, Little Blue Herons, Great Blue Herons, Cormorants and Brown Pelicans nest in the relative safety of this refuge island. Landing on the island is prohibited March-June, but cruising the shoreline, just outside posted boundaries, provides plenty of viewing opportunities.

By late April and May hundreds of magnificent Frigate birds begin arriving at Seahorse Key. These entertaining birds remain until late fall. In June through August, Least Terns make a brief appearance. Other common summer birds all along the Hidden Coast include Osprey, Herons, Egrets, Ibis, Wood Storks, Roseate Spoonbills, Terns, Skimmers and Oystercatchers.

Top: Juvenile White Pelicans, on Derrick Key, with Black Skimmers overhead. The juveniles often stay for the summer rather than heading north with the breeding adults. Left: A Laughing Gull settled down on a sand bar. Below: Two laughing gulls on an oyster bar in the shallow waters at the north end of Cedar Key.

of Black Skimmers rise into the air, creating a perfect picture. By the end of the trip we had seen a wide range of species including American White and Brown Pelican, Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, Short Billed Dowitchers, Semipalmated Plover, Black-Bellied Plover, endangered Piping Plover and Red Knots, Lesser Yellow Legs, American Oystercatchers, Willets, Western and Least Sandpiper, Sanderlings, Dunlin, Forster Terns, Royal Terns, and one Caspian Tern.

YEAR ROUND BIRDING

While November through March are considered prime birding season on the Hidden Coast because of the large migratory bird population, there is plenty

BIRD LISTS & ACCESS POINTS

A list of best birding access points is given below. Hidden Coast birding guides and lists can be downloaded as follows:

Great Florida Birding Trail, West Florida section (for all road-accessible areas)- <http://myfwc.com/GFBT>.

Big Bend Wildlife Management Area (WMA) - www.myfwc.com/docs/RecreationSites/BigBend_birdlist.pdf or go to myfwc.com, click on Sitemap, General Search under Publications and Birdwatching.

Lower Suwannee & Cedar Key National Wildlife Refuges - www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee and click on Publications

CEDAR KEY AREA

The historic town of Cedar Key, located at the end of SR24 has charm, facilities, and loads of natural beauty. Birding may be enjoyed from almost any waterfront location in Cedar Key, but the following locations offer exceptional opportunities:

Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuge: By water only. Limited access on most islands. Boat and kayak rentals and regular island stop-off service available at tour operators on the waterfront in Cedar Key. Guide services and birding tours also available. Take SR24 into Cedar Key, turn left onto 2nd Street, and right on A Street. Parking (may be limited on weekends and holidays), restrooms, restaurants, shopping.

Lower Suwannee Wildlife Refuge - Shell Mound: Accessible by land and water. A long pier provides viewing access. Two walking trails with birding opportunities. From SR24, take CR347 north; turn west on CR326; follow to the end. Parking, boat launch, information kiosks, Porta-potti.

Fishing Pier at #4 Bridge: County maintained pier and boat launch with excellent views overlooking tidal marsh north of Cedar Key. Located just off SR24 at the #4 bridge. Parking.

Waccasassa Bay Preserve State Park: Bordering the coast between Cedar Key and Yankeetown, this wild and beautiful area is accessible only by water. Guide services and birding tours available in Cedar Key. Boat access from CR326 in Gulf Hammock and Cedar Key.

LOWER SUWANNEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

This 53,000 acre refuge stretches from Shell Mound north to encompass several upriver miles of the Suwannee River and coastal creeks as far north as Fishbone Creek. Coastal birding opportunities exist throughout the refuge. Primary access points are:

Dixie Mainline: A nine-mile driving/biking/hiking trail, between CR349 and CR351, crossing tidal creeks through pine flatwoods, bottomland hardwoods and marsh. Excellent birding. From CR349 south near the community of Suwannee, turn north at the sign; from CR357 turn south at the sign. Gates close the trail when flooded or damaged. Kayaks and canoes can be launched in the creeks, but watch the tides. Guide brochure available at trailheads or online at www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee and click on Publications.

Salt Creek Lookout: Boardwalk and deck with seating provide great views over the salt marsh. Accessed from the Dixie Mainline near the CR349 end. Limited parking.

Fishbone Creek: Elevated observation deck provides views over the over the creek and salt marshland. Small boat launch, parking. Turn onto a narrow road from CR357, south of the Dixie Mainline.

Shired Island: Beach (county maintained) and boat launch (launched into Shired Creek) provide access to the Gulf and nearby tidal creeks for birding opportunities. Wild and remote. Near the end of CR357 south of the Dixie Mainline.

Marked Paddling Trails: Three interlocking trails on freshwater Demory, Locke and Shingle creeks provide excellent bird watching opportunities near the community of Suwannee. Launch in Suwannee at Anderson Landing River Camp on CR349. Parking, rentals, camping, restaurants. Guide brochure available at Anderson Landing or online at www.fws.gov/lowersuwannee and click on Publications.

BIG BEND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

This huge, state-managed area covers much of the coastal region between Shired Island and the Aucilla River at the far north end of the Hidden Coast. Main access points for birding are:

Hickory Mound Impoundment: Years before the state purchased these lands, Buckeye Cellulose enclosed 1,800 acres of salt marsh and coastal forest to attract more overwintering waterfowl. The earthen dike impoundment remains, now a part of the area's ecosystem, which offers excellent birding in coastal salt marsh and creeks, coastal swamp forest and swamp hardwood forest. From US19, 18 miles west of Perry, turn south on Cow Creek Grade and travel six miles on limerock access road to the check station. Parking, information kiosk, picnic tables and boat launch.

Hagan's Cove: The shallow waters and grass flats make this an ideal birdwatching area. An elevated deck over the beach is wheelchair accessible. Parking, boat launch, Porta-potti, hiking trails, grills and picnic area. From US19, take CR361 and travel five miles south of Keaton Beach or twelve miles north of Steinhatchee; watch for the Hagan's Cove sign.

Dallus Creek: Offers spectacular views of the coastal creek as well as a trail and paddling and boating access. Parking, boat launch, trail, biking or driving roads. From US19, take CR361 and travel about two north of Steinhatchee; watch for the Hagan's Cove sign.

BIG BEND SALTWATER PADDLING TRAIL

For experienced saltwater paddlers, primitive campers and adventurers, this pristine 105-mile trail from the Aucilla River to the Suwannee River, offers one of the most unique experiences in bird watching on the Hidden Coast. For less experienced paddlers, parts of the trail are accessible for day paddling. The trail is closed July 1-August 31. For more information including ordering a 40-page guide and reserving campsites, go online to www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_BigBend_paddling_trail.htm.



Top: Two White Ibis (juvenile on right) pick through beach debris. Bottom: A Loon swims peacefully at the East Pass to the Suwannee River. Photo: Sandra Prescott.



ROAD TO NOWHERE

This country maintained, but undeveloped road, runs for 12 miles from Steinhatchee (Jena) to the Gulf and offers bird watching opportunities along its length. From CR351 in Steinhatchee, take CR361 southeast and follow it towards the Gulf of Mexico.

BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

CEDAR KEY: BIRDING IN PARADISE. Finding Birds Then And Now by David W. Johnston. Illus. 100 p.

Includes accounts of 18th century explorers, their birds (Ivory billed Woodpeckers, Carolina Parakeets) and contemporary sites for locating the region's diversity and abundance of its fabulous bird life.

Order from the author (fordebirds@verizon.net) \$19.95 + \$3.00 S&H.

THE GREAT FLORIDA BIRDING TRAIL

The Great Florida Birding Trail (GFBT) is a network of 489 sites throughout Florida selected for their excellent birdwatching or bird education opportunities. This 2000-mile, self-guided highway trail, developed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC), is designed to conserve and enhance Florida's bird habitat by promoting birdwatching activities, conservation education and economic opportunity. The Hidden Coast lies within the West Florida region of the trail.

Trail guides and information can be found online, as well as a new interactive, trip-planning tool using Google™ Maps to help birders find destinations and species of interest along the GFBT. This tool allows searches by amenities (such as handicapped accessibility), habitats and 40 featured bird species to help choose which GFBT sites to visit. The trip planner also provides information about each of the featured species and habitat types.

For more information, as well as downloadable guides, go to www.myfwc.com/gfbt/

Flocking to the Rescue of Birds

Each time a person goes birding, his or her activities fuel a local economy," says Mark Kiser, a wildlife biologist and birding trail coordinator for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). "When people buy gas, eat lunch at a deli or spend the night at a motel, they give that community a financial reason to conserve its wild lands."

"You can help save birds by watching birds," Kiser says.

Focusing on birds that are endangered, threatened or species of special concern is another way. Education may lead to action. As people learn about the environmental implications if just one kind of bird is lost, they are apt to do something about it.

For instance, the world's fastest bird, the Peregrine Falcon, almost disappeared due to pesticides such as DDT and habitat loss. By 1965, there were only 650 of them still alive in the United States. Outrage about the many victims of pesticides led to restrictions. Captive-breeding programs were then able to boost the falcon's

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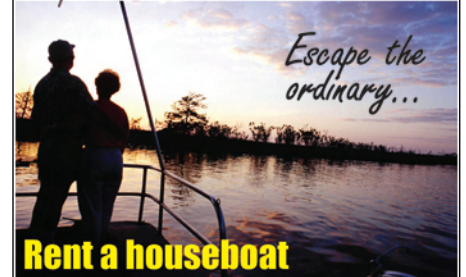
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