



The Hart Beat



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Common Mynahs are not that common in Florida

THE (FLORIDA) KEYS TO LIFE BIRDS

We live on US Route 1. Well, technically not right on the highway, as sleeping with all that traffic rumbling by might be very difficult, but our condominium complex in Fort Pierce, St Lucie County, Florida, is connected to the world through an entrance onto US Route 1. When this highway was laid out and constructed in the 1920's, it was the pre-eminent road way in the entire United States. Still the longest north-south road in the country, it extends from Fort Kent, at the northern most tip of Maine on the Canadian border 2,369 miles to its southern end, mile marker 1, at Key West, Florida. Arguably, for birders, the most intriguing part of the highway is the 110 mile section that connects the string of islands known as the Florida Keys to mainland Florida. Certainly, many North American life birds for many birders have first appeared in the Florida Keys.

Jewel and I no longer "chase" rare or "life birds" except when they are geographically nearby or when their location is somewhere we would like to go and visit for birding even if there were no rare or life birds reported there. Bill Baggs State Park in Miami is such a location, where we chased the Thick-billed Vireo (*right*) a couple of

years ago (see:



<http://stlucieaudubon.org/hartBeat/hb2013/hb130501LifeBirds.html>). But the Florida Keys is perhaps our favorite Florida "chase" location.



This past winter we made two trips to the Keys for two exciting birds: in January to Long Key at mile marker 67.5 to search for the reported Key West Quail Dove; and then again at the end of February to Bahia Honda Key at mile marker 37, for the supposedly reliable Black-faced Grassquit, both on US Route 1. We have made several trips over the years to search for both of these species, and have not been successful, despite spending several days and considerable effort. However, this time we were quite sanguine about seeking out these birds, for we knew there is wonderful birding in the Keys even if we missed the birds again.

We arrived at the gate to Long Key State Park shortly before the 8 o'clock opening, for all reports urged birders to be on the trail where the birds (yes, there were supposedly two Key West Quail Doves present) were

being seen first thing in the morning before there were many visitors travelling the trails. We were the first ones there, but there were no birds. None! Other birders arrived and we agreed to contact each other if one or another found the doves. About an hour later, one of the other birders claimed to have seen the two of them, but in his excitement apparently flushed the birds, and try as we all might, we could not re-locate them. However, we did see several other species during the day, including a very accommodating Short-tailed Hawk (*above, left*).



After a full day of searching, finally, shortly after 5:00 PM, while peering into a thicket in a small island in the middle of the parking lot, after someone on the far side of the island slammed a car door, one of the Key West Quail Doves (*left*) flushed right into a small sun lit spot directly in front of Jewel, and she very quietly and without making any sudden movements was able to round up all the remaining birders who had spent most of the day searching with us. The dove was in the worst possible light for photography, but here displayed are my results. Suddenly, the second dove flew in to join the first one, only moments before they both disappeared. Thus, a successful trip! The last confirmed sighting of the doves was on March 26.

Conversely, the Black-faced Grassquit, in February, was as easy a life bird as we ever found. We started the day by

birding at STA-5 south of Clewiston, (fantastic day), then drove through the Seminole Indian Reservation to again look for the Smooth-billed Ani that we had not found on two previous occasions (again unsuccessfully), and then drove to Bahia Honda Key arriving late in the day, less than an hour before the gate closed. Our purpose was to merely try to find the bath house in the park where the bird was reported hanging out regularly. At the rear of the bath house another birder pointed out the very drab unpretentious female Black-faced Grassquit (*right*) calmly feeding not 10 feet in front of us. I sat down to take photos and the unconcerned bird walked right up to where I was sitting, not three feet from me.

Once again we were fortunate, for only a couple days later some well-meaning person spread bird seed for the Grass-quit and unleashed the unintended consequence of attracting an array of larger birds that apparently overwhelmed the Grassquit and pushed it out of the area, never to be seen again. But for us, the following day that had been committed to the Grassquit quest was now a free day.



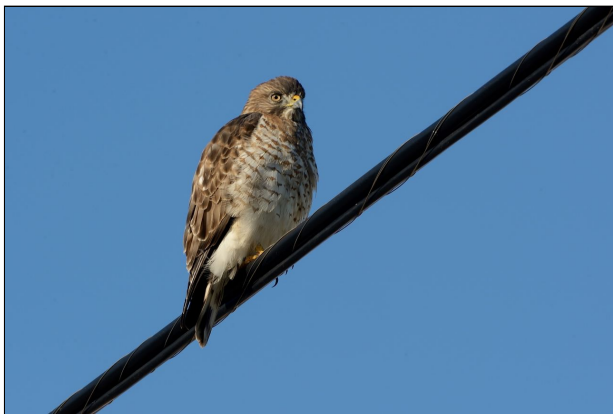
The following morning when we left the motel we noticed several Common Mynahs sitting on the wires along US Route 1



just above the motel parking lot.



Somewhat skittish, the birds did not allow approach for photos. Jewel remembered that the last Common Mynahs (*left and right*) that we saw, in Fort Pierce at the Harbortown Marina before the 1994 hurricanes, responded well to cracker crumbs. Lo and behold, so did these. A flock of 14 Common Mynahs, no longer skittish at all, devoured the couple of crackers Jewel crumbled for them, posed briefly, and then left to seek out more crumbs and goodies under the cars in the motel parking lot. Finally, on the way north on US Route 1, we saw a Broad-winged Hawk



sitting on a wire above the road. While I normally eschew "birds on wires" photos, this was the first Broad-wing Hawk photo op I have had in Florida, and it was just too good to pass up.

After leaving the Keys on US Route 1, I must admit that we did not take that venerable highway the rest of the way north to our Fort Pierce home. Like so many other aspects of life, highway travel has changed, and we now traversed a combination of the Florida Turnpike and Interstate 95 for the remainder of our trip. But in the Florida Keys, the only choice is US Route 1, and it is unlikely to be supplanted by any other super highway or turnpike. Probably a good thing, too, for the character of the Keys would undoubtedly not condone a fancy modern speedway. All that traffic congestion must be good for

business? Sure, no need to hurry, just pull off, relax and take your time. Eat, drink and be merry, and maybe find a life bird.

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