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Are you sure? Yes, it's a Zenaida Dove, rarely seen in Florida

UNUSUAL DOVES

"Look! There it is, right now, coming out of the woods onto the path!" "No way, that's just another Mourning Dove." "No, look, it has the white patch at the base of the tail, it's chunkier, and it has the rounded tail!" "Oh my God, you're right, it is the Zenaida Dove! Wow!"

The foregoing dialogue, some form of which was undoubtedly repeated many times over the past several weeks since its February 21, 2016, discovery, illustrates the conflicting reactions birders have in seeing a nondescript

dove that looks remarkably like the unremarkable and quite common Mourning Dove (*right*), and the realization that the viewer is looking at arguably the rarest bird in North America at the present time. With only three "verifiable records" of Zenaida Dove, all in Florida prior to this appearance, literally hundreds of birders have been flocking to Long Key State Park in the Florida Keys to add this bird to their life lists. As our "waiting for the bird for several hours until viewing" companions, as well as we, all pointed out, "We no longer 'chase' rare birds or worry about our life lists," yet here we all were, doing just that.

Curiously, this rare bird showed up this year in the same general area as last year's "rarest bird in America," the 2015 Key West Quail Dove. (hb150601FloridaKeys.html) It is highly probable that more Zenaida Doves arrive in Florida, but are over-looked or ignored on the presumption they are just simply another



Mourning Dove.

This bird was probably discovered because birders were searching in the hope that last year's Quail Dove would reappear, and a very knowledgeable birder just happened upon this lucky treasure.



In the photo at the top of this column, the Zenaida Dove displays the diagnostic white patch at the base of its tail, the chunkier look compared to the similar Mourning Dove, and the shorter more squared off tail, compared to the longer more pointed tail of the Mourning Dove. Some field guides refer to a "redder" appearance in the Zenaida Dove than in the Mourning Dove, but I suspect that refers

primarily to the males of both species. In this instance, I suspect both versions of the similar doves are females, for their color variation is very slight. However, when compared to an obvious male Mourning Dove (*above, Mourning left, Zenaida right*) the grayer appearance of the Mourning Dove is quite apparent. Some prior observers had reported the Zenaida copulating with a Mourning Dove. We did not observe any copulating activity, but while we watched, the Zenaida did adopt a clearly submissive posture to an apparent male Mourning Dove, (*right*) albeit, head to head instead of the expected normal mounting position.



With the success of this Zenaida Dove chase, and it only being mid-afternoon, we expressed our desire to photograph another relatively rare bird: the White-crowned Pigeon. We told our Zenaida viewing companions of this thought and our previous unsuccessful recent efforts at this challenge.

Yes, we had found White-crowned Pigeons easily and often on prior trips to the Florida Keys, but had been skunked in the past several years, now with a camera in hand as well as binoculars. One of our companions, an old friend from our 1992 Attu trip, said simply, "Nine Mile Pond and Paurotis Pond in the Everglades." Sounded simple enough, and also on our way home. Off we went on another "chase."

At Paurotis Pond and Nine Mile Pond we searched, and looked and watched without success, so decided to head on down to the end of the Everglades Road to see if there was anything at a former favorite birding spot: Eco Pond. There we encountered an Everglades Ranger also looking for birds. Our inquiry about White-crowned Pigeons drew the very same response, "Paurotis Pond and Nine Mile Pond," with the added information that the birds roost in the trees between the two ponds, which are in relative close proximity to each other. Back at the ponds we searched until nearly dusk when we saw some distant flying pigeon type birds that we were pretty sure were our targets.

Encouraged with this information and the Zenaida Dove success, we returned the next morning and found a couple of very distant birds perched in the top of a bare tree. (*right*) The birds were extremely skittish and never allowed close approach. It was only after several hours of watching, waiting and slowly maneuvering our car as a photography blind, that we were able to get within about 100 yards to capture this cropped close-up of a coveted White-crowned Pigeon. (*below*)

All three of these dove species are hunted and regarded as tasty game birds. Millions of Mourning Doves are shot every year in the United States, where they are included in the same hunting season category as pheasants, quail, grouse and other game birds. In the Caribbean islands and



Yucatan Peninsula, where both the Zenaida Dove and White-crowned Pigeon are common, they are not only regularly hunted with guns, but are also taken when most vulnerable, right off the nest while incubating eggs. Many ornithologists are concerned that all three of these doves may, over the long term, suffer the same fate as the once abundant Passenger Pigeon, all victims of habitat loss and over-hunting.

Chasing rare or far out of their normal range birds is great fun and, for a birder evolving into an amateur photographer, it can add new excitement and reason to get out into the field. But, it is by no means an always successful venture. While we write about the excitement of success, I suspect readers would soon die of boredom over accounts of our many failures. Besides, with failure there are no photos to share. But, as in life, it is the

many failures that enhance the appreciation of the successes. Think how wonderful it must feel for Congress members to actually occasionally pass legislation and accomplish something in the midst of all the gridlock and failure to get anything done. Like our finding rare birds, for Congress it must seem almost euphoric. I bet that's not the ending you expected.

For information on Zenaida Doves, see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zenaida_dove; sdakotabirds.com/species/zenaida_dove_info.htm; and www.arkive.org/zenaida-dove/zenaida-aurita/image-G95867.html. For information on White-crowned Pigeons, see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White-crowned_pigeon.

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