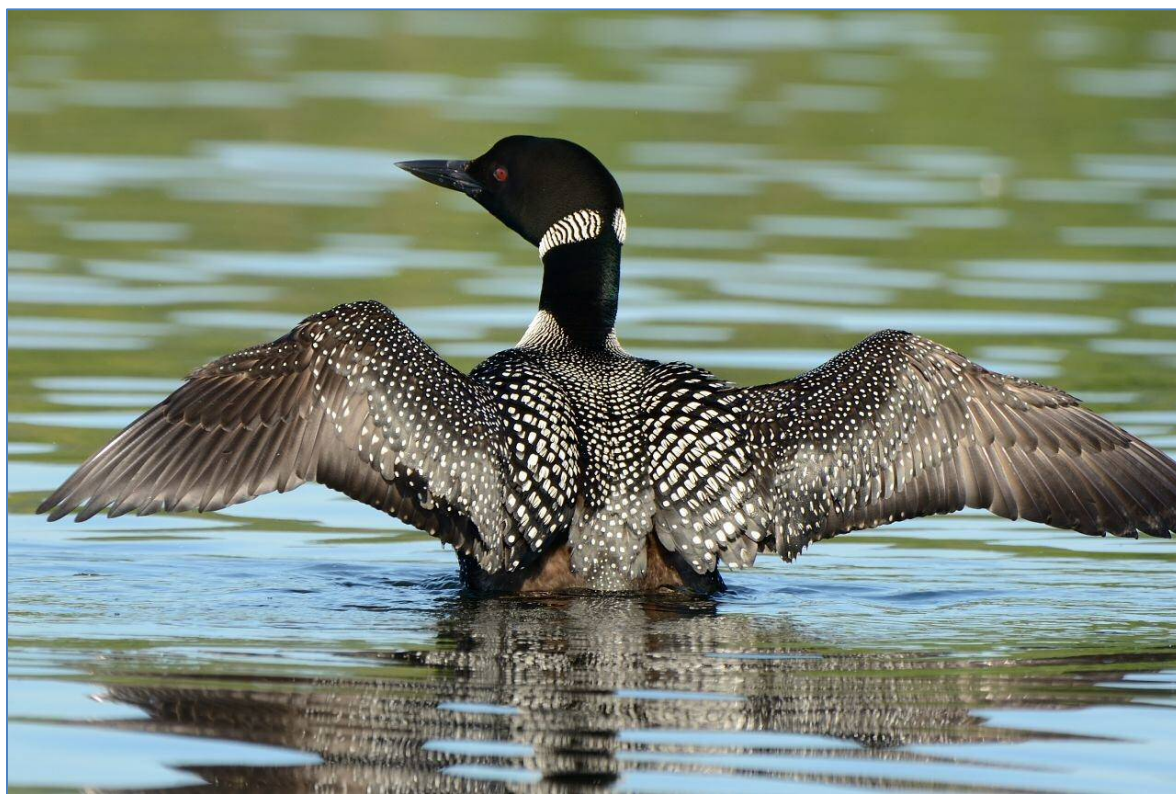


[HART BEAT 47, first published October 10, 2013](#)



*This beautiful plumage of the Common Loon is not how it dresses in Florida.*

## **CRAZY ABOUT LOONS?**

“Your client is crazy as a loon!” That was certainly not the diagnosis I was expecting from a highly regarded psychiatrist for a client I had sent to the doctor for a professional evaluation because Client’s wife had sought my help in obtaining an involuntary legal commitment to an appropriate psychiatric facility for his obvious mental health problems. Any of “delusional,” “schizophrenic,” or “early dementia,” I thought quite possible, but “crazy as a loon,” I did not expect. Perhaps my friendly doctor thought he had to express his diagnosis in terms that this dumb lawyer would understand.

Certainly, “crazy as a loon” is a common phrase in the English vernacular, but where does it come from? Research discloses two probable sources:

1. It is a corruption of the word “lunatic,” which in the Elizabethan era was the term for anyone exhibiting any type of mental disorder.

2. It stems from the fact that the Common Loon “has a weird, haunting cry which presumably suggested to someone the howls of the insane.” And, in addition, they often let loose that weird, haunting cry in the middle of the night, which makes it even eerier.



***Common Loon, winter***

Thus, it is no wonder that Hollywood, whenever it wants to create a scary mood, whether it is in an African jungle, in a center city setting, or the moors of Merry Olde England, will insert a Common Loon night-time wail. And do you remember Katherine Hepburn in “On Golden Pond” imitating a Common Loon call when she anticipated something bad about to happen? To hear the Common Loon “lunatic” wail, just go to [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/common\\_loon/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/common_loon/sounds) and

play the second “Pair Wail” sound presented there.



The Common Loon is another one of those birds that appears in Florida in the winter in its basic “shopping at the mall” plumage. In addition, it is more commonly found in salt or brackish water in Florida, whereas it breeds, nests and rears its young in fresh water in the northern most parts of the United States and Canada.

When it changes into its breeding plumage, it is quite a striking bird with its black head, red eye, striped neck and mottled back and wings.

Jewel and I found the breeding plumage birds depicted here in Maine this past August. We did not arrive there early enough in the season to see and photograph the cute little loon chicks as they rode on the backs of their



parents, but we did see a parent bird catch a good size bass and feed it to its half grown chick. With the size of the fish the chick is able to eat, it is no wonder they are able to grow so fast. Keep in mind that the chick eating the fish will be migrating south within a short couple of months.

While there is nothing crazy about a loon, I am happy to report that my “crazy as a loon” client did go into an appropriate care facility, where he received the help and medicine he needed, and he and his wife came to see me some six months later to report that he was a changed man (he had lost almost 70 pounds in the hospital) and that our efforts to get him the help he needed saved their marriage and improved their lives together immensely. And I still enjoy hearing a Common Loon call in some completely inappropriate setting in another dumb movie







*A quartet of Roseate Spoonbills dispute landing rights?*

## **A VOTE FOR THE BEAUTY OF THE ROSEATE SPOONBILL**

The compliment is the kind that photographers dream about receiving. It arrived “out of the blue,” from a far off land (well, Los Angeles, CA), unexpected, unsolicited, and unannounced in my email inbox. It was originally sent to the general email address for the St. Lucie Audubon Society on May 31st of this year, but did not find its way to my inbox until September 18. The email simply said:

*“Dear Sirs and Madams,*

*"Please tell whoever took that photo on your home page of the Roseate Spoonbill standing in the water with its wings open that that is the best photo of a bird I have ever seen (Okay, I'm biased, because R Spoonbill is one of my favorite birds). But seriously: it is sharp, in focus, well-composed, etc. etc. etc. That photo should go on the cover of National Geographic Magazine. I am stunned by how perfect that photo is. Tom"*





Of course, I could not let that note go by without sharing it with you, and also presenting additional photos of this gorgeous species. In *Hart Beat* 38 I suggested that the Painted Bunting was the most beautiful of all the birds in North America. Most readers who commented on the article agreed, but quite a number also suggested other birds as candidates for the “Most Beautiful” crown. However, none mentioned Roseate Spoonbill. Undoubtedly, “Tom’s” email should be counted, like a late absentee ballot coming into a Florida voting precinct, as a vote for Roseate Spoonbill. Does any reader want to change your vote as a result of this new contestant?



Unlike a regular election we can reopen the voting, and even offer additional advertising photos in support of the new candidate.

And so, in addition to the original spread wings photo, we present a formal “regal” pose; a baker’s dozen shot including an interloper; a group of squabbling Spoonbills acting like bickering legislators; and a cute juvenile Spoonbill with a just-beginning-to-develop spatula bill. Okay, you can now cast your vote.



Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge is a wonderful place to see Roseate Spoonbills up close and personal, and the spread wings, regal and baker's dozen photos all were taken there. In early spring the Roseate Spoonbills compete for prime nesting spots at the T M Goodwin Waterfowl Management Area, also known as the "Stick Marsh," near Fellsmere, FL, and can be seen in good numbers squabbling

for sites. And finally, the Alligator Farm in St Augustine in late March through early May is an excellent place to see all kinds of baby herons, Wood Storks and Spoonbills at relatively close range.

I have reached out to the compliment sender to thank him and try to learn how he came to spot the photo on the St. Lucie Audubon web site. I have not received a response. Perhaps the time lapse between his email and my response was too great and he has moved on to other activities, other birds, and other photos. But if any reader knows "Tom" from Los Angeles, tell him I am still interested in hearing from him.





HART BEAT 49, first published November 11, 2013



*This mother Clapper Rail has seven very dark chicks to keep an eye on.*

## KEEPING ON THE RAILS



*Clapper Rail*

Rail, a long slender bar extending from one post to another for horse race fans to lean against as they cheer for their horse to win; or, a bar of rolled steel, which when joined with a second one in parallel position forms a track for trains to run upon and block traffic for long periods of time at intersections on Route 1 in Fort Pierce; or, in past times another kind of bar that citizens would





### ***Soras***

use to ride politicians and other petty thieves out of town upon after tar and feathering, when necessary; or, as a verb, to revile or scold in harsh, insolent, or abusive language, as many have sought to do at our legislators who have recently caused the shut-down of the federal government and threatened the default of the full faith and credit of the good old U S of A.

Oh yeah, there is another definition: the term rail applies to any of 127 species of marsh birds in the family Rallidae, which includes the three species we present here today. For a complete list of the rails worldwide with photos, videos, and calls, see: [ibc.lynxeds.com/family/rails-gallinules-coots-rallidae](http://ibc.lynxeds.com/family/rails-gallinules-coots-rallidae).





### ***Virginia Rail***

While the official list of rails in Florida numbers nine species, including the American Coot, and both gallinules, it probable predates the adding of the Purple Swampphen as an approved wild bird, living, playing, working and enjoying the sun and warmth of the Sunshine State, albeit, just another undocumented immigrant. And so there are really 10 rail species in Florida, and interestingly, not any more anywhere else in North America.

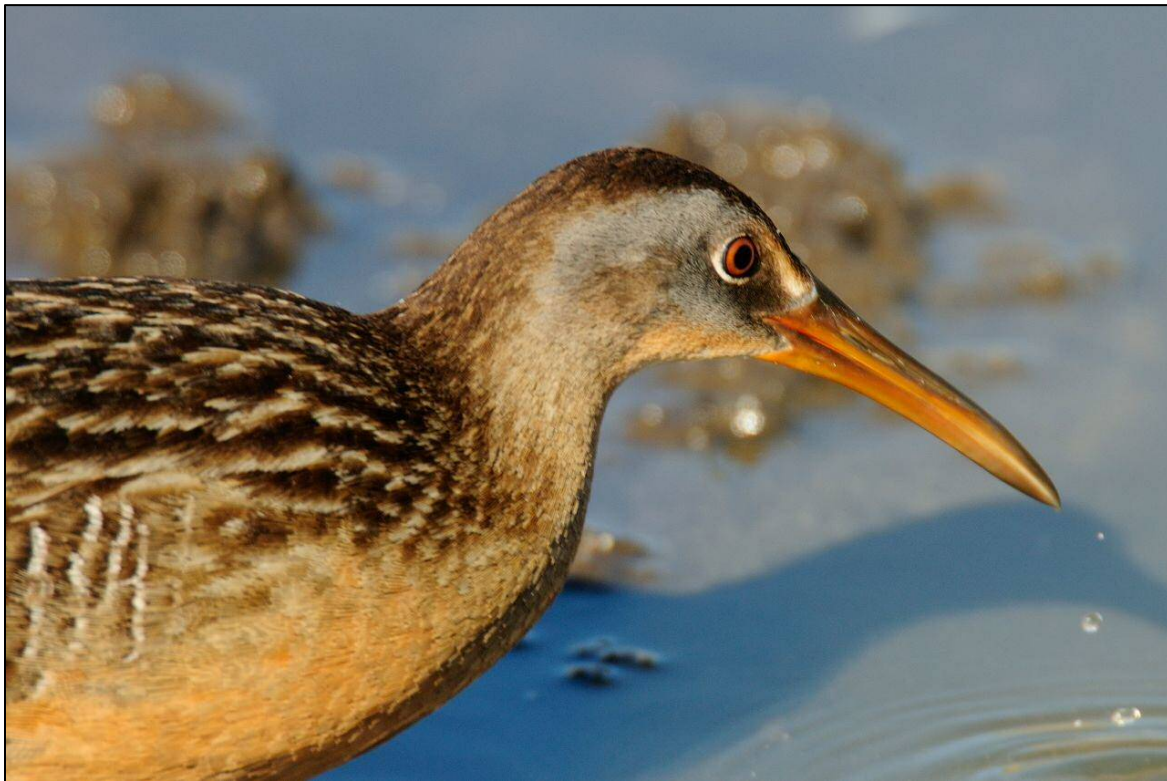
Of the 10 species, seven are relatively easy to find in Florida. The American Coot and the Common Gallinule (originally “Gallinule,” then “Moorhen,” and now “Gallinule” again) are found year round just about everywhere, and the Purple Gallinule and Purple Swampphen, while not quite as common as the first two species, can be readily seen in the appropriate habitat. See the previous *Hart Beat* 31 “The Color Purple.” Conversely, the tiny sparrow-sized Black Rail, the slightly larger, (but smaller than a Sora) Yellow Rail, and the largest of the rails, King Rail, are almost impossible to find. The Black and King Rails are year round residents of Florida, while the Yellow Rail is a winter snowbird. Jewel and I have yet to see any of these three species in Florida. Therefore, we present here the remaining three “not-hard-to-see-but-not easy-to-see” Florida rails: the Sora, the Clapper and the Virginia.

The Sora, with its short yellow bill and black face is found on most of our field trips to Green Cay/Wakodahatchee, Viera and Merritt Island as it is a winter resident usually from September to May. The Clapper Rail may be as common as the Sora but it is much more secretive and therefore much harder to find even though it is a year round resident of Florida. But the Virginia

Rail, another October to March snowbird, is so secretive and reclusive that a birder is more likely to stumble upon it in an unguarded moment than plan to intentionally find it.

All three of these species were found on different trips to Merritt Island National Wildlife Reserve (MINWR), although the mother Clapper Rail with the seven cute little black chicks was found in New Jersey.

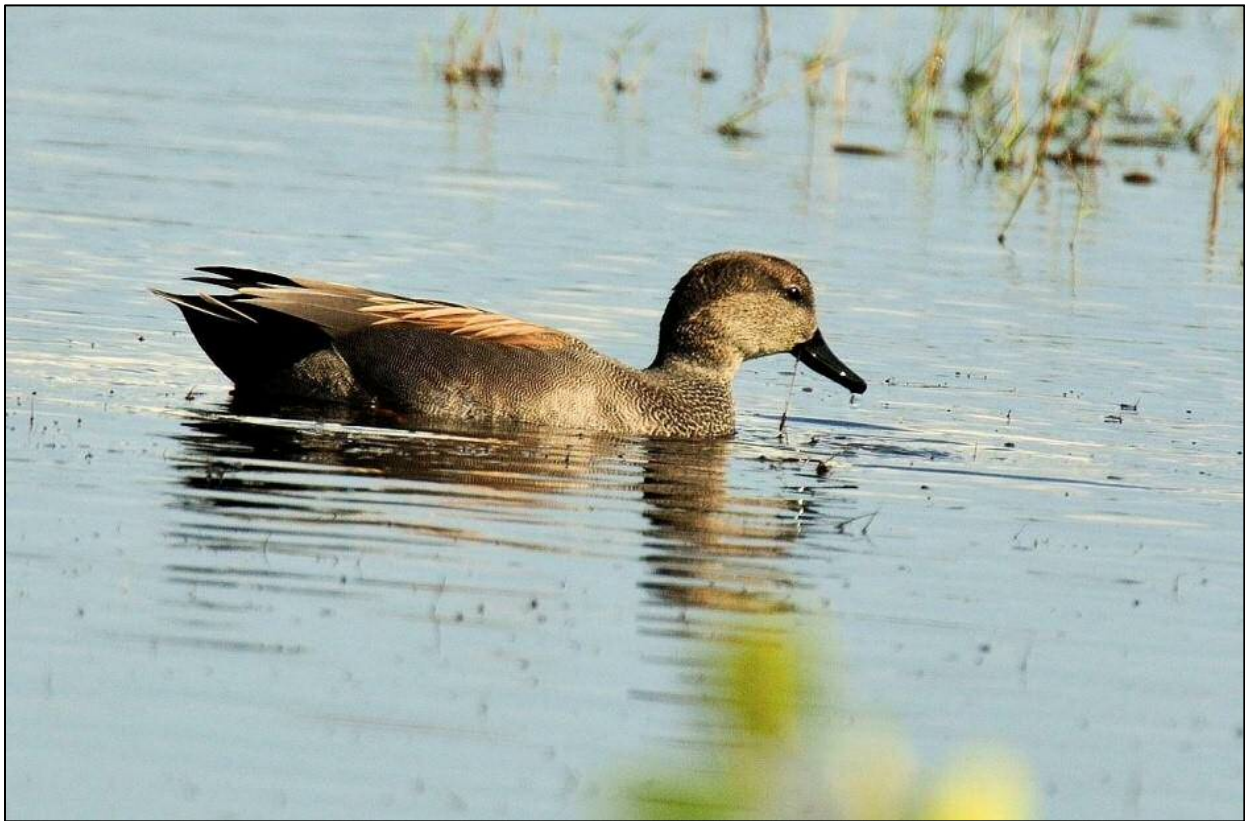
This past July the birding world was all agog with excitement at the first ever appearance in North America of a Rufous-necked Wood Rail, a Central and South American species that unexpectedly showed up in New Mexico. Because of commitments, Jewel and I were not able to fly out immediately to add this bird to our lists, and unfortunately, when we were able to go, the bird was gone. It was there for just over two weeks. [www.sfgate.com/nation/article/Rufous-necked-wood-rail-makes-rare-U-S-visit-4682964.php](http://www.sfgate.com/nation/article/Rufous-necked-wood-rail-makes-rare-U-S-visit-4682964.php). Maybe one will walk by one day as we wait on Route 1 in Fort Pierce for one of those long trains to pass by on a pair of those other kind of rails.



*Virginia Rail*



[HART BEAT 50, first published November 25, 2013](#)



*Because the Gadwall has few distinguishing marks, it can be a challenge to identify.*

## THE GISS/JIZZ OF BIRDS

Today, as I write these words, it is Veterans Day, and I am reminded of a popular birding term that comes directly from the military. Birders often talk about the giss or jizz of a bird. I have always understood that this birding term stems from the World War II military, particularly Air Force, practice of requiring all pilots to be completely familiar with the General Impression, Size and Shape of all aircraft, so that a pilot (or land-based anti-aircraft gunner) would quickly know whether an approaching plane was friend or foe. Often birders/pilots confronted with a fast flying bird/plane, don't have the time to consult a bird-book/plane identification manual to properly identify the bird/plane.

Field trip participants are often amazed when either Jewel or I quickly identify a distant flying bird as a Turkey Vulture, rather than a Black Vulture or some other raptor. This is not a rare or remarkable skill, as most experienced birders can just as quickly make this distinction because of their familiarity with the jizz of each of these species. Attached is a photo of the two in close proximity so that the difference in the jizz of each is readily apparent. In researching the origin of

the terms giss/jizz I found that the history of their usage is much more complicated than I realized. If you are interested [seebioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/birding-aus/1995-08/msg00056.html](http://seebioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/birding-aus/1995-08/msg00056.html) and [birding.about.com/od/birdingbasics/a/birdingacronyms.htm](http://birding.about.com/od/birdingbasics/a/birdingacronyms.htm), and finally: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jizz\\_\(birding\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jizz_(birding)).



***Turkey Vulture (top) and Black Vulture***

On a recent field trip, it became necessary to rely on the jizz of a distant group of ducks to attempt a fairly certain identification of the obvious different species in the group. All of the birds were pretty much just silhouettes in the cloudy daylight compounded by the great distance, right at the edge of the telescope reach to view them. However, we were able to determine that the largest and most numerous of the birds in the group were undoubtedly the expected Mottled Ducks although we surely could not see the bills well enough to determine the sexes of the birds (bright orange - male; olive-orange - female.)

Similarly, the smallest ducks, and second most numerous in the group, were undoubtedly Blue-winged Teal, but certainly not presenting as well as the sleep-eyed male in the attached photo.



***Bald Eagle, juvenile***

And there were several Northern Shovelers,, which were distinguishable even in the silhouette form by the unique shovel-shaped bill which would be presented to us periodically as the birds shifted and turned from side to side, depicted here in their blah winter plumage. For a series of spring plumage male Shoveler photos, the photos in *Hart Beat* 35 about "Preening"





***Mottled Ducks (above) and Blue-winged Teal (below)***

But the challenge of the day was a pair of medium sized ducks, with flat, blocky type heads, small bills and particularly nondescript coloring. With little more than that jizz to work with, we thought the pair might be the uncommon in Florida, Gadwall. With careful observation the birds occasionally rose and flapped their wings, presenting their whitish underbelly contrasted by the darker gray breast, and the light gray face with a darker cap. Interestingly, the attached photo was taken last November here in Florida.



Shortly after the duck jizz exercise, a very large raptor flew over causing all the birds in the area to take wing. Without the typical white head and tail, we used the jizz of the bird to conclude it

was a juvenile Bald Eagle. Then it came close overhead and confirmed our conclusion and presented this photo opportunity.

Giss/jizz is certainly not the “be all and end all” of bird identification. But with practice, it can certainly be helpful to move the ball along on the continuum from “I haven’t a clue what it is ...,” to “I think it’s a ...,” to “I’m pretty sure it’s a ...,” to the final destination of “It’s definitely a ...” If you think about it, we use giss/jizz regularly in our daily living, for that is the very technique we use to identify a friend or loved one, too far across a mall parking lot to see their facial features, but familiar enough in their size and shape, and the peculiarities of their gait or mannerisms to know for sure the person is our friend or loved one, and not just some stranger. Of course, sometimes we are wrong, too. Cars, trucks and buses are even easier.



*Northern Shovelers*



[HART BEAT 51, first published December 22, 2013](#)



*Burrowing Owls used to be seen in St. Lucie County, now they are difficult, if not impossible to find.*

## WISE ABOUT OWLS

Do you know why owls are considered to be wise? Apparently, it goes all the way back to early mythology when Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, had an owl for her symbol. Then too, it was easy for the lore and legend of wise owls to grow because of the owl's naturally wise appearance, with eyes that look straight forward and a head that can revolve almost 360 degrees.

Perhaps owl wisdom was best summed up in a poem by Edward H. Richards, "A wise old owl sat on an oak; The more he saw the less he spoke; The less he spoke the more he heard; Why aren't we like that wise old bird?" For more, see: [www.ask.com/question/why-are-owls-considered-wise](http://www.ask.com/question/why-are-owls-considered-wise).

Certainly owls are in the news currently with the report of a major southward irruption of Snowy Owls from their normal tundra habitat, resulting in Snowy Owls appearing in unforeseen

numbers, and as far south as South Carolina; see [www.nemesisbird.com/news/snowy-owl-irruption-watch-2013-14/](http://www.nemesisbird.com/news/snowy-owl-irruption-watch-2013-14/). And the traditional New York-Boston feud was fueled by the fact that JFK Airport in New York briefly shot Snowy Owls to prevent them flying into planes, while Logan Airport in Boston trapped and transferred them away from the airport for the same reason. Advantage Boston! See this article from *Slate* magazine.

[www.slate.com/blogs/wild\\_things/2013/12/17/snowy\\_owl\\_east\\_coast\\_irruption\\_why\\_charismatic\\_megafauna\\_get\\_all\\_the\\_love.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/wild_things/2013/12/17/snowy_owl_east_coast_irruption_why_charismatic_megafauna_get_all_the_love.html) (For even more, click on the high-lighted words in the article.)



***Great Horned Owls***

home area in Pennsylvania, and in our home area here in St. Lucie County. As cavity nesters, they can be found in almost any patch of woods with some larger trees, but are more difficult to

Meanwhile, here in Florida, with a five year Breeding Bird Atlas Project underway, winter is the time that owls are engaged in their breeding activity and much effort is being made to find and document all the breeding owls throughout the state, as well as here in St. Lucie County. So, what owls should Breeding Bird searchers be looking for in Florida, and particularly, here in

St. Lucie County?

First, the largest and easiest to see is the Great Horned Owl. They often vocalize at dawn and dusk, but can be seen during the daytime. Great Horned Owls do not build their own nests but will commandeer a nest previously built by an enterprising hawk pair, and begin their egg laying and hatching process well before the hawk pair are ready, forcing the hawks to build a new nest for their own reproduction.

Screech-Owls are the most common of our owls, both in our





***Eastern Screech-Owl***

sighting in the county. We have been informed that they formerly were found on the Adams Ranch and at the County owned Bluefield Ranch, but are no longer at either location. They are readily seen at Brian Piccolo Park in Hollywood, Florida (See [andygarcia1.wordpress.com/2012/05/26/the-burrowing-owls-of-brian-piccolo-park/](http://andygarcia1.wordpress.com/2012/05/26/the-burrowing-owls-of-brian-piccolo-park/), for one visitor's story) and at Cape Coral, just north of Fort Myers on Florida's west coast, where they actually nest in resident's front lawns. See this article from [capecoral.net](http://capecoral.net)

actually get to see. However, sometimes they will backyard nest in a bird box built to their specific dimensions and requirements.

Barred Owls, also cavity nesters are even harder to see, unless a birder knows where a pair is setting up house-keeping. Usually found not too far from a swampy or wetland area, they will readily respond to an imitation or recording of their call.

Barn Owls originally (and still, sometimes) cavity nesters, have adapted to barns and other human structures. Sugar cane and vineyard farmers have discovered that Barn Owls are very effective for rodent control and have installed Barn Owl bird boxes in their fields with great success. While Barn Owls are almost gone in many areas of Pennsylvania, they are merely "uncommon" in Florida, including St. Lucie County.

Burrowing Owls occur north, west and south of St. Lucie County, but Jewel and I are still searching for our first



***Barred Owl***

No, we have not heard of any Snowy Owls (right) being seen in Florida yet, but if there ever was a year for it to happen, this might be THE YEAR. And they can show up anywhere, but habitat resembling their native tundra, such as closely mown fields, or beaches, would be the best places



*Snowy Owl*

to look. The wise old Snowy Owls have undoubtedly moved south because their regular diet of rodents, particularly lemmings, has probably crashed this year. Every year a few come south, and in 2009, Jewel and I photographed the one presented here at Round Valley Reservoir in New Jersey.

In closing, I think it would still be better to be thought of as a “wise old owl” than a “crazy old coot.” No one has ever attributed wisdom to a coot. Of course, it also has been said that “Wisdom comes with age; but sometimes, age wls, JFK Airport excepted.



*Barn Owl*





American Kestrel



***Bob Rufe (left) birding with Jewel and Hart on the Aleutian Island of Attu in 1992. Below, Hart alongside the North Fork of the St. Lucie River in a photo from a Palm Beach Post article Feb. 2, 2011 (<http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/news/retired-judge-knows-patience-needed-when-it-comes-/nLpmp/>).***





HART BEAT 52, first published January 11, 2014



*There are five species of "peeps" but only a two show up regularly in Florida, and then only in the winter.*

## KNOW YOUR PEEPS



***Western Sandpiper***

When we think of peeps, the first thing that comes to mind is those cute little yellow fuzz balls that grow up to be White Leghorns, or “chicken hawk” food, or chicken parmesan. Or we might think of those cute little yellow marshmallow imitation peeps that show up in a child’s Easter Basket.

But I still vividly recall the story from my depression-era early childhood that I now refer to as the “Parable of the Peep.” An unworthy peep was discarded by a farmer in a

bucket of his friends and dumped into a barrel. He picked himself up only to discover that more of his friends were being dumped into the barrel on top of him. Nevertheless, he worked his way

to the top of the new pile each time a new batch was dumped into the barrel on top of him, until (drum-roll) when the barrel was just about full and the farmer was about to put the lid on the barrel, the peep managed to jump out of the barrel and escape.

The farmer, recognizing the peep's strong will to live, returned him to the chicken house, where he lived happily ever after, siring many offspring

and dozens of eggs. The End. What!? You never heard that story!? Come on, it has all the elements of a morality play: abject rejection; bare survival; determined struggle; strong striving; ultimate success and final recognition. Never mind the unreality of the plot; it's a natural for Hollywood.



***Least Sandpiper***



***Semipalmated Sandpiper***

But when it comes to the world of birds, (or at least the North American part of that world) “peeps” refers to five species of diminutive sandpipers: Least, Western, Semipalmated, White-rumped, and Baird’s. For all you ever wanted to know about these peeps, see: [www.aba.org/birding/v40n4p32.pdf](http://www.aba.org/birding/v40n4p32.pdf) Sibley calls the first three “Small Peeps” and the last two “Large Peeps,” while the reference article designates the last two as “long-winged peeps.”





***White-rumped Sandpiper***

For birders in Florida, it really doesn't matter much, for only the Least and the Western are likely to be encountered in Florida, and only in the winter at that. And they are easy to tell apart: the Least is smaller and has yellow legs; and the Western is slightly larger and has black legs. Of course, the larger Sanderling, and even larger Dunlin

may sometimes cause confusion, when seen at a distance, or not under optimal viewing conditions. But the Sanderling has a heavier, stockier bill than any of the peeps, and the Dunlin is significantly larger with a longer down-curved bill.

At Cape May, New Jersey, and along the Delaware Bay shore, and particularly at Heislerville, NJ, during the spring migration, tens of thousands of Semipalmated Sandpipers gorge on the horseshoe crab eggs, along with the Red Knots and Ruddy Turnstones. Least Sandpipers are pretty common, and there are also a few White-rumped Sandpipers. Baird's are unusual and strictly a fall migrant in New Jersey, as Baird's Sandpipers are primarily Central Flyway migrants both spring and fall. White-rumped Sandpipers are distinguished from both Least and Semipalmated by the larger size, longer wings, which project beyond the tail, streaking on the flanks, and an absolutely diagnostic field mark: red on the base of the lower mandible (bill) in all plumages. All of these field marks are visible in the attached White-rumped Sandpiper photo.

So there you have it, as you push your way to the top, and success, in peep identification, like the peep in the parable, keep in mind: In Florida, in winter the only peeps are Least, yellow legs, and Western, black legs. And in New Jersey in the spring the only peeps are Least, yellow legs; Semipalmated, black legs; and White-rumped, larger size, longer tail, streaks on flanks, and red base of lower mandible. And, also like the peep in the parable, when you have mastered those few details, you too can live happily ever after. The offspring and dozens of eggs is another matter though.



*Sanderling (left) and Western Sandpiper*



HART BEAT 53, first published January 30, 2014



*This Little Blue Heron is making no secret about being ready to breed.*

## COLOR ME BLUE

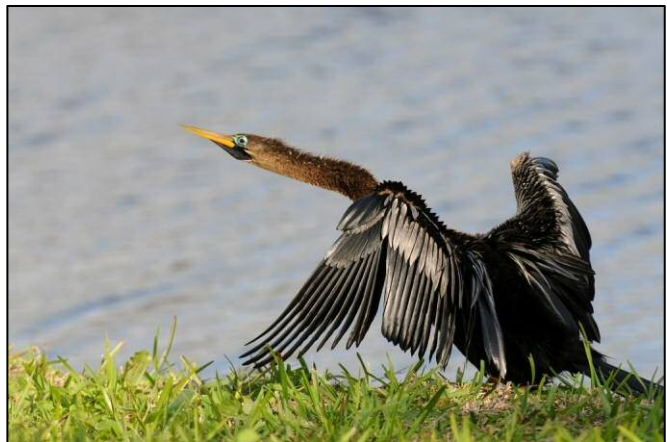
The color blue permeates our culture. Boys are blue, girls are pink. Winners receive blue ribbons, and we hope the stocks we purchase are blue chip. Blue is patriotic: 64 countries have the color blue in their flags; and it is the color of royalty, as royals are called “blue bloods.” Blue is the color of sadness or melancholy; but it is also the color of happiness, expressed with “blue skies” and the “bluebird of happiness.” It is the color of cold, as in “blue ice,” whereas your hot water tap will be marked red. It is the color of hard work as “blue-collar workers” perform many of our most strenuous tasks. And it is found throughout our music from “It will be a blue Christmas without you...,” to “Blue skies smiling at me...,” to Blue Moon and Mood Indigo. You get the idea.



***Tricolored Heron***

It is included in the first word of the names of 12 North American bird species, not counting the Indigo and Lazuli Buntings, or the Black-throated Blue Warbler, or the Great Blue or Little Blue Herons. But for this writing, blue is the color of love, both for humans and birds. Brides wear “Something old; something new; something borrowed and something Blue,” while some birds sport the color blue to announce their readiness for the serious business of mating and passing on their genes.

This realization hit me after a lifetime of birding when, at Wakodahatchee, a Great Blue Heron in all its obvious mate attracting grandeur, presented a close-up of its bill, sporting bright blue eye lores, a feature not present during the rest of the year. While this late discovery came as a



***Anhinga***



surprise to me, I then remembered that Little Blue Herons and Tricolored Herons have the same bright blue lores and base of the bill when ready for breeding.

Reddish Egrets display their desire for love by changing the color of their legs from black to blue. Anhingas don't really get a deep blue around the eye when trying to attract a mate, but that turquoise, only present for a few weeks when ready for love, is certainly close to blue. And the Cattle Egret, while showing a brownish orange on its head, back and breast to signal readiness for action, also develops a lovely shade of lavender between its eyes and the reddish bill that also has changed from its usual year round yellow.

All of these examples of birds wearing a "bridal - something blue" are obviously herons, or, in the case of the Anhinga, a closely related water bird. I haven't yet checked to see if this blue color is prominent in other breeding species, but the blue bill of the breeding Ruddy Duck is obviously one other possible example. We also know that most species don their finest feathery when setting up breeding territories.



***Great Blue Heron***

While we all love to anthropomorphize birds to show our close connection to them, it is true that we humans have more in common with our feathered brethren than one might realize. I sometimes wonder if birds could add words to some of their beautiful songs, we wouldn't hear their version of Blue Skies. Of course, hearing the normal squawks and sounds of most herons would not lend itself to

that theory, but then again, we don't know what the female of the species is hearing.



***Cattle Egret***

Maybe it's like the sweet nothings that some tone deaf, hoarse males may be whispering in the ear of some star struck females of the human species. Or, maybe not. Maybe it's just another version of *Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue*.



***Reddish Egret***



[HART BEAT 54, first published February 15, 2014](#)



*When it comes to speed, the Peregrine Falcon is difficult to beat.*

## **SPEED!**

Speed has always been important to humans. Our very earliest ancestors used speed to survive and pass on their genes by escaping prowling predators, not by out-running the predators, but by out-running their slower human companions, who often suffered a less desirable fate.

We no longer rely on our own speed for survival, but we are still fascinated with speed: think Roman era chariot races; cars running around in circles in ever increasing speed; baseball pitchers hurling a ball at nearly 100 mph, or quarterbacks rifling a spiral practically through a brick wall; the majority of Olympic events award medals to the speediest; and the Kentucky Derby is sold out every year, and it's not just for the mint juleps. And we are constantly looking for more speed. I remember as a boy that extreme speed was expressed as "going like sixty," at a time when automobile typical "high" speeds hovered between 35 and 40 mph. Now a driver doing 60 on an interstate simply backs up traffic.

But nothing humans can do to generate speed on their own, without the help of machines, begins to approach the speed that Peregrine Falcons reach when they stoop in a dive to knock some hapless duck, pigeon, pheasant, or other prey sized bird out of the sky. Starting at a height



***Peregrine Falcon***

of anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 feet a Peregrine Falcon will stoop at speeds up to and over 270 mph and strike its prey with such force that the prey is instantly killed:

[bestsciencebloginthelife.wordpress.com/page/45/](http://bestsciencebloginthelife.wordpress.com/page/45/).



***Merlin***

Of course, it also engages in more conventional chase hunting, like its close falcon relatives, the Merlin and the American Kestrel. (The Gyrfalcon, the fourth and largest North American falcon species, has never been recorded in the wild in Florida.) Each of the falcon species was formerly named after the prey species that it might take. Thus the Peregrine was the “Duck Hawk;” the Merlin was the “Pigeon Hawk;” and the Kestrel was the “Sparrow Hawk.” While bird names are often





*Merlin*

inscrutable, the modern falcon names are certainly classier than the old names.

Peregrine Falcons, which were almost extirpated during the DDT years, have rebounded as a result of reintroduction into modern day cliff habitats, better known as city skyscrapers, where they often nest high on building ledges to the delight of office workers who are very protective of them, and where there is a plentiful supply of pigeons

to prey upon. They follow migrating birds south, sometimes even chasing shorebirds along ocean beaches, and arriving like snowbirds in Florida, where they can be found in locations with concentrations of birds.

Jewel and I have witnessed a Peregrine dive on a duck, unsuccessfully, but have also seen one take and eat a Killdeer. Surprisingly, Peregrines are successful on only 20 percent of their strike attempts. Merlins also hunt small birds and sometimes, dragonflies. Both Peregrines and Merlins can be found in Florida in the winter, but breed much farther north, although some Peregrine Falcons are now breeding in eastern North American cities and at some shore locations.

American Kestrels are the most common of the falcon species as they breed throughout most of North America, including Florida. While they can be seen on telephone wires and fence posts all over Florida, particularly in the winter, they have suffered some decline in



*American Kestrel*

numbers, attributed to the increase in Cooper's Hawks, which love to prey on Kestrels. The Kestrel diet does feature some small birds, but they are more likely to eat small rodents or grasshoppers. Neither the Merlin or Kestrel achieves the Peregrine's speed records, nor are they likely to stoop from high altitudes, even though short sudden surprise dives are their favored method of attack.

And so, the Peregrine Falcon stands alone: the fastest self-propelled organism on earth. We humans have achieved higher speeds, surpassing the speed of sound and sending rockets into space, but not by flapping our own arms or using our own legs. And memory is a wonderful thing. The older I get, with advancing age and approaching dotage, the faster I remember I was able to run as a youth. But alas, there was always Someone faster. (Actually, a lot of "Someones" were faster.) Somehow, dreams never die. Oh, to be as fast as the Peregrine Falcon!!!



***American Kestrel***

Note: Some time ago I watched a video documenting a Peregrine Falcon being radar clocked at 272 mph, but despite diligent internet searching, I have not been able to relocate it. However, here are some exciting views of Peregrines stooping on prey: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me3Y64VUqqQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Me3Y64VUqqQ).

A short BBC clip: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=legzXQIFNjs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=legzXQIFNjs). And another short BBC clip, with the camera mounted on the bird. And another with sky-divers: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=d\\_PWry-vG9w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_PWry-vG9w).

And finally, a long BBC documentary on Peregrine Falcons in three parts; Part 1: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8ZY9a-9eBY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8ZY9a-9eBY), and Part 2: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk7F0P\\_VwvE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk7F0P_VwvE), and Part 3: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7K7Tl9vK0E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7K7Tl9vK0E).



[HART BEAT 55, first published March 2, 2014](#)



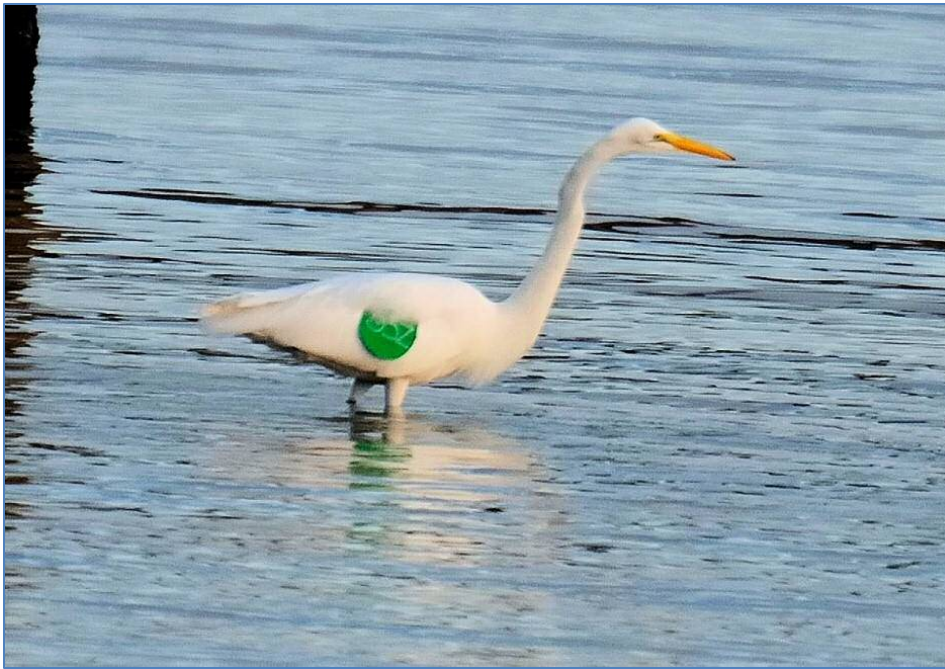
## A BIRD IN HAND

Do you have any idea how often someone can track your whereabouts? Banks, credit card issuers, phone companies, internet providers, and probably the NSA, the FBI, Target security hackers, and investigators hired by divorce lawyers, have the capability of knowing or finding out exactly when and where people are located with remarkable precision. But when it comes to birds it takes special effort to document their specific individual comings and goings.

We may know with some certainty when one particular bird comes to a feeder because of a unique feather, or color or feature which distinguishes that bird from all the others like it. But the following year that feature may have changed with the bird's molt, and we may not be able to recognize it again. Certainly, unlike a human with a Smartphone in purse or pocket, we are not able to track and learn about birds, other than by sight, without some help. Hence, bird banding.

While there is some history of bird banding in Europe back to 1595, John James Audubon is credited with the first banding in North America, when he tied silver cords around the legs of fledgling Phoebe's at Millgrove, and had two of them return the following year. Banding has progressed from silver threads to readable wing tags, (see *Great Egret*) leg flags, (See photos in

*Hart Beat 15* “Fly Your Flag”), neck markers, (see Trumpeter Swan) and radio transmitters with satellite tracking.



***Great Egret***

But by far the most common method of banding birds is the placing of readable bands on their legs, so that individual birds can be identified one from another. Nan LaFramboise, a licensed bander working under the auspices of the U. S. Geological Survey, is currently banding Painted Buntings in St. Lucie County and other locations in Florida. Painted

Bunting numbers are in serious decline and there is a concerted effort to understand more about them to prevent their population plummeting to a critical level. Nancy is working with the University of North Carolina and the Painted Bunting Observer team to contribute to this effort. [www.paintedbuntings.org](http://www.paintedbuntings.org).

Typically, the bird's regular feeder is replaced with a trap into which the birds go to feed, from which they are unable to escape (photo 1). Upon removal from the trap by gentle hands, the birds are placed in a cloth bag to calm them (photo 2), then removed and banded with four bands in a sequence unique to that bird (photo 3), checked for fat deposits (photo 4), evaluated for flight feather molt and condition (photo 5), wing measured to help determine the age of the bird and add to the gathered data of the species (photo 6), weighed, and then released (photo 7). The entire process is completed gently and quickly, and birds are set free within minutes of their capture.

We discovered that very shortly after their release the birds were right back in the traps, probably to feed again, rather than because they enjoyed the banding process. When the team discovered that they were catching more already banded birds than unbanded, they shut down the process, although there were clearly more unbanded birds in the area.



Everything that takes place is duly recorded (photo 8) and subsequently sent to the Bird Banding Laboratory, which is now curiously under the umbrella of the U. S. Geological Service, at Patuxent, Maryland, where the information is entered into a national database



***Trumpeter Swan***

available to the world. If one finds or sees a banded bird, that discovery should be reported at [www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl). It is important to note and report the sighting of the bands in the following sequence for Painted Buntings (as shown in photo 3): top left, black and white split, indicating the bird was banded in Florida; bottom left, blue; top right, red; and finally, bottom right, here, the silver Federal band which carries a nine digit number unique to that specific bird. Remember, the sequence and perhaps the colors change with every banded bird.

While keeping track of the whereabouts of we humans may be more sophisticated, the information gained from the banding of birds is invaluable. We probably never will be able to persuade birds to carry beepers or smartphones so we can track them, so bands are the next best thing. There were times when we would have loved to be able to know where our children were, especially during their teen years, but unlike some paroled prisoners, we never did stoop to affixing satellite monitors to their legs. (I hope this suggestion doesn't put ideas into the heads of some parent readers.) Then again, many of us do indeed wear bands like birds, but on the third finger of the left hand. However, like birds, that band requires sighting to record whereabouts as well. Good thing, too, for some.

1



2





3



4



5



6





7



8



For more information on bird banding see:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North\\_American\\_Bird\\_Banding\\_Program](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_American_Bird_Banding_Program); and  
[www.zoosociety.org/conservation/bwb-asf/library/birdbanding.php](http://www.zoosociety.org/conservation/bwb-asf/library/birdbanding.php)

**HART BEAT 56, first published March 16, 2014**

*Snail Kites have been seen scoping out the new Lakeside Ranch site for possible nests.*

## **CLEAN WATER**

In Colonial America it was called the “Necessary Room” and it was in the back garden, where many a citizen endured a cold night walk to use it. In the late 1800’s, with the advent of indoor plumbing it morphed into the “bathroom,” a euphemism still very much in use. And now everyone knows exactly what you mean when you ask, “Where is the restroom?”

The treatment of human generated wastes has also changed, from simply covering it with dirt, to disposing of it in a nearby stream or river, always downstream from the upstream intake for drinking water, (God help the residents of the next village/town/city downstream, doing the same thing), to the construction of treatment plants, now sophisticated enough to produce safe drinking water from the treated sewage effluent. Do you think that Astronauts, now spending months in the International Space Station, carry with them the four gallons of water per day, per person, that is considered the appropriate minimum for proper survival?





***Masked Ducks, male (left) and female***

In Florida, a parallel problem arose, when the early settlers found millions of acres of potential farm and cattle land perpetually covered with water and inhabited with alligators, snakes, mosquitoes and Seminoles. The solution was to channelize the meandering rivers and build canals for the drainage of the land and make it suitable for productive purposes. (Three Seminole Wars solved the Indian problem, but that is another story. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seminole\\_Wars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seminole_Wars)) But the land reclamation projects, like so many panaceas with unforeseen consequences, created other problems, as the fertilizer run-off and cattle waste washed into the rivers and canals, polluting downstream estuaries, lagoons, and coastal tidal areas, in many instances causing environmental havoc.

You may ask: “What does all this have to do with birds?” Here in Florida one partial solution to both of these water treatment environmental problems has been the construction of large scale water detention areas covering hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of acres where the polluted water is retained in progressively cleaner cells, to be naturally filtered by native plants that extract the pollutants, until the water is deemed clean enough to return to the environment. These waste water treatment areas are euphemistically called “Wetlands,” while the farm land treatment areas are called “Storm-water Treatment Areas” or STA’s for short. These Wetlands and STA’s are a paradise for birds, as well as alligators, turtles, otters, bobcats, birders, photographers, joggers, walkers, and any number of additional critters.

The most sophisticated of these wetlands is Green Cay in Boynton Beach, which has a Nature Center as well as a 1.5 mile boardwalk. A mile away, also in Boynton Beach, is the older, original model for such wetlands, at Wakodahatchee, with a  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile boardwalk. Well known similar Florida wetlands with drivable berms include Viera, in Viera, Blue Heron in Titusville, and walkable Orlando in Christmas, and Indian River County in Vero Beach.



***Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal***

STA's are owned and managed by The South Florida Water Management District, and are open on a limited basis to birders and photographers by partnership arrangement with Audubon chapters in the counties where they are located. STA-5 is the best known and most popular STA, and birding is managed by Hendry-Glades Audubon Society; STA-1 birding in Palm Beach County is managed by Audubon Society of the Everglades; and birding in the newest STA (16 months at this writing) at Lakeside Ranch in western Martin County is managed by the Martin County Audubon Society.



***Double-crested Cormorants***





***Eared Grebe***

While virtually all of the common and expected bird species, as well as many uncommon species, can be found in these water impoundments, most years one or more rare and unexpected species arrives to the delight of birders and photographers from all over the United States. For example, Viera has hosted both female and male Masked Ducks in two different years, and one winter, a Great Cormorant mingled with the Double-crested Cormorant flock. In

2007, an Eared Grebe wintered at Green Cay, and STA-5 features the newly recognized Purple Swamphen and several pairs of endangered Snail Kites.

It also seems to attract an array of kingbirds. See the previous *Hart Beat 12* “Kingbird Highway,” to which article can now be added the Tropical Kingbird, seen in 2013. At Green Cay and Wakodahatchee, birders and walkers sometimes jostle each other as they attempt to use the same boardwalk space for their separate purposes. But the birds have become so acclimated to all the people in close proximity that they often offer up close and personal inspection.

The newest STA at Lakeside Ranch has only recently been planted with the pollutant gobbling vegetation that also attracts birds, and therefore is still being discovered by both birds and birders. However, Snail Kites have already been observed



***Tropical Kingbird***

exploring the area, undoubtedly for appropriate nesting sites and awaiting the development of the Apple Snail population.

So the next time you have the need to use a “Necessary Room” or a less eloquently named “restroom,” particularly in or near one of these water treatment areas, think of it as contributing to the well-being of our bird friends. While birds may not fully understand or appreciate the valuable service you are providing to their benefit, I’m sure birders will increasingly welcome the opportunities provided by your input, or more correctly, “output,” to these fantastic birding areas. Now, if only St. Lucie County would construct one of these “wetland” facilities so that we could contribute regularly to the cause.



*Purple Swamphens*



[HART BEAT 57, first published April 1, 2014](#)

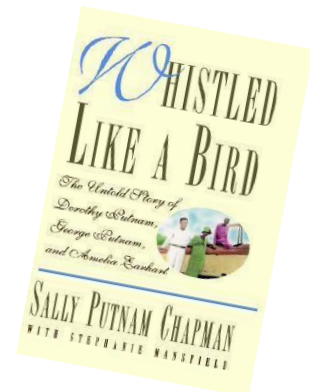


***Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks are one of the two species of Whistling-Ducks seen in St. Lucie County***

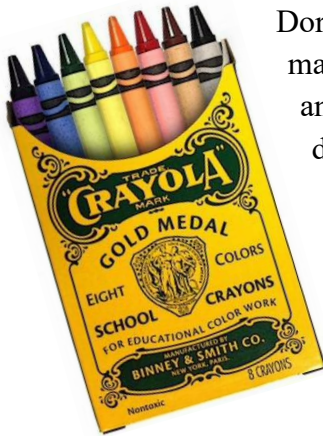
## WHISTLED LIKE A BIRD

The book, *Whistled Like a Bird*, is the biography of arguably St. Lucie County's most famous person. The famous "whistler" was Dorothy Binney Putnam, heiress daughter of Edwin Binney, inventor and founder of Crayola Crayons, and the wife of George Putnam, the high powered force behind the Putnam publishing empire.

Dorothy was Amelia Earhart's best friend. They traveled and flew together, and Amelia later dedicated her book to Dorothy. But Amelia also captivated Dorothy's husband, when she fell in love with George while he was promoting her career as the leading aviatrix of her time. After divorcing Dorothy and marrying Amelia, George sponsored and promoted Amelia's fateful flight across the Pacific Ocean, and spent unprecedented amounts of time and money searching for her, a mystery and search that continue even today. While one might expect that Dorothy's divorce from George should



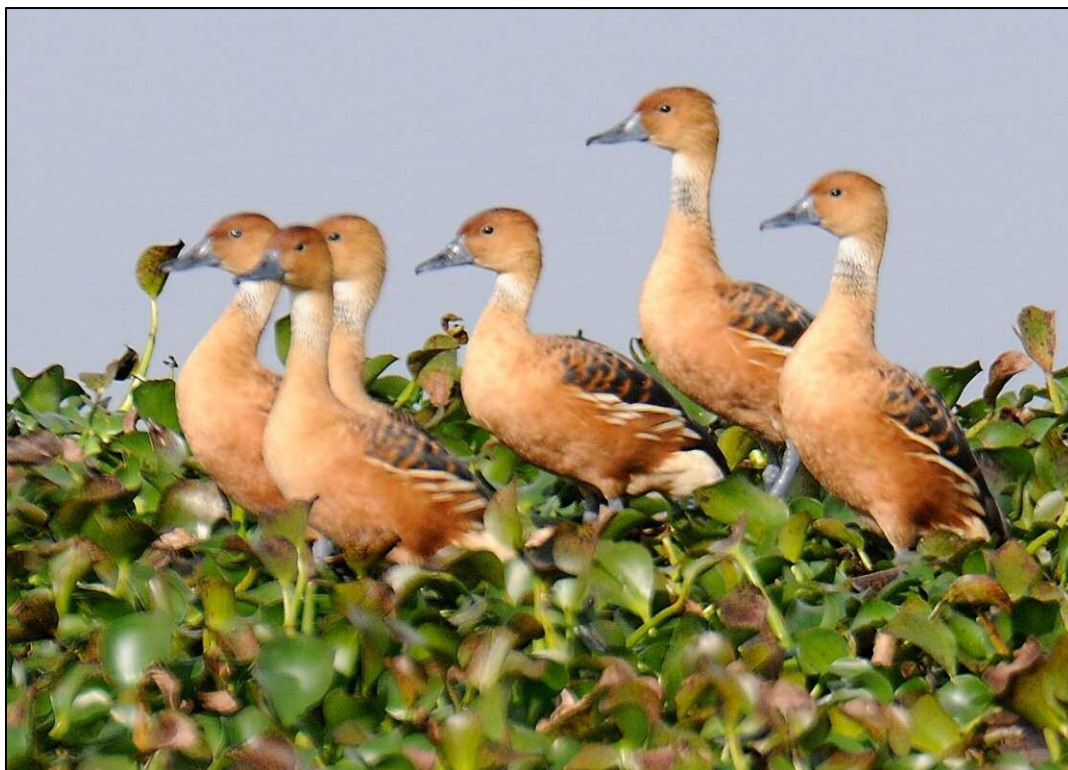
have been devastating, it really was quite liberating for Dorothy, for like Anna in *The King and I*, she “had a love of her own,” -- the 19- years-younger tutor of her son.



Dorothy came to Fort Pierce in 1930 after the divorce and built the magnificent estate, “Immokolee,” where she lived until her death in 1982, and where she loved birds and was able to whistle imitations of many different species. For the record, she was also a co-founder of the St. Lucie Audubon Society. I can only wonder how Dorothy’s life story was missed by Hollywood.

It is not known whether Dorothy ever whistled like a Black-bellied or Fulvous Whistling-Duck, but it is probably unlikely, for both of those species are relatively recent arrivals in Florida.

Prior to 1968 the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck was virtually unknown in Florida, and between that date and 2012, the species was regarded as very rare and localized. In 2006, when the small flock pictured here began to appear regularly at Dottie and Hank Hull’s feeders in Port St. Lucie, it was quite a thrilling event. Today, they can be found in many locations where suitable habitat exists, including back yard bird feeders along canals in residential areas throughout the Treasure Coast.



***Fulvous Whistling-Ducks***



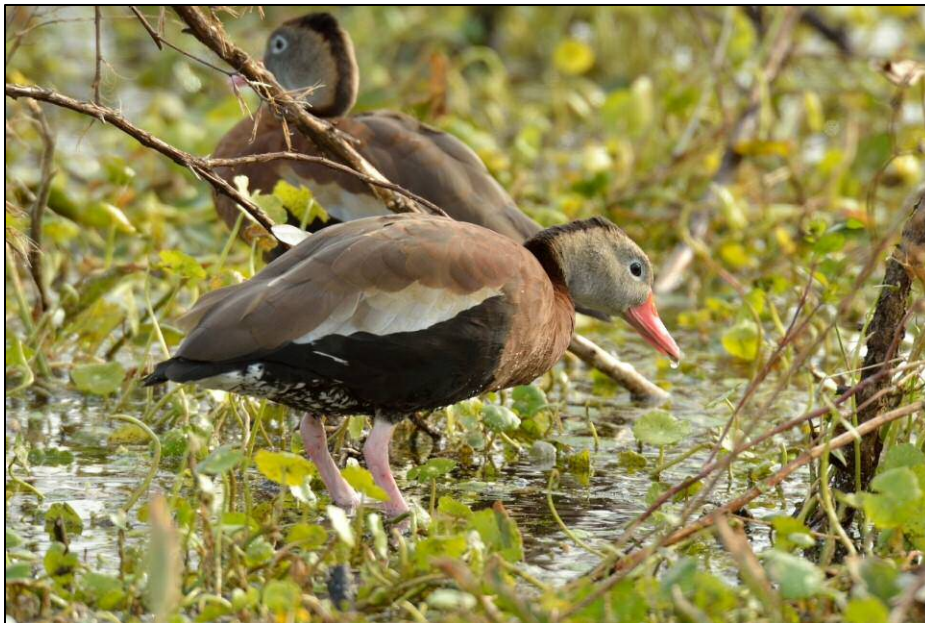


***Fulvous Whistling-Ducks***

Fulvous Whistling-Ducks were first found on Lake Okeechobee in Florida in 1965, and are more reclusive and not nearly as wide-spread or easy to find in Florida as Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. The Great Florida Birding Trail web site only lists a small hand full of locations for finding the species, but Jewel and I have found them most near Fellsmere.

Both species are cavity nesters and were previously named “Tree-Ducks.” The two, Black-bellied and Fulvous, are the only species of the Whistling-Ducks found in North America (eight species worldwide), and all Whistling-Ducks are placed in a separate subfamily of the *Anatidae*, the bird family of ducks, geese, and swans.

If you have the opportunity to go birding with a leader who has the talent to whistle like a bird to



***Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks***

call them in to view, (and I have heard some extremely talented bird whistlers), I would wager that none can claim anywhere near the background life story that was lived by Dorothy Binney Putnam. I’ll bet if she ever heard one, she could imitate the Whistling-Ducks too.

To hear Fulvous Whistling-Ducks whistle, click:

[birds.audubon.org/bir](https://birds.audubon.org/bir)

[ds/fulvous-whistling-duck](https://birds.audubon.org/birds/black-bellied-whistling-duck). To hear Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks whistle, click:  
[birds.audubon.org/birds/black-bellied-whistling-duck](https://birds.audubon.org/birds/black-bellied-whistling-duck).

The author of *Whistled Like a Bird* is Sally Putnam Chapman, grand-daughter of Dorothy and George Putnam, and step-grand-daughter of Amelia Earhart. She continues to live in the magnificent estate built by Dorothy, and occasionally hosts birding field trips for the St. Lucie Audubon Society. The main resource for her biographical work was the collection of Dorothy's very personal and private diaries that Dorothy gave to Sally before her death in 1982, and which covered the years from 1907-1961.



***Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks***



[HART BEAT 58, first published May 1, 2014](#)



*It's easy to anthropomorphize when it comes to mother birds and their chicks.*

## MOTHER'S DAY

Mother: everyone has one, or at least had one at one time, and some men have two, if they have children. The demographics make it a perfect day for commercial exploitation. Greeting card companies, florists, confectioners, jewelers, restaurant owners, and telephone companies have seen such a spike in their sales on Mother's Day that it now ranks only behind Christmas and Valentine's Day for peak profit performance.

Anna Jarvis is credited as the creator of the celebration of Mother's Day in 1908, but her project got impetus when Philadelphia merchandising magnate, John Wanamaker, supported it in 1910. Finally, in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day. (Yes, it is the singular, your "Mother's Day," not the plural, all "Mothers' Day.") Miss Jarvis, who never married or became a mother, became so incensed with the commercialism that



***American Oystercatcher***

developed in the 1920s, that she spent the rest of her life and fortune protesting, fighting and even being arrested for her anti-Mother's Day activity. She died in 1948, at age 84, regretting the fact that she had ever started it. Nevertheless, Mother's Day, and the concomitant commercialization, continue and have now spread throughout the world.

I assume it will come as no surprise to anyone that birds have Mothers too. And while bird mothers don't go through labor pains at birth, they are pretty restricted for upwards of a month while incubating eggs. They bond with their offspring just like human mothers, and are protective, nurturing, attentive to feeding needs, and even perform diaper removal service in the form of fecal sac disposal.

It is easy to anthropomorphize birds, but the Sandhill Crane photo, on the previous page, to me, evokes images of Madonna and Child. Some bird mothers, like the American Oystercatcher, provide shade from the blistering sun. Other mothers with precocial babies that are able to walk and swim right after birth, like the Black Duck who has Octomom beat by three, are quick to lead their charges from danger. Another mother, like the Limpkin, seems to have hungry chicks literally under foot while she strives to find food for them.



***Black Ducks***





*Limpkins*

Birds with altricial babies that are born sightless and featherless, perpetually present only gaping mouths to their mothers, like this Barn Swallow even when they have passed through the bare and blind stage to bird pre-teen age. But some bird mothers are presented with hatchlings that, like Hans Christian Anderson's Ugly Duckling, are ones that only a mother can love, until they grow into majestic birds, such as the Great Blue Heron mother and child.

Other young birds are already beginning to show the unique shaped bill that will fully develop into an American Woodstork's massive de-curved proboscis. Then, some bird babies are just plain weird, with long wavy reed-like necks that seem almost too weak to hold their heads, and bear none of their parent's coloring, such as this Anhinga mother and her three babies.

I assume also that it will come as no surprise to anyone that bird young reach the point when it is time for them to leave the nest, just like our own young adults. A friend witnessed the mother Sandhill Crane threaten and almost attack her young after almost a year of constant companionship and joint travel and feeding together. It was time for the mother to get on with a new nesting season, but the young bird clearly



*Barn Swallows*





***Great Blue Herons***

looked bewildered and lost when confronted by this new strange mother that had changed so drastically so suddenly. It was heart wrenching to watch.

The world they are thrust into as young adults, just like ours, is full of dangers, predators and pitfalls. We, both humans and birds, can only hope that these young adults have been properly prepared to face life fully and



***American Wood Storks***

find all the fascinating features and wonderful opportunities before them.

Mothers make life possible, and so what if some firms make some money while making it easy for demonstrative emotion challenged offspring to find means of expression. A great deal of love, affection, appreciation, recognition and sometimes just plain time, is devoted to Mother on that day. I am not

aware of any mother who was not glad for the day of celebration. Unless she had to clean up the mess after the kids cooked the Mother's Day meal.

For all you ever wanted to know about the history and subsequent development of Mother's Day, simply Google "Mother's Day." For information on precocial and altricial bird babies, see: [www.stanford.edu/group/stanfordbirds/text/essays/Precocial\\_and\\_Altricial.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/stanfordbirds/text/essays/Precocial_and_Altricial.html).



For a short video of one mother Mallard faced with an insurmountable problem and her solution to resolve it, see: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmFCplrAXrU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmFCplrAXrU) And another very protective Mallard mother: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvAzdbfFJeQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvAzdbfFJeQ)



*Anhingas*

[HART BEAT 59, first published June 1, 2014](#)



*Some bird fathers, such as this Sandhill Crane take an active role in heir raising, while others just put on a good show.*

## FATHER'S DAY

Father: Everyone has one, or at least had one at one time, and some children have more than one, often called step-fathers. While the day of father celebration has never achieved the success for commercial exploitation that Mother's Day has, it was trade groups that benefit from the holiday that promoted it: manufacturers of ties, tobacco purveyors, and men's wear



*Northern Mockingbird chasing Red-tailed Hawk*





***Snowy Egret displaying***

retailers. They finally succeeded in having Father's Day, the third Sunday of June, made a permanent national holiday when President Richard Nixon signed it into law in 1972, fifty-eight years after Mother's Day was officially recognized.

Credit for first starting the effort to create a day for fathers is generally given to Sonora Smart Dodd, whose father was a Civil War veteran single parent who raised six children. She began her effort after hearing a sermon about Mother's Day in 1910, when she decided fathers should also be celebrated. Several presidents from Wilson to Lyndon Johnson proposed legislation to create the holiday, but were rebuffed by



***Wild Turkeys***



recalcitrant congresses. It seems some things never change.

As one might suspect, birds also have fathers. But as with humans, bird fathers play many different roles when preparing for fatherhood and interacting with their offspring. Virtually all male birds actively engage in courtship and put their full effort into winning fair maid, usually by elaborate display, like the Snowy Egret straining with all his might to spread his plumes and prove his worthiness to father baby egrets.



#### ***Purple Gallinules***

While many species are monogamous and devote all of their effort and attention to impressing just one prospective mate, others, such as this tom Wild Turkey (right), put all their effort into winning as many mates as possible thereby hoping to breed often with as many different females as will be impressed by their display. For all males, human and bird, the goal seems to be the same: copulation. And this male Purple Gallinule (right) has just succeeded in accomplishing his goal. With many species of birds, that function ends the male's participation in the entire heir raising business. Gallinaceous birds and hummingbirds are particularly well known for their “love them and leave them” approach to rearing young, and their females are virtually always single parents.

But for most species the task of successfully passing on their genes is so arduous that the males stick around and help with the job. Many males share the duty of nest building, incubating the



eggs, or bringing food to the sitting female; while others devote their time to driving off other males of their own species, sometimes real, and sometimes imaginary, as with this Pileated Woodpecker (right) attacking his own reflection both in the car mirror and also in the car window. Poor guy couldn't figure out which was the bigger threat. One could almost hear him thinking, "Don't want no one mess'n with my woman!" And there is always the threat of predators that have to be driven off, no matter how big or dangerous they might be; which is why a Northern Mockingbird won't hesitate to take on a Red-tailed Hawk). But note, he is careful to



***Pileated Woodpecker***

stay in back of and above the intruder, well away from those lethal talons.

Finally, some males, such as the Anhinga, help with the baby feeding chores, first bonding with the youngster very shortly after hatching so the baby will be familiar with the food delivery system, then putting his whole heart and soul, (well at least his whole mouth and neck,) into forming a feeding tube so that none of the food will spill onto the floor.

The larger chick gets fed first until he/she is full, then the smaller chicks follow up. Thus, if there is plenty of food, all chicks will thrive and fledge. If there is not enough food, or if the parents are not able to feed all the young, at least the larger, presumably older, chicks will survive to keep the gene pool going.

So, while with some males the surprisingly long and elaborate chase ends with the swift completion of the egg fertilization act, and the male is off to greener pastures elsewhere, it is the fathers who stick around, get to know and help raise the kids, and provide excellent paternal role models, that we celebrate with Father's Day. The day may not have the same cachet as Mother's Day, but there are certainly many fathers, both human and avian, deserving of all the respect and recognition we can give them. Now if we could only do something about those "love them and

leave them” absentee fathers, who sometimes give fatherhood a bad name!?! Do you think maybe congressional action is the answer?

For a complete history of the establishment of Father’s Day, see:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father's\\_Day#History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father's_Day#History). For the most spectacular display of male bird courtship ever, see the Birds-of-Paradise Project videos [at www.cornell.edu/video/birds-of-paradise-project](http://www.cornell.edu/video/birds-of-paradise-project).



*Anhinga Dad feeding chicks*



[HART BEAT 60, first published June 1, 2014](#)



*This three-part photo of a male Pileated Woodpecker shows how he puts his prodigious beak to work digging a nest hole for his family. Close-up of male crest below.*

## PILL-LE-ATE-TED OR PI-LE-ATE-TED?

It all began when a friend asked if I knew what “pileated” as in Pileated Woodpecker meant. I had to admit that I didn’t have a clue. So I did what any red-blooded, card-carrying, information challenged, birder would do - I pulled my Smart Phone traveling encyclopedia from my pocket and looked it up.

“Pileated: having a crest covering the pileum.” Well that certainly moved the ball forward! What in heaven’s name is the “pileum?” Back to my pocket encyclopedia to look up “pileum” and, lo

and behold, it now makes sense: “the top of the head of a bird from the bill to the nape.”



That led to the second question: Which is the correct pronunciation of “pileated?” “Pill-le-ate-ted” or “pi-le-ate-ted?” That one I was sure I knew: it always starts with the “pill” sound, and I even remember bird call recordings and tapes in which the announcer always





pronounced it with the “pill” first syllable, although I remember one once where the announcer said either pronunciation was correct.

Except those announcers and I were, and are, dead wrong. When you check the definition of “pileated,” immediately after the word there is a little loudspeaker symbol, which when clicked causes a sexy female voice to give the correct pronunciation as “pi-le-ate-ted.”

[www.merriam-](http://www.merriam-)

[webster.com/dictionary/pileated](http://webster.com/dictionary/pileated). And I always thought that the occasional birder that I heard use the “pi” first syllable pronunciation was just misinformed or a newbie! But I also suspect that after many decades of mispronouncing the word, it will take some time for the correct pronunciation to sound right.



***Pileated Woodpecker, female***

The male Pileated Woodpecker (top) is the cavity excavator for the family. He begins by pounding into the tree to create wood chips, then, grabbing a mouthful from the hole, he closes his eyes and gives the chips a heave into the air. After he enlarges the hole sufficiently, he works from the inside, frequently coming to the entrance to discharge another mouthful. Meanwhile, the female, with her black mustache instead of the male’s red, shows up periodically to check the home building progress and cheer the male along. She is an adept hunter though, sometimes locating particularly juicy morsels such as this large white grub.

Back to “pi-(3.1416)-le-ate-ted,” though, I have wondered why the bird namers haven’t called our North American Cardinal, “Pileated Cardinal.” Pileated certainly seems to me to have more





***Northern Cardinal***

panache than the very mundane “Northern Cardinal,” which, I presume, was unnecessarily chosen to distinguish the species from the beautiful South American Brazilian Cardinal. A close examination of the crest on both birds, Northern Cardinal and Pileated Woodpecker, shows the Cardinal’s crest clearly qualifies as “pileated.” The close examination is

also interesting to note the difference between the neck and bills of a woodpecker who needs a chisel and a flexible neck to excavate its home, compared to a seed eater that needs a heavy cruncher and strong neck muscles to operate it, in order to crack open the seeds that form its diet.

And if you are going to have a crest covering the pileum it might as well be red, and be given a name like “PILEATED!.” Otherwise it is just a crest (Great Crested Flycatcher) or merely a tuft (Tufted Titmouse.) Would Donald Trump’s hair style qualify as pileated? Just asking.

For images of the Brazilian Cardinal, (introduced into Hawaii as the Red-crested Cardinal and therefore regarded as an American species,) search Google Images for the Brazilian Cardinal.

[HART BEAT 61, first published August 1, 2014](#)



*If you keep your eyes open, you may find some surprising feats of Mother Nature, and Mother Killdeers.*

## **PARKING LOT PLOVER**

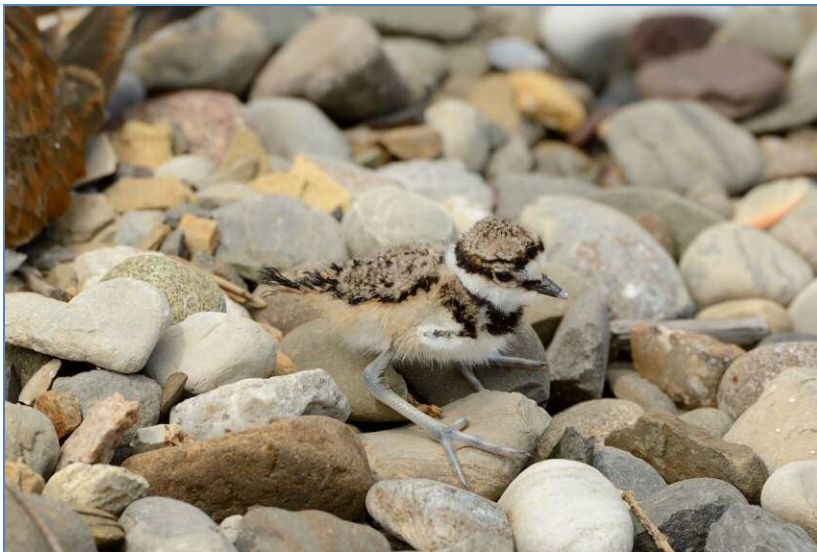
It's been a tough winter, physically, for Jewel. In November she twisted her knee. She assumed it would resolve with rest; it didn't. In December, just in time for Christmas, she dislocated her elbow. That needed medical assistance and rehab, and all the while the knee still bothered her, getting worse instead of better. Finally in May, she sucked it up and went to First Orthopedic Surgeon, who after looking at MRI's of her knee announced, "Torn meniscus, you need surgery; I'll get you scheduled for it in three weeks."

Not sure she wanted surgery, Jewel did some internet research and decided to get a second opinion. Second Orthopedic Surgeon, after exhaustive testing of the knee and study of the same MRI said, "Yes, you have a slight meniscus tear, but from the location of the pain in your knee, I think you have a muscle pull and physical rehab should resolve it, without surgery." Off to rehab Jewel went and (drum roll and applause) Happy Ending: Jewel quickly recovered: no surgery and no pain!





What is the point of all this? Coming out of the rehab facility the first day she went, Jewel discovered the Parking Lot Plover, happily incubating four eggs (*photo previous page*), in the stone divider between two parking areas while many cars and pedestrians closely hurried by, most of them completely oblivious to her presence.



We went back that evening, after the facility was closed and were fortunate to arrive just as Mother Killdeer rose to turn her eggs, so that we could see the four eggs even though they blended in so well with the stones. One could hardly call it a nest, or even a “scrape,” a term often used when some birds nest right on the ground without any kind of formal nest. Two days later, Jewel went back for her next rehab session and took the

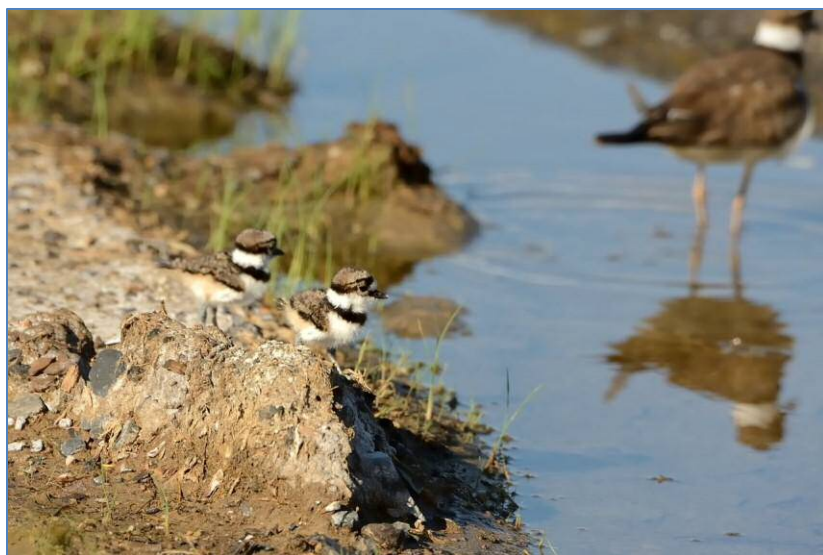
camera along, “just in case.” She took photo 2 (*top above*), documenting an older first born chick, a smaller second-born chick, a third born chick, still wet from having hatched just minutes before the photo, and a fourth egg, not yet hatched. She also took photo 3 (*bottom above*), as the oldest chick takes its first wobbly steps, on relatively large unfamiliar legs, exploring the vast world 6 inches from Mother Killdeer.

The very next evening, we went back to see how the Parking Lot Plover Killdeer family was doing. All four babies were wandering all over the area; in and around the parking lot; in the grassy plains and muddy patches adjacent to the lot (*photo 4*); and along a small water course nearby, where you can just see the two babies in *photo 5* thinking, “Mom wants us to go through that?!?” But they did indeed screw up their courage and make the trip through the water (*photo 6*).



Later in the evening Mother Killdeer gathered all four chicks together on the parking lot preparatory to herding them back to their rocky resting place (*photo 7*). The driver of the blue car in the photo came out of the rehab facility and walked right by the birds, got into his car and left, without ever noticing the Killdeer family or us

**4** photographing them. It was very impressive to see the little day-old chicks scurry out of harm's way as the big blue car backed out toward them. We realized that such activity must have been going on all day, every day.



Two evenings later we returned to again see if the babies had survived all the parking lot dangers. Only three babies were still present, and we have no idea what happened to the

**5**

fourth. The three remaining babies were now exploring far and wide, learning to forage for themselves (*photo 8*), and trying out their newly discovered wings: "I'm here on the runway, why can't I take off?" (*photo 9*). But at the end of the day, Mother Killdeer called all three of her charges together, now on the grass rather than on the stones, and all three of them found refuge under her ample breast (*photos 10 and 11*).

We returned 11 days later (Jewel had long finished her rehab) to find all three babies developing nicely, still traversing the parking lot and the surrounding areas. They were beginning to develop actual wings and seemed to be doing well. One was checking out its birthing place (*photo 12*) and another one posed for a formal portrait (*photo 13*). One final visit five days later disclosed the entire family had moved out of the area, for not a single Killdeer could be found anywhere.



Two points are to be made here: One, Be your own advocate regarding your own health and don't hesitate to get a second opinion; and Two, Be alert to the natural world and birds around you everywhere you go. You never know when a sore knee might lead to a fascinating discovery



and a delightful experience. And feel sorry for those poor souls who wander through life without a clue of what wonders and mysteries and just plain excitement may exist if they would only open their eyes and be aware during their most mundane meanderings. Now don't go out and purposely get hurt, hoping to duplicate our lucky Parking Lot Plover exploits

*6, above, and 7, below*





8



9



10





11



12



13



HART BEAT 62, first published September 1, 2014



*Looks like this Northern Cardinal didn't need a crest to start a family*

## BALD AS A .... BIRD?



Recently I ran into an old friend whom I had not seen for several years. He was/is a very handsome man who always had a magnificent mane, arguably his most outstanding physical feature. On this occasion, however, he was absolutely hairless, bald as the proverbial cue-ball. How do you greet a person whose appearance has changed so drastically? Flabbergasted: “Oh my God, what happened to your hair?”



Incredulous, as to a five year old who has just taken a scissors to his head: “Why did you ever do that?” Sympathetic, thinking cancer: “You poor man, are you all right?” Or perhaps a weak attempt at Humor: “Did they catch the Indians that did that to you?” I went with Simple Statement: “I hardly recognized you.”

One word answer: “Alopecia!” as though that explained everything. After our reunion I went to my trusty encyclopedia in my pocket and found “alopecia totalis,” an autoimmune disorder that causes the sufferer to lose all the hair on his head. Sometimes the hair completely returns, more often it does not. Sympathy for my friend would definitely have been appropriate, but probably unwelcome. See: [www.hairlosstalk.com/alopecia/alopecia-totalis.php](http://www.hairlosstalk.com/alopecia/alopecia-totalis.php).

Sympathy, if not pity, was definitely the reaction we felt for a male Northern Cardinal that showed up under our feeders with the same alopecia totalis condition. Accustomed to cardinals with crowning crests, this poor, pathetic fellow would seem to be at a distinct disadvantage in the dating/mating scene. Nevertheless, he seems to have been successful, for three weeks later he was, indeed, feeding young.

We now know that in humans an autoimmune disorder causes the condition, but what causes it in birds? While the balding condition in birds is apparently more common than thought, (although



*“Bald” Northern Cardinal feeding one of his young*

this was my first experience with such a sight in many decades of avid birding,) it is not well studied, nor do ornithologists completely agree on the cause. All do agree that it is not caused by the bird being hen-pecked, for such abuse would not cause the complete loss of feathering observed. Four possible or probable explanations are suggested:

Most likely, the bird is going through an irregular feather molt, losing all the head feathers at one time rather than incrementally as might be normal and expected. Second most likely, the bird has a bad case of feather mites, tiny arthropods that feed on feathers. As birds can normally preen away such pests, the head is one area they are unable to reach in their preening process, and hence the mites can gorge themselves until all the feathers are gone, after which they then migrate into feather areas where they are dispatched by the preening host. But less likely, the bird is suffering from nutritional deficiencies. Some avian disease or injury trauma, but there does not seem to be any evidence to support this explanation.

All ornithologists agree that the bird will grow a complete new head-dress in a matter of a few weeks, and will have a normal appearance thereafter. Or until the same thing happens again the following year, which apparently does sometimes, happen.

We did not see our bald-headed cardinal very often, and if he is still in our area and has now grown a new bright red crest, we would be hard-pressed to pick him out from the various cardinals that visit our feeders each day. As for my handsome human friend, I am not likely to see him again for several years, so I will just have to wait to see if he was as fortunate as the birds in growing a new crest. Reminds me of the old riddle: What is it that a man never wants to get, but once he gets it, he never wants to lose it? Sure, you know the answer – a bald head!

For more information on bald birds, see: [www.farmanddairy.com/columns/scott-shalaway/solving-the-mystery-of-what-causes-bald-cardinals/15565.html](http://www.farmanddairy.com/columns/scott-shalaway/solving-the-mystery-of-what-causes-bald-cardinals/15565.html), and [www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~insrisg/nature/nw98/baldbirds.html](http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~insrisg/nature/nw98/baldbirds.html)



*Female (left) and male Northern Cardinals with normal plumage*



HART BEAT 63, first published October 1, 2014

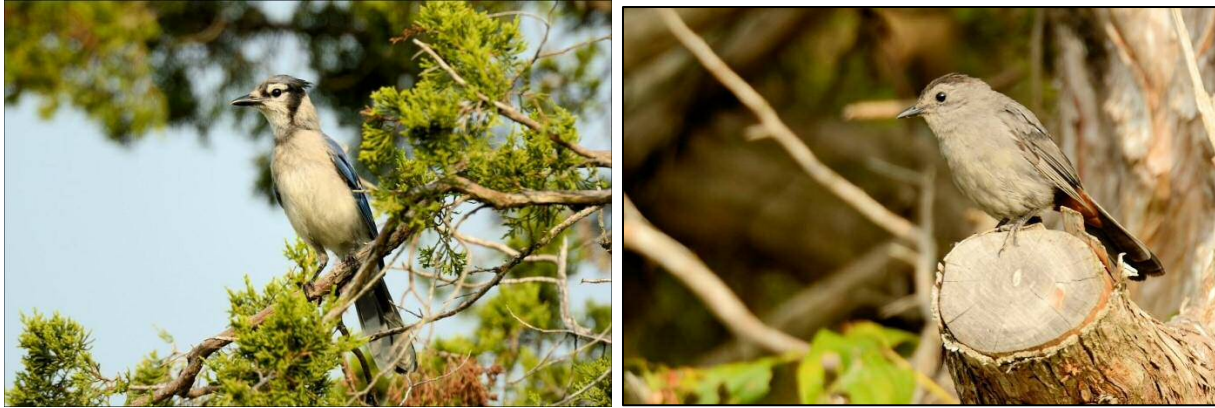


*Old and weather-beaten, this cedar tree is still a haven for small birds.*

## THE BIRD TREE

One day this summer Jewel and I watched a small, all white, bird fly into a large cedar tree standing alone in the middle of our field. There had been two trees together, but one died and had been removed, so that the remaining tree was mostly bare on one side but retained all its glory on the other side. There are no small, all white, field birds in North America, so this bird quickly aroused our curiosity. It hopped around and preened among the bare branches on the open side of the tree, and seemed to be inviting me to come take its picture.

It stood out conspicuously against the brown branches and green foliage, but when I quickly returned with my camera it was nowhere to be seen. Early the next morning, I set up my bird blind and camera facing the open side of the cedar tree and settled in to await the white bird's arrival. It never appeared, but during the next two hours I was constantly busy documenting all of the 12 species featured here.

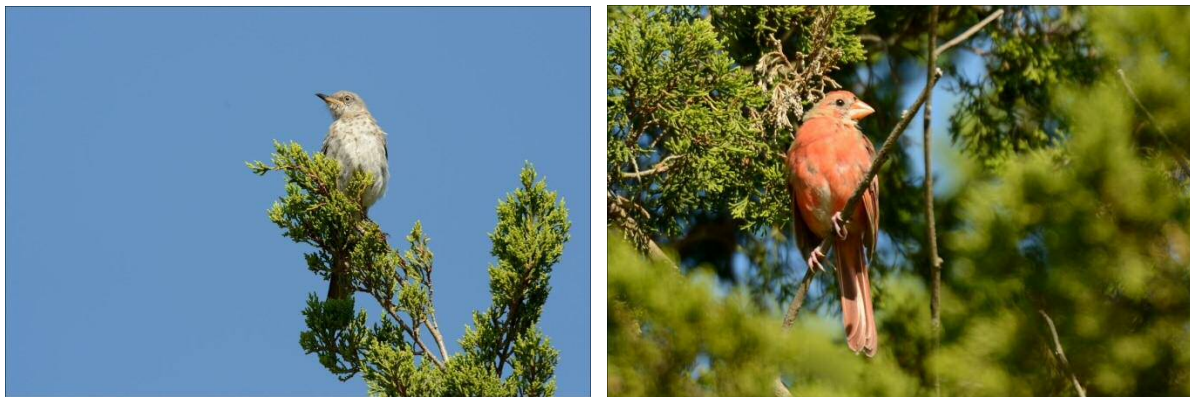


***Blue Jay (left) and Gray Catbird***

I barely got my camera set up on the tripod in the blind when the Blue Jay raucously arrived and started screaming his warning about the recent change in the territory. Three minutes later the Gray Catbird flew in to see what all the commotion was about.

Then three Eastern Bluebirds came into the green foliated side of the tree, giving me only glimpses of their presence until one juvenile came around to the bare side of the tree, where I was ready for it, and able to record its portrait. The House Wren, a few minutes later, was the first surprise bird. I knew they nested in bird boxes in another area on our property, but never expected one out in the middle of a field in a cedar tree, with no other trees nearby. Yet, there he was, click.

I have seen Northern Cardinals in this cedar tree frequently, so I was not surprised when this one showed up next, although I might have preferred one that was more photogenic.



***Northern Mockingbird (left) and Northern Cardinal***

Six minutes later the second surprise bird of the morning hopped up on the same perch the Bluebird had been on. I took a number of photos of it because I must confess - I did not know what it was. I knew it was not one of the flycatchers or a pewee, because it did not have any yellow in the bill; but the all brown plumage and the buff wing-bars certainly stumped me. I



knew phoebes have an all dark bill and no eye-ring, and while this one had the size and shape of a phoebe, it did not pump its tail, not once, and they certainly aren't brown.

I began to have thoughts about the discovery on our property of some rare South American vagrant, and was beginning to contemplate how we would handle all the crowds of birders that were sure to come to our property to see it. But, alas, later research and an email query to an expert, confirmed that it was indeed a juvenile Eastern Phoebe, and I now had my lesson for the day: There is always more to learn about birds.

The Northern Mockingbird flew onto its regular perch on top of the tree where it went through its dazzling repertoire and entertained me for several minutes, until an Eastern Kingbird arrived. It was not as accommodating as most of the birds so far had been, but it finally lit on a green branch where I was able to snap a few quick photos before it left.

Then an adult Eastern Phoebe landed on one of the old vine branches running through the tree and confirmed my opinion (incorrectly) that the earlier brown bird with the buff wing-bars was not a phoebe.

Both a male and a female Downy Woodpecker started working on another of the old vine branches hanging in the tree, one on one side and the other on the opposite side but much lower. I hoped that they would work close enough together to enable me to photograph both in one shot, but it didn't happen.

While I took photos of both, I have only included the male here. A female Red-bellied Woodpecker and a White-breasted Nuthatch added to the excitement, and finally, a House Finch posed for a quick portrait. Twelve species, plus one 'needs more research bird,' in less than two hours!

The white bird that set this process in motion never did show up, but in subsequent days its behavior pattern became obvious, and I was able to set up my blind and camera to document what it is. But I'm not going to tell you now. Just like in the old time movie serials, where the heroine was left tied to the tracks with the train bearing down on her, right at the end of that Saturday's matinee, you will just have to wait for the next article to find out what happens.

And to think, we almost had that cedar tree removed when the dead tree next to it was cut down. Sometimes unplanned circumstances can lead to unexpected and very exciting results. Like going out on a first date?

*Downy Woodpecker*



*Eastern Bluebird*



*Eastern Kingbird*





*Eastern Phoebe,*  
*adult*



*Eastern Phoebe,*  
*juvenile*



*House Wren*



*Red-bellied  
Woodpecker, female*



*White-breasted  
Nuthatch*





HART BEAT 64, first published October 23, 2014



*This white bird in a far-away tree had us puzzled for a while.*

## AN UNUSUAL BROOD

“There goes that white bird again.” This became a common refrain as we began seeing it here, there and everywhere around our property. But it would never let us get very close to it, as it was wary and quite skittish.

This is probably a good thing, for a white bird stands out as an open invitation to predators looking for their morning meal. Seen from 200 yards away, the white bird is highly conspicuous, unlike virtually all other small birds which are able to blend in and adapt to their surroundings. While movie stars, prancing on the red carpet heading into the Oscar ceremony want to stand out and don ever more attention grabbing garb to be sure they are seen, birds rely on their coloring to shun attention and avoid catastrophe.

Of course, as with any rule, mating season provides the exception, when birds, as well as humans, try to look their absolute best. But pure white is not what either chooses, for even white birds, such as herons and egrets, while keeping their white feathers, temporarily change the color



of their beaks, legs, feet, or eyes to make themselves stand out. And white wearing humans are probably heading for an altar.

For several days we closely followed our white friend's travels, noting favorite perches and hunting areas. It became clear that a certain cluster of trees were favorites, but not the Bird Tree, where I had waited so patiently for it earlier. After setting up my blind at what I now knew was a favorite hunting tree, I discovered that "Whitey" had several traveling companions. First, there was almost always a male Eastern Bluebird; second, a regular companion, also an obvious Eastern Bluebird, wore a white necklace, and had white flecks on its wings, neck and face; a third fellow traveler had an even whiter necklace, throat, face and head, but the

obvious reddish breast and blue tail feathers of another Eastern Bluebird.

But when "Whitey" flew onto what I now knew was a favorite perch, the white plumage and bright yellow bill, legs and feet were stunning. From his left profile, only a very light tinge of color across the top of his head provided any color whatsoever, except for the very dark eyes.

***Top to bottom, Adult male Eastern Bluebird, regular plumage and with white necklace, and juvenile Eastern Bluebird, limited partial leucistic***





But when he flew down to capture a bug and returned to the tree, his right profile was not as pristine white.

A dark smudge on the face, in front of the eye, and a dark spot on his upper mandible were quite prominent. In addition, there was apparently some coloring on the back. But it was pretty clear that he was also an Eastern Bluebird, and a fair conclusion could be drawn that the three bluebirds with varying amounts of white were probably from the same nest: hence, an unusual brood. (I have used the masculine in referring to “Whitey,” but don’t really know whether that is correct.) When he flew into another cedar tree he displayed an asymmetrical color pattern on his back and wings, which along with the dark eye, clearly distinguished him from a true albino.



Birds with white feathers where there should be colored feathers are called “leucistic.” Birds that are “fully leucistic” have virtually no coloring in their feathers whatsoever. Birds with some white feathers, but also with some colored feathers are “partially leucistic,” which can vary from only a few scattered white feathers, as in two of this “uncommon brood,” to almost completely white, as in “Whitey.” The condition is caused by the partial

***Top to bottom, left profile of leucistic Eastern Bluebird; right profile; flying, showing uneven dark feathers***

failure of the bird to produce melanin, the color in the feathers, and can vary greatly.

True albinos have absolutely no colored feathers and have pink eyes which results from a complete failure to produce any melanin whatsoever. This genetic condition, which affects pigment in skin and eyes as well as feathers, can occur at times in all vertebrates, including humans, although it is very rare. More research is still needed to determine whether leucistic birds replace, lose, or gain more of, their white feathers with each successive molt.

In addition, a male American Goldfinch with only a few leucistic feathers on his back, feasted on our cone flower seed pods recently. We are sure he was not a nest mate of the bluebird brood, but he did make us wonder whether there is something in the water around here. This unusual brood reminded us of the leucistic Boat-tailed Grackle we observed at the Rodman Dam on the Ocklawaha River in north/central Florida several years ago. That poor fellow also had a deformed claw to contend with, as well as the mating disadvantage of an inability to puff up shimmering iridescent blue/black feathers to impress the girls.

Leucistic birds are unique and provide a fun diversion from regular birding. It will be interesting to follow “Whitey” to see what the future holds for him, assuming he survives. Who knows, his very different plumage may just prove attractive to a prospective mate. Could be next year’s unusual brood; or maybe an avian “Rosemary’s Baby?” We will just have to wait to see.



***Leucistic Boat-tailed Grackle at Rodman Dam (left) and partially leucistic American Goldfinch with white feathers on the back***

For more on leucistic birds, see: [birding.about.com/od/identifyingbirds/a/leucism.htm](http://birding.about.com/od/identifyingbirds/a/leucism.htm) and [www.sibleyguides.com/2011/08/abnormal-coloration-in-birds-melanin-reduction](http://www.sibleyguides.com/2011/08/abnormal-coloration-in-birds-melanin-reduction). For fascinating photos, (not mine) of an albino Ruby-throated Hummingbird, see [www.naturefriendmagazine.com/photos/?catid=9](http://www.naturefriendmagazine.com/photos/?catid=9)



[HART BEAT 65, first published December 1, 2014](#)



*A Gray Catbird is delighted to find this suet feeder at a Treasure Coast home.*

## BREAKING THE RULES

“You know you are violating a cardinal rule of bird photography, don’t you?”

“What? There is a photography rule named for the Cardinal? Just kidding, and besides, you are well aware that ‘law abiding’ has been an important part of my life. We don’t even cut the tag off a new pillow in the privacy of our bedroom because of the warning: ‘Unlawful to remove this label.’ Imagine the embarrassment if a policeman knocked on the door: ‘Sir, you are under arrest for removing the label from that pillow you just bought.’ OK, what cardinal rule?”

**“THOU SHALT NOT PHOTOGRAPH A BIRD ON ANY MAN MADE OBJECT!”** It was Commandment XI on Moses’ Mt. Sanai tablets, but didn’t get the same publicity as the first ten.”



***Baltimore Orioles***

“Sure, I know that rule, but this is different. The lady at the feed store asked me what kind of birds eat that when she saw me buying processed suet blocks in the bird food section. When I began to list the number of species attracted to the suet blocks she looked at me as though I had two heads, in complete disbelief. So I decided to show her some photos to prove I wasn’t just making all the birds up.”



***Northern Flicker***

“All right then, as long as you don’t suggest there is anything ‘artistic’ about such bird photos that aren’t in a natural setting.”

“No problem there, I have never been under the illusion that any of my bird photos are ever ‘artistic.’ I simply present them to make one birding point or another.” So, now that the argument with the ‘little conscience guy’ on my shoulder is behind us, Lady in The Feed Store, assuming you might ever read this, here is positive evidence of some of the birds that feed on those processed suet blocks.

Woodpeckers are particularly drawn to suet blocks, and while some blocks are advertised to be specially designed for woodpeckers, we have found that they don’t really care what flavor of suet blocks we provide. Downy, Hairy, Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Northern Flickers all compete for time on the blocks. Gray Catbirds and Brown Thrashers, two of the three eastern mimic-thrush species are quite regular feeders, while I have never seen any of our resident Northern Mockingbirds on or around any of our feeders.





*Downy Woodpecker (left), Hairy Woodpecker (right) and Red-bellied Woodpecker (below)*



As you might expect, blackbirds, especially Red-winged (juv. male here) and Common Grackle are also frequently on or around the suet blocks. We try to discourage the European Starlings that occasionally come by, and a loud noise seems to work. One of the big surprises for us was the attraction of Northern Orioles to the blocks. It was interesting to note that only young male and female Orioles came to the suet however, as the adult male Orioles dominated the nearby grape jelly feeder in preference to the suet, keeping the less dominant orioles away.

When I began writing this account I was dumfounded to discover that I did not have any photos of Blue Jays on the suet block, as they are constantly monitoring and chasing other birds away. The same is true of the woodpecker wannabe, White-breasted Nuthatch, which frequently sneaks

in and steals a glob of suet and quickly leaves. Smaller birds often dash in and grab a bite when the larger birds are either sated or not paying attention. These include, commonly, the Carolina Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse, and both Carolina and House Wrens. However, these smaller birds also seem to prefer the oiled sunflower seeds offered nearby, where they are less harassed by the larger birds. When many of these birds were feeding young, the young would wait right under the suet



***Red-winged Blackbird, juvenile***

feeder while the parent broke off a chunk and then delivered it to the begging, gaping-mouthed juvenile. Sound familiar?

So, Lady in the Feed Store, here is evidence of many of the birds feeding on the suet blocks that I told you about. As for the rest that I have mentioned, for which I don't have photo documentation, you will just have to accept my word. Actually, I probably don't have those additional photos because I was obeying the cardinal rule mentioned above, as I normally disdain feeder photos of birds. Speaking of cardinal rules, our numerous Northern Cardinals rule the oiled sunflower feeders and the ground beneath them. I have never seen a single Northern Cardinal on a suet block. Sometimes, as I have observed over the years, evidence to prove a point is sometimes obtained through devious or even sneaky means. Sometimes, even by breaking the rules. I still won't cut the tags off our pillows though.





*Common Grackle (above) and Brown Thrasher*



*Note: Commercial suet blocks, and feeders to hold them as depicted in the photos, are readily available at feed stores and Tractor Supply in Florida, and do not melt in the heat, nor are they susceptible to mold or mildew. They also have the benefit of not leaving any ground residue beneath the feeder, and are not attractive to squirrels.*



***Jewel Rufe is also an avid birdwatcher and co-leads many of the field trips for the St. Lucie Audubon Society***





Great-crested Flycatcher



*In the summer Hart and Jewel (fourth and fifth from right) continue their birdwatching further north. Here they joined 31 other members and guests of the Delmarva Ornithological Society on a field trip to Bombay Hook National Wildlife Reserve in July 2015. Brother Bob Rufe (center, white shirt) was Trip Leader. Photographer Lane McLaughlin ([www.lanemclaughlinphotography.com](http://www.lanemclaughlinphotography.com))*



[HART BEAT 66, first published January 1, 2015](#)



*Great Crested Flycatchers are the only flycatchers that breed in Florida, but you may see others in the winter.*

## FLORIDA'S WINTER FLYCATCHERS

Florida is many things to many people: the warm weather wonderland away from the icy, nasty north; the obligatory short term destination to annually visit grand-parents; the reality relief, relaxation resort of the Magic Kingdom; the grand golf vacationland where high handicappers can grapple with gators for lake bound golf balls; the state where the Supreme Court of the United States decides presidential elections rather than the voters; and for birders, the state where batches of birds can be added to personal bird lists in expectation they will one day be adopted by bird list committees as acceptable to be added to "Life Lists," i.e. birds in the life list "bank."



***Great Crested Flycatcher***

What Florida is not, is the place to go to look for flycatchers. And yet, in most winters, any or all, of the eight flycatcher species featured in this article can be found at some place or other, somewhere in Florida, even though only one of them is a common breeder in the state, and year round south Florida resident.

Yes, the one and only breeding flycatcher of Florida is the Great Crested Flycatcher. While not a common, see it in every back yard bird, like the Northern Mockingbird, it can still be found almost anywhere in the state in the summer, and south Florida in the winter. It is a shy, cavity nesting bird, and in the photo shown here at a nesting box, I was photographing the bird on the roof and was not even aware of the mate at the hole until I viewed the shot that night on the computer. Serendipity!

Of the three “look alike” winter Florida flycatchers, the Great Crested, the Ash-throated, and the Brown-crested, - the Great Crested has the brightest yellow belly and breast, with an all reddish tail extending to the tip. It also has a brownish lower mandible on the bill. The Brown-crested, a summer only resident of the south-western United States and year round resident of Central and South America, looks most like the Great Crested, but is much paler on the breast and belly, and the tail is not as rufous-orange as the Great Crested tail.



***Ash-throated Flycatcher and Brown-crested Flycatcher***





***La Sagra's Flycatcher***

The Ash-throated, another southwestern United States bird, is slightly smaller than the other two, and has a smaller, all black bill, and black at the ends of its rufous tail feathers. As its name would indicate, it has more extensive pale gray at the throat and upper breast. All three have different calls, which sometimes may be the best way to distinguish them. The Ash-throated, like the Great Crested, is also a cavity nester, while the Brown-crested is not.

The La Sagra's Flycatcher, like those already mentioned, is a *myiarchus* flycatcher and thus, all four are closely related. A native of Cuba, the Bahamas and other northern Caribbean islands, it is slightly smaller than the other three, completely pale on the underside, and does not have any rufous in the tail feathers. It seems to show up somewhere in south Florida every year. The bird shown here

spent a winter at Green Cay Wetlands in Boynton Beach and was seen by many on a St. Lucie Audubon field trip.



***Fork-tailed Flycatcher and Least Flycatcher***

The Least Flycatcher is supposed to be a regular winter resident of Florida, but I have only seen one a couple of times in all the over twenty winters I have spent in Florida. The one depicted here was found and photographed on Carlton Road just south of St. Lucie County's Paleo Hammock Preserve. It is the only *empidonax* flycatcher found in Florida at any time of year, which is fortunate for Florida birders, as *empidonax* flycatcher species are so similar that if they



***Vermilion Flycatcher***

are not vocalizing, they can be almost impossible to tell apart. And they don't usually vocalize in the winter.

Two of the Florida winter flycatchers have very long tails and are quite showy. The Scissors-tailed Flycatcher and Fork-tailed Flycatcher are both members of the *tyrannus* genus, and while scissors-tailed are summer residents of Texas and Oklahoma, Fork-tailed are vagrants anywhere in the United States as their range is in Mexico and Central America. Scissors-tailed show up regularly in winter on Route 70 in St.

Lucie County, and are even more frequent visitors in Hendry County around STA-5. Fork-tailed are much rarer, as this one was photographed in Highlands County, Florida, although Jewel and I found our life Fork-tailed in Maryland many years ago.

Arguably the most colorful of the Florida winter flycatchers is the Vermilion, which for several winters has wintered at Orlando Wetlands Park, and another pair in the Everglades National Park. Another bird of the southwestern states, Mexico and South America, it has become a regular visitor to Florida in the winter. However, we can hardly call it a snow bird. (Unfortunately, when photographing a bird we can't always tell it where to pose, so barbed wire it is.)

So if you come to Florida in the winter for one or more of its many attractive features, you may want to consider checking to see what flycatchers are being found. Presidential vote counts come only once every four years; flycatchers are here every winter. *(All photos here, taken in Florida, except the nest box shot, which was on our property in Pennsylvania.)*





*Scissor-tailed Flycatcher*



*Watching this Anna's Hummingbird throws some light on the effect of a bird's feathers.*

## IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT

Light is one of the most commonly used words in the English language. We awaken at the first light of day, have sun light all day long and go to bed by moon light, or if it's not raining or snowing, by star light; our room is lighted by a lamp; our car has a head light, seat belt lights, drives on streets with street lights, is stopped by traffic lights, or a cop's flashing lights, and goes by a mall highlighted by flood lights; a confused person sometimes finally sees the light; and some plants need good light.

A pretty girl with high lights in her hair can light up your eyes, and an expert can be a leading light in his field. One lights a match to light a fire or give a cigar smoker a light; and a girl with light blue eyes might be wearing a light blue dress. Light also might be used to describe a truck load; or weapons used by terrorists; or a meal or dessert eaten by a dieter; or the wine consumed with the meal. A parent may place a light kiss on a child's cheek, use light footsteps to leave the child's unlit room, only to discover the child was a light sleeper, and wanted the light left on. Many watch light entertainment; or some light-weight pundit or politician on TV, making light



of some serious issue. But a good friend or good news can lighten your day and leave you with a light heart. These examples are only the tip of the ice-berg. I'm sure you can come up with many more.

How about the effect of light on a bird's feathers? This past Christmas we travelled to San Diego, California, to spend the holidays with our daughter's family. Visions of birding and photography opportunities danced in my head. Rare and seldom seen species hung from the chimney with care: OK, I've gone far enough with this. Family gatherings and activities take precedence over birding, but there were innumerable memorable family photographic opportunities, so carrying my camera was worthwhile. Nevertheless, there was one memorable birding opportunity. Our daughter has a hummingbird feeder dominated by a single male Anna's Hummingbird. In Florida and east of the Mississippi the only regular species of Hummingbird is the Ruby-throated, so studying the Anna's during the brief lulls in family activities was a welcome break. And what a fascinating study it was!

The light reflecting on the head, face, and throat feathers of this feisty little fellow, as he fed or took a watchful position to drive off any intruders into his domain, created an amazing array of colors. The default color for the male Anna's, as depicted in all the bird books, is featured in photo No. 1: bright red head, face, and gorget, which he has flared out while feeding. (I suspect the red color here may be slightly enhanced by reflection off the feeder itself.)

However, in photo No. 2, as he approaches the feeder, the top of his head and around his bill appears to be a distinct brown color (photo 3).

As he took up one of his two favorite monitoring positions in a plant near the feeder, his prominent color appears to be a rich purple velour;

followed by a purple-brown combination as he turns his head ever so slightly (photo 4);

and finally an olive drab/rufous, virtual lack of bright color, as he completes his head turn and catches the light from a different angle (photo 5).

These three photos were all taken within only seconds of each other, and have not been retouched by post-processing whatsoever.

Somewhat later, while in the same guard position, he displayed hints of gold in his gorget (photo 6), as he caught the light from yet another angle.

Still later, as he took up his second favorite guard position on the top edge of a high palm leaf, all those usual red parts of his head, face and throat, or gorget, now appear to be black (Photo 7).

And finally, very shortly after alighting on the leaf he gave brief hints of all the colors at his command. (Photo 8; did you like that word "alighting"?)



2



3



4



5



6



7





## 8

While a male hummingbird may be light as a feather, it is the light on his feathers that renders him spectacular. Artists and photographers learned many years ago the importance of light on their subjects, but birds have been way ahead of them for hundreds of years. We might wonder whether birds are conscious of the impact different kinds of light might have on their appearance as they confront, or court, other birds, but we know that the colors different light on the birds feathers create certainly impresses birders. Feather color study is not a subject to be taken lightly, and some heavy weight scholars have engaged in the topic. But when I think of how light weight feathers are, I am reminded of the old elementary school question: Which is lighter, a pound of feathers or a pound of lead? Answer, anyone?

For more about bird feather colors, see:

[www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/studying/feathers/color/document\\_view](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/studying/feathers/color/document_view); and [www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/studying/feathers/](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/studying/feathers/). For a fantastic video on the ultimate in bird feather display and color variation as birds move about in the light to change color effects, see The Birds of Paradise Video: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=REP4S0uqEOc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REP4S0uqEOc).



*While photographing any bird in flight takes patience, some, like the Osprey, are easier to capture.*

## BIRDS IN FLIGHT

Man has always been intrigued by (envious of, jealous of?) birds ability to fly. While man, early on, learned to lift off the ground by virtue of lighter than air means, and after the Wright brothers, heavier than air means, neither of those forms of locomotion was, or is, the same as being able to flap or wave your arms and achieve “liftoff.” I remember a television commercial years ago in which observers watched an enterprising young man haul a set of homemade “wings” to a bridge, attach them to his arms and leap into the air. In wonderment they exclaimed, “He can fly!” As he soared out over the river and slowly, inevitably, glided down to the water, one skeptic observed, “But he can’t swim.”

It is a testament to the power of commercials that I was not able to recall what was being advertised until I recently located the commercial on the internet; and once again, I have already forgotten the advertiser. But the image and lesson of the skit lives on. You can watch the commercial anew at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=v17Yow2PfHw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v17Yow2PfHw).





### ***Merlin and Short-tailed Hawk***

Photographing birds in flight is a special challenge, all its own. While clicking a photo of a sitting or standing bird is a relatively simple and common experience, even for someone armed with nothing more than a cell phone camera, coordinating all the requirements of focus, aperture, shutter speed, ISO, and exposure of the camera, with the required tracking and panning of the bird, can be a very daunting task. The largest birds, with their frame filling size and fairly steady flight patterns, and the smallest hummingbirds, with their relatively stationary hovering, may be the easiest to follow and photograph in flight. But medium sized and smaller, erratic flying birds can be the most difficult to locate in the camera view finder, and keep there, and it takes considerable practice and experience to come home with decent flight shots.

Most birds in flight photographers have the iconic Bald Eagle soaring, or Great Blue Heron coming in for a landing, or gorgeous Great Egret gliding through the air, photos, and I have been fortunate to have secured many of those shots as well. However, for the purpose of this article I have chosen less common subjects to illustrate some of the different types of birds in flight photography. Birds at the moment of taking flight, such as the Merlin and American Bittern shown here, or just pretending to take flight while in fact actually seeking food, such as this Reddish Egret, or when released after banding, such as this Painted Bunting, can be photographed by patiently watching the bird and waiting until the very moment it takes flight, and then snapping the camera shutter feverishly.

Artistic groupings of birds, like the Roseate Spoonbills here, or relatively rare or uncommon birds, such as the dark phase Short-tailed Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Osprey with a fish, and White-tailed Kite depicted, are often just a matter of serendipity and good luck.

Smaller birds, such as the almost impossible to photograph Belted Kingfisher, gulls and terns, i.e. the Bonaparte's Gull and Caspian Tern shown here, and shorebirds and ducks, here the Lesser Yellowlegs, Marbled Godwit, Killdeer and Blue-winged Teal, are even more difficult to photograph. But the smallest birds, as in: Barn Swallows, Purple Martins and Vermillion

Flycatchers, and a diving female Red-bellied Woodpecker, take the “most difficult to photograph” prize.

Finally, while many photographers have frame filling photos of clouds of Snow Geese and Canada Geese, I have chosen two photos: of Red Knots over the ocean; and a horde of Tree Swallows over a Port St. Lucie lake; to illustrate the impact of a large number of birds in flight, even though individual birds might not be well depicted. And in conclusion for bird photos, a relatively easy female Ruby-throated Hummingbird (males are harder to get) on an iconic Cardinal Flower. And as you can see, I still have room to improve my images in all these categories, but as my sons would most likely tell me, “You’re making headway.”

In my lifetime I have seen remarkable technological advances that were never dreamed of in the days of my youth. However, it is still very hard for me to conceive of the possibility that one day man will be able to flap his arms and fly like a bird. In addition, as the commercial ended, “But he can’t swim,” I am reminded that there are many birds that “fly” under water in pursuit of fish or other organisms, yet I am not aware of any photographers making an effort to get photos of those birds in flight. Don’t look at me! I’m not going to start THAT genre of birds in flight photography. I’m still working on doing pull-ups (unsuccessfully), and that is as close as I will ever get to flying without external assistance. For excellent background and instructions on Birds in Flight photography, see: [www.uglyhedgehog.com/s-112-1.html](http://www.uglyhedgehog.com/s-112-1.html)



***Blue-winged Teal***





*American Bittern*



*Belted Kingfisher*



*Banded bunting*



*Peregrine Falcon*



*Reddish Egret*



*Barn Swallow*



*Roseate Spoonbills*



*Caspian Tern*



*Marbled Godwit*



*Purple Martin*



*Killdeer*



*White-tailed Kite*





*Lesser Yellowlegs*



*Bonaparte's Gull*



*Red Knots*



*Vermilion Flycatcher*



*Tree Swallows*



*Red-bellied Woodpecker*



*Ruby-throated Hummingbird*



[HART BEAT 69, first published April 1, 2015](#)



*Plovers, such as this Piping Plover finding a meal on Bunche Beach in Lee County, Florida, have a wardrobe that changes with the season, location and thier age. (photo 5)*

## FLORIDA'S PLOVERS

“You can find them right on the beach about a quarter mile north of the south end parking lot.” We have been searching for Snowy Plovers for several years now, each time we travel to the west coast of Florida in the winter. And we have heard many such strong suggestions of good locations on previous occasions, including this particular trip, none of which ever panned out. But this time the source was Lillian and Don Stokes, of the Stokes Field Guides fame (see: [stokesbirdingblog.blogspot.com](http://stokesbirdingblog.blogspot.com)), whom we met on the boardwalk at Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island on Florida’s Gulf Coast.

“In fact, 11 of them were seen at one spot just yesterday,” they said. Armed with more site specifics, we set out immediately for the location. As we separated to increase our search coverage, Jewel found them first and came rushing back to get me. “There are five or six of them, right there, and they are so well camouflaged in the sand that I almost stepped on one.” Alas, what Jewel failed to note in her haste and excitement, was the orange legs on each of the birds. Piping Plovers! A very common mistake made by many birders, including one earlier that



***Top to bottom, photos 1 and 2, Snowy Plovers; photo 3  
Pipina Plover***

very morning who told us he had seen many Snowy Plovers on Bunche Beach as we were walking out that very beach. He even showed us a very nice photo he had taken of a “Snowy Plover,” which was indeed a very nice Piping Plover shot. We also found many Piping Plovers there, but no Snowy Plovers.

But all was not yet lost, for as we continued searching among the Piping Plovers on the Sanibel beach, we found one Snowy Plover sitting tucked in amidst the flotsam on the drier part of the beach, quite confident in his invisibility. (photo 1) When another beach walker, despite my warning, almost stepped on him, he did briefly rise providing a portrait photo op (photo 2) before quickly settling back down. There were undoubtedly more in the area, but rather than disturb them from their mid-day siesta, we decided to go have a late lunch/early dinner. One was all I needed for this article. Polarized sunglasses were essential tools for finding the bird on the bright beach in the harsh hot sun. (That last comment was for all of my northern snow-bound readers.)

While Snowy Plovers are year round residents of some Gulf Coast Florida beaches, the Piping Plover is strictly a winter visitor. It is easy to see why its pale





winter complexion (photo 3) causes confusion with the even paler Snowy Plover, but the orange legs, compared to the Snowy's gray legs, and the slightly heavier bill and slightly heavier body profile, are distinctive differences. As the Piping Plover gets ready to return north to court and breed, it begins to develop black forehead and neck markings that further distinguish it. (photo 4) And when the Piping Plover engages in a tug of war with a beach worm, it almost always wins. (photo 5,) I love the precautions the authorities take on New Jersey beaches in the summer to protect nesting Piping Plovers. They not only rope off the nesting area, but also post signs with ominous appearing pictures of large Dog Ticks and the warning "Tick Infestation Area." Now I suspect a sandy beach is the last place any self-respecting Dog Tick would ever be found, but no doubt many a beach walking dog is drawn closer on a tighter leash when those signs are encountered, and of course, the nesting plovers are not disturbed by curious Snoopys.

***Top to bottom, photo 4, Piping Plover; photos 6 and 7, Semipalmated Plovers***



***Top to bottom, photo 8 Wilson's Plover; photos 9 and 10, Black-bellied Plovers***

Semipalmated Plovers are the most common and the most widespread of the smaller plovers. They winter extensively on both coasts of the United States, from New Jersey to Texas in the east, and Baja Peninsula to Oregon in the west. They are a darker brown (photo 6) than the Snowy and Piping Plovers and have a more distinct neck band in all plumages than either the Snowy or Piping Plovers. As the Semipalmated Plovers moult into their fresh breeding plumage in the spring they develop a black neck band and head pattern that is quite striking. (photo 7) A close inspection of the left foot of the Semipalmated Plover shown here will disclose the small amount of webbing at the base of the toes that gives the "Semipalmated" its name.

The Wilson's Plover is the largest of the four small similar Florida winter plovers. It is one of the five bird species (Phalarope, Plover, Snipe, Storm Petrel, and Warbler) named for Alexander Wilson, who is regarded by many as the "Father of American Ornithology," ( [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander\\_Wilson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Wilson) ) well before John James Audubon, Roger Tory Peterson, or today's David Allen Sibley. Found in south Florida year round, it extends its breeding range only slightly farther north as far as



South Carolina. Its heavier, all black bill and bulkier profile, make it easy to separate from the three smaller plover species already discussed. (photo 8) It is not uncommon to find Piping, Semipalmated and Wilson's Plovers all in close proximity to each other on some winter Florida beaches.

“Why is it called Black-bellied Plover? There isn't a hint of black on the bird.” is a question we often hear on Florida birding field trips. (photo 9) In winter, in Florida, we only see the basic, non-breeding, plumage of the bird. When the Black-bellied Plover dons its formal, courting, get-ready-for-breeding finery, usually on its way to the northern most regions of Canada and Alaska, where it completes the continued survival of the species cycle, it sports a stunning change of appearance, with, indeed, a full black belly, as per its name. (photo 10) It does have one black diagnostic feature, however, which it wears year round: large black spots in the armpits, (which photo, because of its poor quality, I reluctantly display, as it is the only such photo I have). (photo 11) These “black armpits” separate the Black-bellied Plover from all other similar plovers, i.e. American Golden, Pacific Golden and European Golden, of which, only the American Golden Plover, rarely, ever occurs in Florida, and again, only in the winter. They all have white armpits.



***Photo 11, Black-bellied Plover in flight***



**Killdeer**

The most widespread, largest, and perhaps, most common of the plover species in Florida is the Killdeer, which gets its name from the call it makes, which does, indeed, sound like it is saying, "Killdeer, Killdeer, Killdeer."

While range

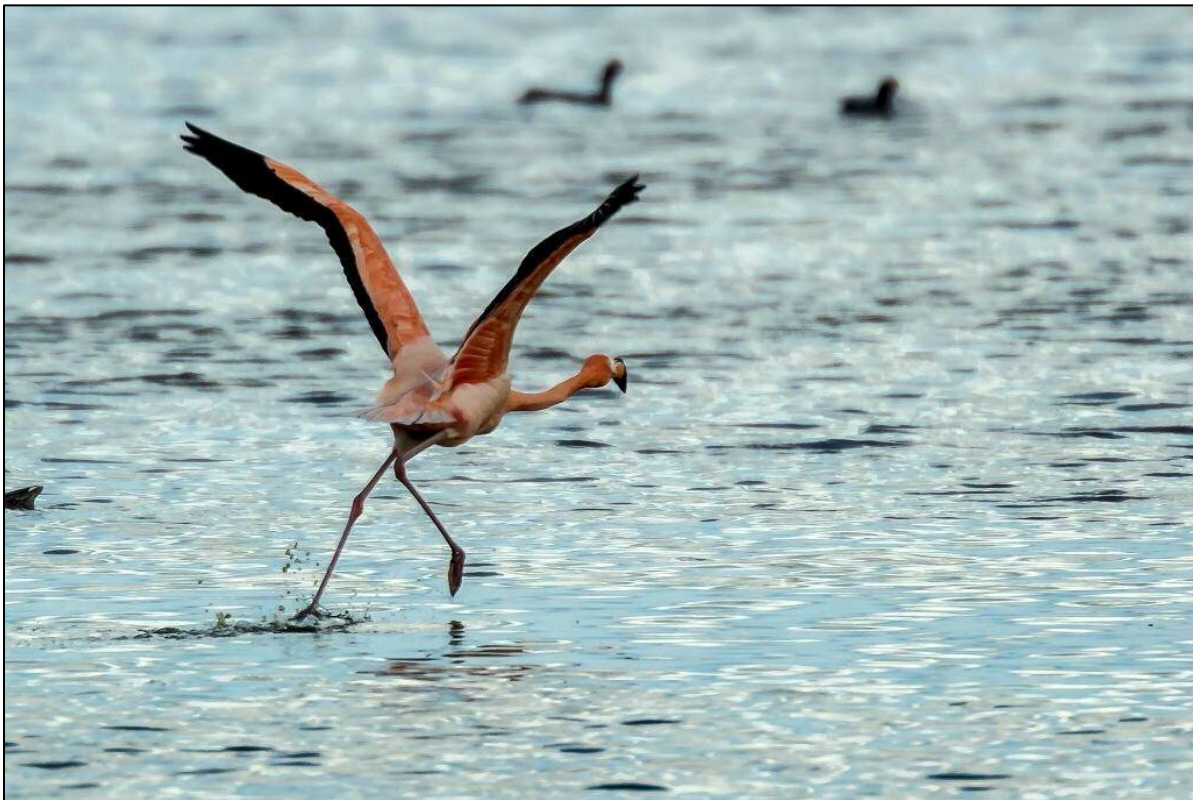
maps show them just about everywhere in the United States, those same maps show the southern edge of their breeding range just about in the middle of the Treasure Coast of Florida. They are found on beaches, mud flats, farm fields, meadows, the lawns here in our condo complex, just about everywhere you might look, although I haven't seen one yet mixed in with the Ring-billed Gulls and Boat-tailed Grackles at the Publix parking lot, but I wouldn't be surprised if one showed up there. They love to nest in gravel, (here in a commercial Garden Center in 2009) where their eggs blend in with the small stones. (photo 12, above) Also see the earlier *Hart Beat 61* for a killdeer story.

It may be ironic that the genesis of this article began after a chance meeting with world renowned birders on a boardwalk in the woods, at an iconic Florida National Wildlife Refuge. The irony stems from the fact that a boardwalk in the woods is one place a birder is not ever likely to encounter any plovers of any kind. Nevertheless, serendipity being what it is, maybe on our next walk on a beach somewhere we will encounter a birder with specific information about a marsh location for a Black Rail, a bird not ever likely to be found on a beach, that will set us off on another quest for the photos necessary for a rail article. But not All Aboard Florida. We will leave that one for the politicians and the newspapers.

For more information on the plight of Piping Plovers, see: [audubon.org/news/pbs-newshour-zooms-piping-plover-efforts](http://audubon.org/news/pbs-newshour-zooms-piping-plover-efforts)



[HART BEAT 70, first published May 1, 2015](#)



## **FABULOUS! AMERICAN FLAMINGOS IN FLORIDA**

Once upon a time American Flamingos were common in south Florida. But, as with so many other things, foreigners, in this case our ancestors, wiped them out. I can only assume they found the birds to be tasty. For many years the occasional American Flamingo found somewhere in south Florida has been presumed to be an escapee from the decorative captive flock maintained at Hialeah Racetrack. There were also occasional “good birds,” presumed to be wild, including the flock of 22 that Jewel and I hired a fishing boat to see at Sandy Key, well out in Florida Bay at the extreme southern tip of the Everglades, from the park marina known curiously as Flamingo.

The flock had been discovered by fishermen as they were not even remotely visible from land, and we were far out of sight of any land mass except for the occasional sand spit that rises out of the bay, including Sandy Key. The entire bay was very shallow, riddled with channels with which the fishermen were familiar, and thus able to navigate us to the spectacular birds. The year was 1991; but with the advent of global warming and rising seas, it is highly likely that this entire area of Florida Bay will become part of mainland Florida and presumably ripe for development as waterfront building lots. For an illustrative map of Florida Bay, see:



[www.nps.gov/ever/planyourvisit/upload/florida\\_bay\\_map.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/ever/planyourvisit/upload/florida_bay_map.pdf). Sandy Key is at the left edge of the map, just to the right of the “Everglades National Park Boundary” designation, approximately 20 miles out in the Bay from Flamingo.

The migration of American Flamingos is not well known or

understood. The birds are apparently nomadic in nature and not given to regular or fixed migration patterns. There are Flamingos in the Bahamas, throughout the Caribbean, and on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, thus surrounding Florida, and presumably there is movement between these areas. Occasionally birds are found in Snake Bight, another area in Florida Bay, where, with good luck, they are seen from the end of Snake Bight Trail, a mosquito riven gauntlet, where American Flamingos can be observed at the very edge of visibility through a strong telescope. Your odds there are probably in the low single digits.

For more on Snake Bight Flamingos, see: [www.birdwatchingdaily.com/featured-stories/flamingos-snake-bight/](http://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/featured-stories/flamingos-snake-bight/). Storms can also blow the birds just about anywhere, as illustrated by the photo by Amy Marques of one in the Indian River near the St. Lucie Power Plant after tropical storm Debbie on June 27, 2012. See: [stlucieaudubon.org/images/BirdPhotos/AmFlamingo1206.jpg](http://stlucieaudubon.org/images/BirdPhotos/AmFlamingo1206.jpg).

But wait, there's more: for the past 10 years American Flamingos have been seen regularly in western Palm Beach County at STA-2, from mid-March to mid-May, reaching an amazing total of 147 at one time in late April 2014. That is - seen by a couple of knowledgeable STA-2 employees only, as the area has been closed to the public and the sightings information not released to the birding world until this year. However, this year, for the first time, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) opened Stormwater Treatment Area 2 (hence STA-2) to the general public by arrangement with the Audubon Society of the Everglades ([www.auduboneverglades.org/](http://www.auduboneverglades.org/)) under very strict and limited conditions. See: [www.birdwatchingdaily.com/blog/2015/03/18/how-to-see-flamingos-in-florida-this-spring/](http://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/blog/2015/03/18/how-to-see-flamingos-in-florida-this-spring/). For information on joining one of the trips, see: [www.auduboneverglades.org/info-for-the-flamingo-carpool-trips/](http://www.auduboneverglades.org/info-for-the-flamingo-carpool-trips/).



Jewel and I joined the trip caravan on Sunday April 12, 2015, which was treated to the sighting of four American Flamingos. The day was heavily overcast and the birds were very far away. Not the ideal lighting or distance conditions for decent photography. I was reluctant to inflict these lousy photos upon you, but intrepid as ever, here they are. Fortunately, there were a great many other birds there as well, and the site should prove to be an outstanding birding destination in future years, as it will be opened to the public next year, according to the STA representative who greeted us.

Prior to setting out to find the Flamingos, a representative of the SFWMD addressed the group and explained the purpose of the STA's. Polluted runoff from farm fertilizer, animal waste, and failed septic tanks flows from north-central Florida into Lake Okeechobee. The polluted water marinates in the lake, and when the lake needs to be lowered to prepare for the summer storms, the polluted water is dumped into the St. Lucie (east) and Caloosahatchee (west) Rivers, and in the east, ultimately into the Indian River Lagoon, where it causes devastating damage.



The STAs have been created to provide a holding area for the polluted water, so that it can be naturally filtered, and cleaner water delivered to the two rivers. The long term solution is to create more STA's and restore the original natural southern flow of the Okeechobee water widely to the "River of Grass" in the Everglades, where it historically naturally maintained the balance and diversity of this world famous habitat. The STA representative stopped there and did not explain further that what is needed is the money and the political will to complete the process.

The Florida voters solved the money part by approving a \$780 million annual fund referendum specifically for this and like projects. The political will has been stymied by big money interests opposed to the project which have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to legislators, who, not surprisingly, are now also opposed to the project, notwithstanding all scientific studies



and conclusions that the projects are absolutely necessary. So much for the Supreme Court's approval of "soft core" corruption! ("Hard core" corruption = actual bribery = illegal; "soft core" corruption = PAC's and unlimited political party contributions = legal).

And so, dear readers, the Fairy Godmother waved her magic wand and all big money was removed from politics, and

"government of the people, by the people and for the people" was restored; resulting in reversing the status quo of "government of the people, by the big money interests, for the top 1%." Well, finding American Flamingos has always been a kind of fairy tale come true; sometimes fairy tales do come true, but in today's political climate, don't hold your breath.

And now I will get off my soap box.

*CORRECTION: My sharp-eyed brother caught a glaring mistake I made this article when I said, "with the advent of global warming and rising seas, it is highly likely that this entire area of Florida Bay will become part of mainland Florida and presumably ripe for development as waterfront building lots." I got it exactly backward. Instead of all those islands becoming land for development, they will actually disappear with the sea rise, and they, along with much of South Florida will become part of the ocean. The new land available for water front lots may actually be somewhere in Northern Florida or Georgia.*



[HART BEAT 71, first published June 1, 2015](#)



*Common Mynas 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.

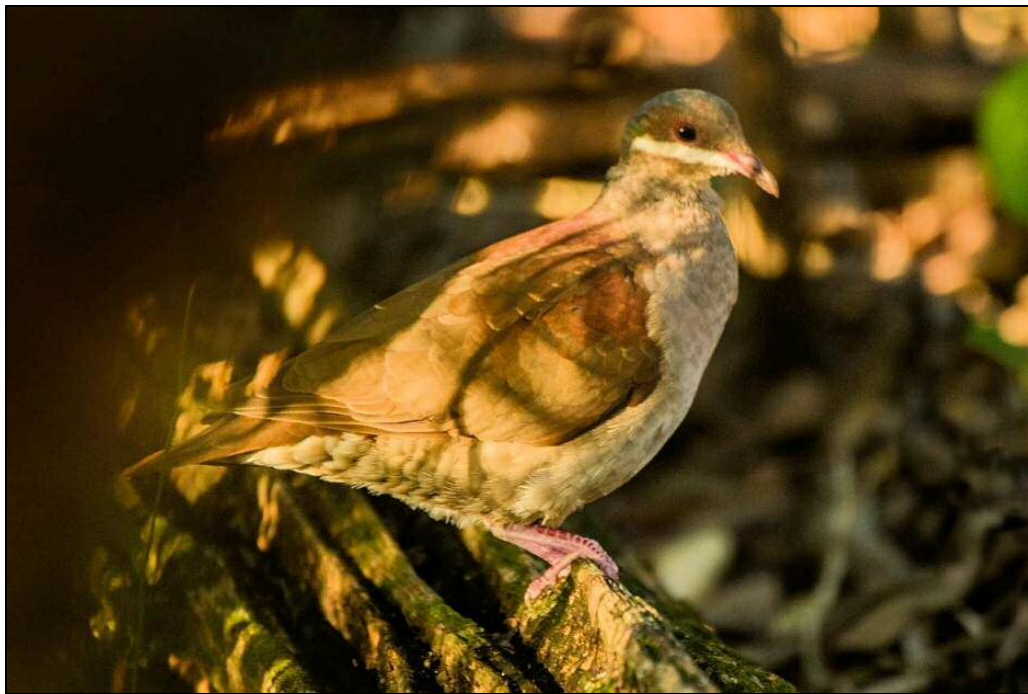
Jewel and I no longer “chase” rare or “life birds” except when they are geographically nearby or when their location is somewhere we would like to go and visit for birding even if there were no rare or life birds reported there. Bill Baggs State Park in Miami is such a location, where we

chased the Thick-billed Vireo a couple of years ago (see *Hart Beat 39*). 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



***Thick-billed Vireo***



***Key West Quail-Dove***

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.





***Black-faced Grassquit***

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.



***Short-tailed Hawk***

After a full day of searching, finally, shortly after 5 p.m., 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 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 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 Grassquit 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.



***Broad-winged Hawk***



The following morning when we left the motel we noticed several Common Mynas 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 Mynas 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 Mynas, 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.



*Common Mynas*



*Be prepared for all kinds of wildlife*

## WHAT'S STICKING AROUND STICK MARSH?

“Stick Marsh” is about as uninviting a name as one could conjure up for a premier birding location. To make matters worse, it is only open one day a week, Thursdays, no less, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and to make matters even worse yet, it is managed primarily for hunting from November to January, so all the water fowl are quite skittish, and move quickly away from cars driving the perimeter roads. Notwithstanding all that, it can be a spectacular birding destination. Located near Fellsmere, Florida, about three miles west of Exit 156 off I-95 between Vero Beach and Melbourne, and down 6 miles of a sometimes very dusty road, “Stick Marsh” is the colloquial name for the officially named T. M. Goodwin Wildlife Management Area.

In February and March, after the shooting has stopped, the birds settle down and are more approachable. Thankfully, there is no hunting on







***Roseate Spoonbill***

Thursdays, so birders are not subjected to the war-like sounds of gunfire as sometimes occurs at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. Unfortunately, it will never be a Wakodahatchee or Green Cay. See

[floridabirdingtrail.com/index.php/trip/trail/T.\\_M.\\_Goodwin\\_Waterfowl\\_Management\\_Area/](http://floridabirdingtrail.com/index.php/trip/trail/T._M._Goodwin_Waterfowl_Management_Area/) for T.M. Goodwin Waterfowl Management Area.

Concentrations of large American Alligators are fairly common, and on one occasion we were met by this phalanx of Raccoons marching down the road. Actually, it was this same cohort (different photo) that started me on this Hart Beat writing journey back in 2011. See Hart Beat 1.

One of the most common and accommodating species at the Stick Marsh is the Red-shouldered Hawk, which often can be found road side at eye level where it is very photographable. The other common and accommodating species found regularly, and particularly in late March and early April when nest-building, is the Roseate Spoonbill. Actually, the Roseate Spoonbills can be well seen from the boat ramp parking lot just outside the entrance gate to the Stick Marsh any day without restriction and without entering into the WMA, as they go about their nesting activities on an island just across the canal from the parking lot. It is the best place in Florida that I am aware of for seeing this species.



***Red-shouldered Hawk***

Even during hunting season the birds that aren't shot at can be accommodating and seen at fairly close range. Pied-billed Grebes are common, and sometimes can be seen with their cousins, the Horned Grebe. Both Night- Herons can be found (Black-crowned here,) and they, as well as Great Blue Herons, and all other herons which are not game birds, are not as skittish as the ducks. In my experience there are only two Florida birding locations that are reliable for Fulvous Whistling-Ducks: STA-5 and the Stick Marsh. Sometimes a Fulvous Whistling-Duck will try to hide behind even a single blade of grass though.

Hawks are another reason to visit the Stick Marsh. Osprey are ubiquitous; Northern Marsh Hawks are reliable, and both Sharp-shinned (shown here with its squared off tail) and Coopers Hawks are found on most trips; and one or more of all three Florida falcons (Merlin shown here) can be found regularly in the winter.

In addition, if dickie birds are your thing, just about everything you can find in Florida in the winter is present at the Stick Marsh. I have included photos of a Swamp



***Sharp-shinned Hawk***



Sparrow, and a White-eyed Vireo taken there, but there is a large variety of species from which to choose. And I haven't even mentioned all the shorebirds. The hunting information for the Stick Marsh mentions Bobwhite Quail as a target species, but I must confess we have never seen or heard one there.

While I understand and appreciate that a lot of excellent wildlife habitat has been acquired with the aid and assistance of funds from Ducks Unlimited, including the Stick Marsh, with the related hunting that goes with it, I can't help but think how nice it would be for the ducks and game birds to be safe and secure and more readily available for all of us to enjoy. Still, life is a constant stream of trade-offs. Now if we could only come up with a more inviting and compelling name for the place than "Stick Marsh."



***Black-crowned Night-Heron***

*Horned  
Grebe*



*Fulvous  
Whistling-  
Ducks*





***Osprey***



***Northern  
Harrier***



***Merlin***



***Swamp  
Sparrow***







*White-eyed Vireo*



*Jewel and Hart Rufe*

## NOTES

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