



The Hart Beat



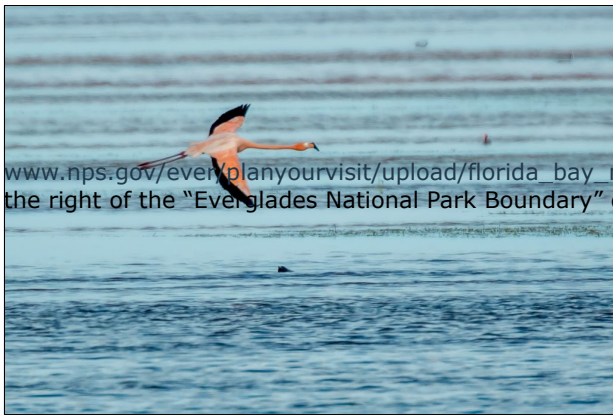
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FABULOUS! AMERICAN FLAMINGOS IN FLORIDA

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/evergladesyourvisit/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/. 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.

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/) under very strict and limited conditions. See: 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/.

Jewel and I joined the trip caravan on Sunday April 12th 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. (5/1/2015)



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.

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