

# Florida

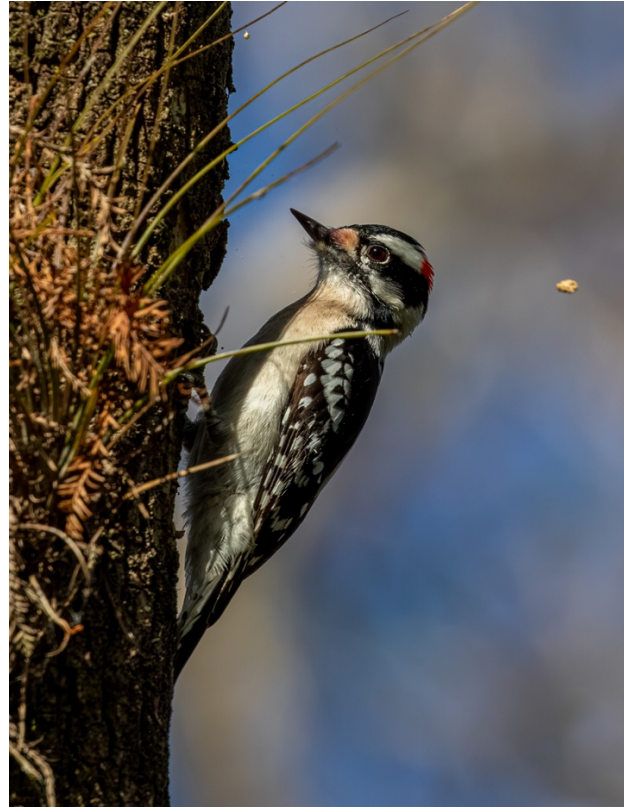
## Naturetrek Tour Report

6th – 14th February 2024

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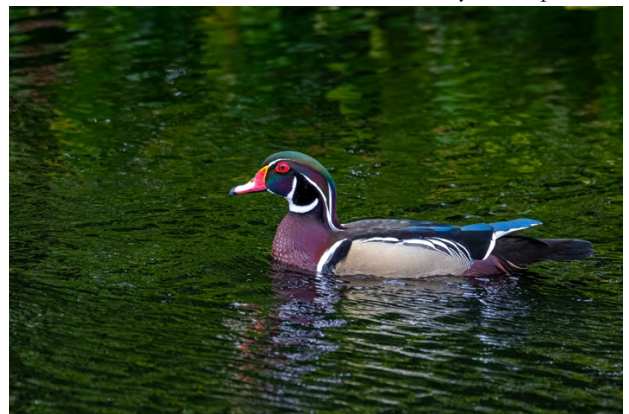
Great horned Owl



Downy Woodpecker



Alligator



Wood Duck

Tour report and photos by Matthew Capper

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Tour Participants: Matthew Capper (tour leader) and Toby Collett (co-leader) with 13 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

We had another superb trip around the sunshine state of Florida. As ever, this was a wonderful escape from the British winter weather, enjoying both sunshine and warmth. However, 2024 was unusual in that the effects of the El Niño climate phenomenon were being felt across the south-east of the United States. During such weather patterns, Florida experiences cooler and wetter winters than the average and more storms sweep their way across the State.

Luckily, we didn't really experience any of the direct weather effects whilst we were there, but it was clear that water levels in the southern Everglades were higher than normal, spreading birds across the landscape. It also seemed to have brought in a number of rare and unusual birds for us to see, and the resultant trip list was the highest and most varied we have experienced to date.

Birds such as American Flamingo, Bufflehead, Louisiana Waterthrush and Rufous Hummingbird for example, were all new and all well outside their usual expected range. But they were just a small part of the wonderful range of wetland birds, waders, warblers and woodpeckers that make up this tour.

There is always a trip highlight though and I think it would be hard not to say that this year it was the owls that stole the show. We can usually rely on the Burrowing Owls but this time we added a very smart Eastern Screech Owl snoozing in the hollow of a tree stump and best of all was a wonderful half hour stood beneath a pair of Great Horned Owls and their chick. Just magical!

And of course, it isn't just about birds. Florida always delivers with lizards, butterflies, Alligators, dolphins, Manatees and this year, we got up close and personal with a huge fourteen-foot brute of a Crocodile.

## Day 1

**Tuesday 6th February**

### Arrival in Orlando and transfer to Titusville

Toby and Matthew were at Orlando Airport to meet everyone, some arriving from within the State, some from other UK airports and some on the main flight from Heathrow. We met in the arrivals hall where the monorail disgorges passengers from Terminal C. Despite the flight being early, this year's change of schedule to a later time meant it was dark outside as we headed east to Titusville; no chance to see any wildlife therefore. The wind was buffeting the trucks – it had been a very windy day with a storm system having just passed over the State. Thankfully the morning would bring calmer, if still breezy, conditions.

Once at the hotel, we met up with our final couple and did some brief introductions in order to allow everyone to get off to bed quickly. A planned rocket launch had been cancelled due to the weather – a relief for those who would otherwise have got up for the 1.30am scheduled slot.

## Day 2

Wednesday 7th February

### Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge

We had the first of our American hotel breakfasts and everyone was excited to be out and about. The first birds were seen from the hotel as we assembled – American Robins flying overhead, Killdeer on the adjacent field, a pair of nesting Red-tailed Hawk and the ubiquitous Common and Boat-tailed Grackles, Northern Mockingbirds and Blue Jays.

Our drive through Titusville took us alongside the Indian River Lagoon which was dotted with Scaup (mostly Lesser) and every few hundred yards brought an Osprey nest, including one in our first Publix car park, where we stocked up on provisions.

Once you cross the causeway to Merritt Island, the birding starts in earnest. The car park was full of Black Skimmers and gulls and there were plenty more Scaup offshore, along with various terns, Brown Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants and brief views of Bottle-nosed Dolphin. A short walk took us to the beach where Sanderling, Turnstone and Willet were probing the sand and the first Turkey Vultures of the day started to rise on the thermals. Best bird was a close in Horned (aka Slavonian) Grebe in its smart black and white winter plumage.

We took in our usual stop for the endemic Florida Scrub Jays but Armadillos were proving hard to find. We drove over to the Haulover Canal, scanning all the way, but no luck. Instead we made do with a rarity in the form of four American Flamingos that had been blown in from the Caribbean on the back of a recent storm. The water here was clearly full of fish as there were hundreds of birds – from wildfowl to both species of pelican and even 30-40 dolphins. A quick stop at the manatee viewpoint confirmed that they were not present and so we headed off to the visitor centre for lunch, finally tracking down an Armadillo en route. Sadly, despite it being a perfectly safe place to stop, a local law enforcement officer clearly didn't agree and we weren't going to argue – we were armed with binoculars and cameras, he was armed with a gun!

We'd already added Painted Bunting to the list when we'd stopped to use the toilets but lunch-time gave us the opportunity to add more views of what is always a highly sought-after species. With that in the bag, we spent the afternoon driving round the Black Point Wildlife Drive. It was as good as ever – Northern Harriers quartered as Ospreys fished and the selection of wetland birds was mouth-wateringly long. Highlights included hundreds of ducks, a confiding Sora and Skimmers that were actually skimming. Several lagoons were full of waders – Long-billed Dowitchers, Least and Western Sandpipers, Stilt Sandpiper, Black-bellied (Grey) Plovers and elegant American Avocets all showed really well.

It had been a superb day with an extensive list of species and a great introduction to Florida and its wildlife. We headed out for an evening meal and did the first of our evening species logs when we got back. The rocket news was good – after three days of postponements, it was going to be launched tonight. The bad news, it was still scheduled for 1.30am. Ouch! Things could have been worse though - the hotel is ideally placed, overlooking the launch site and has a viewing gallery on the fifth floor allowing those who wanted to, to simply leave their rooms, watch the launch and then slip back into bed. The SpaceX rocket went up as planned; over the hotel, lighting the sky and the sound and shaking ground was even enough to wake several of those who had decided to sleep through.

## Day 3

## Thursday 8th February

### Joe Overstreet, Lake Kissimmee and Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area

One of the longer travel days today. We began with a similar selection to the previous day as we assembled outside the hotel and shortly after setting off had two Wild Turkeys, looking rather incongruous as they walked down the hard shoulder of the freeway. We had an hour or so's journey to our second Publix of the trip and another car park birding moment with a couple of Sandhill Cranes that were happy to walk right up to the group to have their photos taken.

The drive to Joe Overstreet takes in some nice farmland and is known for being a spot for Crested Caracara. Today our luck was certainly in as pair were sat by the roadside. We stopped and added a few Savannah Sparrow, Eastern Phoebe and other bits and bobs before the Caracara landed right in front of us and started mating. Wow!

As soon as we turned into Joe Overstreet we were onto good birds too. Splendid looking Eastern Bluebirds and then an equally smart Red-headed Woodpecker. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a very close White-eyed Vireo. Further out there was our first good look at one of the many Red-shouldered Hawks and an American Kestrel co-operated by sitting on top of a tree stump for several minutes.

We stopped periodically, adding more goodies such as Eastern Meadowlark, hundreds of Sandhill Cranes and our first Raccoon of the trip. Down near the end, we got out again for a look at a Bald Eagle nest, complete with both adults and a chick and there was a mixed flock of cowbirds, grackles and Glossy Ibis out in the field. A Loggerhead Shrike close by had been using the barbed wire fence as a larder. Bits of Yellow-rumped Warbler and a perfectly spiked Cricket were a fascinating, if slightly gruesome, insight into just why the shrikes are called Butcher Birds. Toby was scanning with the scope and picked out the tail of a Bryant's Fox Squirrel just over the horizon. Top spotting! Thankfully, it allowed us a much more complete view as we drove past.

The boat landing was our lunch spot and allowed everyone to relax and wander and take in the various birds as they wished. The highlights included another pair of mating Caracara, Purple Swamphen, Forster's Terns, plenty of herons and ibis, more Bald Eagles and great views of Snail Kite – including a perched male. Limpkin had showed as we arrived but it wasn't until just before we left that two landed right in front of us and started wailing at each other. It is an incredible and eerie sound that has to be heard to be believed.

After our fourth Bald Eagle nest on the way back, we drove round to the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area for our final stop of the day. A sparrow on arrival caused a great deal of subsequent scrutiny. The final and considered opinion once we'd got home and had time to deliberate was that it was actually a Swamp Sparrow. This spot proved to be pretty productive though. More Eastern Bluebirds, Pine Warbler, more Woodpeckers and a very close pair of Brown-headed Nuthatch that flew down to drink from the puddle in front of us.

It was now time to head south to Boynton Beach. It was a lengthy drive and the final part took a little longer than hoped as the freeway snarled up. It meant a slightly later dinner but nothing too bad.

## Day 4

## Friday 9th February

### Green Cay Wetland, Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and Boynton Beach Inlet

This morning, we were just quarter of an hour away from our first stop, Green Cay Wetland - a site that, along with Wakodahatchee, provides a quintessential Florida wetland experience. The first 200 metres are a nightmare for the leaders. With birds everywhere and often just feet away, everyone is so overawed that any progress completely grinds to halt. But with so much more to see and a treat around every bend of the boardwalk, you have to be brutal and chivvy everyone along, much to their initial reluctance. Luckily this year, Toby wandered on ahead and radioed to say he had a Least Bittern, a bird that always gets everyone moving...

Further on, we had our first decent mixed flock of warblers. Blue-grey Gnatcatchers were dotted in amongst a nice selection that included Black and White, Palm, Pine and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Northern Parula, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and a very smart male American Redstart.

Next, there was a pair of Wood Duck – new birds for us here at Green Cay - and an American Bittern that eventually moved into the open and gave everyone a nice view. And it just kept on coming with Glossy Ibis and Wilson's Snipe right by the boardwalk and a pair of Roseate Spoonbills that flew in to join them. Right by the end, just before we got back to the Centre, Grey-headed Swamphens showed very well and we ended with a Southern-banded Watersnake curled up right beneath us.

After a toilet stop and chance to shop for T-shirts, we reassembled by the Painted Buntings on the feeders and then headed over the road for an unscheduled but incredible extra stop. Everywhere we had gone, from the car park to the furthest reaches of the boardwalk, the question had been the same. "Have you heard about the owls?". Well, no we hadn't. At least not at first. But this being America, every birder was keen to share the exact directions. And so we followed them. Park up, walk to the storm pipes and turn right at the dip. Go in twenty yards and look up. And there they were. Great Horned Owls. Mum, Dad and then, the chick, gazing down on us impassively. What incredibly beautiful and amazing birds they were, especially when viewed at full frame through the scopes. And those feet and yellow eyes. Getting everyone to drag themselves away from here was even harder than the start of the boardwalk!

We still had more to do though. And next up it was the Loxahatchee Wildlife Refuge. Lunch was taken in the shade of a shelter and then we wandered down to the end of the first pond where we hoped to find Pileated Woodpecker. We were in luck and a pair gave us superb views and flew over our heads. A quick search for a Bell's Vireo, a rarity that had been reported, was unsuccessful and a Barred Owl that called close to the car park at the visitor centre refused to show itself to us.

We therefore drove east and ended our day at Boynton Beach. There were a few local birders sea watching and we joined in, adding a few good species with Gannet, Cabot's and Forster's Tern all being highlights alongside a number of Brown Pelicans fighting over fish scraps and even stealing one off the end of a fisherman's line. Best of all though were three Magnificent Frigatebirds that we tracked out at sea to the south of us. It felt like a fitting way to end the day so we retraced our steps to the hotel and were back in good time for a cup of tea and shower before heading to an Asian Bistro for dinner.

## Day 5

Saturday 10th February

### Wakodahatchee Wetland and a drive across the State

After the spectacle of Green Cay Wetland yesterday, we followed it up with the smaller but equally lovely Wakodahatchee Wetland this morning. As ever, people were assembled outside in good time and enjoying the local birds – Mottled Duck and Egyptian Goose on the adjacent golf course, Mockingbirds, Mourning Doves and Grackles in the car park and a flyby from some Monk Parakeets.

It was Saturday morning so we made good time to Wakodahatchee, arriving before the parking lot filled. Night Herons and some large Iguanas were the first to greet us along with a few warblers in the trees by the entrance. The Wood Storks were as good as ever and the Great Egrets were busy nest building and pair bonding; their breeding plumes making them look so different to the usual views – and all just a few feet from the boardwalk. We were particularly amused by one Green Iguana whose favoured spot was right beneath the branch where an Anhinga would perch to dry off after a fishing sortie. With both equally happy and neither wanting to move, the white splattered lizard looked more iguano than iguana!

We had managed to spot a few White-winged Doves already but finally had some great views as we wandered round. Similarly, the Purple Martins had all been a bit distant so far but the artificial houses here were in use and the birds were overhead at times. Right beneath them was a Brown Watersnake. This is a good site for snakes and reptiles and we also saw both Brown and Green Basilisk as we walked round.

After yesterday's Wood Ducks, today we saw lots of Black-bellied Whistling Duck and our bonus bird of the morning was a, rare for Florida, Louisiana Waterthrush – picking its way round the base of the vegetation at the waters edge. A very attractive and confiding bird.

We made our usual stop for food and then pulled in to one of the Stormwater Treatment Areas (SWTAs) where basic facilities afforded us some seating and shade to eat lunch. Caspian Terns and Northern Harriers were quartering the water and reeds respectively and there were plenty of duck and American Coot further out. A Belted Kingfisher on one of the wires allowed Laura to finally get a much-desired view in the scope and we took a moment to talk through the role of the SWTAs in the wider restoration of the Everglades ecosystem.

The Sem Chi Rice Plant and the abandoned Atlantic Sugar Mill don't sound the most exciting places to go birding but at times, they can hold a range of species that can be hard to find elsewhere. They weren't at their most birdy today but we still enjoyed a few goodies – brief views of a Marsh Rabbit, male Painted Bunting, a female American Redstart, lots of Osprey, good views of Common Ground Dove and another rarity – a Tropical Kingbird perched up on the wires and canal side bushes.

In a break with previous years, we drove over to Fort Myers via a slightly different route, allowing us ten minutes to stretch our legs at the Okaloacoochee Slough Wildlife Management Area. It was relatively quiet but we did enjoy nice views of Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Carolina Wren.



Our check in to the hotel was smooth and the very helpful lady on reception ascertained that our planned restaurant for the following night would be closed because of the Superbowl. Instead, she arranged for us head across that evening which was very much appreciated.

## Day 6

## Sunday 11th February

### Bunche Beach, Cape Coral, Lee County Manatee Park, Ava and Six Mile Cypress Slough

This morning we allowed some a lie in while the more eager were up before dawn to enjoy Bunche Beach before the crowds arrived. We wandered along the sand with Sanibel Island as a backdrop and took in the nice selection of waders including Semi-palmated, Wilson's and Piping Plovers, Short-billed Dowitcher, Sanderling, Least and Western Sandpipers, American Oystercatcher, Dunlin and Willet. Amongst the herons there were a few Reddish Egret that gave us excellent views and best of all, were two Magnificent Frigatebirds, one of which gradually drifted our way, never once flapping its wings.

As we were leaving, another group arrived and we discovered that they were on a US birding holiday. We exchanged news and pleasantries and offered places in our vehicles to any of 'theirs' who fancied swapping groups. One was tempted when she found out she might get a second breakfast and it was something of a relief for Toby and I to find that all of our group had decided to stick with us and not jump ship the other way!

After breakfast we made our way over to Cape Coral and 'our' Burrowing Owls. This pair has been incredibly reliable every year we've tried and this was no different. Cross the bridge and bingo, there they were. Both birds were sat at the entrance to the burrow, allowing us to admire them and take as many photos as we desired. We mooched around for a little while, looking at the scaup, pelicans and gulls and we were joined by a couple of local birders. It is always worth picking the brains of the locals and their news was that Sanibel, whilst open, still hadn't recovered from Hurricane Ian and the usual birds and other wildlife were just not being seen. In contrast, they had had some good birds at Six-mile Cypress Slough that morning and had a lead they were going to follow up on some feeders in a garden close to our Manatee site that were attracting a range of good birds. We didn't take much persuading and promptly re-wrote the itinerary for the rest of the day.

It was breezy and we suspected that the ripples on the water at the Lee County Manatee Park would make viewing difficult. It proved to be so but we did see about four of them - knowing that at least we had Manatee sightings in the bag ahead of hopefully closer views in the Everglades. A quick visit to the loos and a look at the shop and we headed to Alva and the tip off from our friendly birders. As we pulled up, we were pleased to see that they had arrived before us and were already watching a large flock of Indigo Bunting with a couple of bonus Lazuli Bunting thrown in. The owner of the house was clearly bird obsessed and had a variety of feeders and types of food. It meant we got to see a range of species really well including Ruby-throated Hummingbird on the nectar feeder, Carolina Wren on the seed feeder, Yellow-throated Warbler on the hanging bird table and a very smart male Northern Cardinal in one of the bushes. The buntings and associated cowbirds continued to show in good numbers too and we agreed it had been a great little diversion. The owner of the house wasn't in but we wanted to show our appreciation and so wrote a little note of thanks and left it, and a small contribution towards bird food, in his porch entrance.

After lunch, we headed out onto the board walk at Six-mile Cypress Slough (pronounced slew). We had our usual mix of warblers and gnatcatchers and some nice Yellow-crowned Night Herons. But the woodpeckers were particularly good. Downy Woodpecker right beside us and then a Pileated Woodpecker that spent ages just feet away. You could even see the tongue flick out as it fed on grubs under the bark of the tree. The species we were hoping to see though was Eastern Screech Owl. Our new birding friends had shown us photos and drawn us a map with directions to the area where it had been seen. And our luck was truly in as it was sat in dappled sunlight, tucked in the top of a snapped tree trunk, with one eye open to keep an eye on the woodland around it. The boardwalk wasn't the easiest spot to watch it from but we set up a telescope and became the focal point for every visitor who walked past. Their reactions upon seeing it were just lovely and we could have made a fortune if we'd charged per view!

It was getting late and so we headed back to the vehicles, stopping to admire (well, maybe not admire...) otter and raccoon poo on the way. Our friendly hotel manager was again on hand to check our intended dinner destination was open – many places close on the evening of the Superbowl as it isn't worth opening. And we were back in time to see the Chiefs beat the 49ers in extra time.

## Day 7

**Monday 12th February**

### Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and Homestead via the Everglades

Another transit day today. But before that, we had Corkscrew Swamp to look forward to. A rather unique place with the largest remaining old-growth cypress swamp left in the State. It took less than an hour to get there and we were lucky, picking up a male Wild Turkey, a couple of White-tailed Deer and three Sandhill Cranes close to the road as we approached the sanctuary. It was the first Turkey we'd managed to see really well and he was fanning his tail out nicely, seemingly in display to the cranes.

We arrived at the same time as the group we had met the previous day at Bunche Beach. They stopped to look at the feeders, so we took advantage of the opportunity to get out ahead of them to ensure we got the first look at whatever there might be out there. This soon paid off as we picked up an American Bittern close to the boardwalk. It was grunting and barking, very different to the boom of its Eurasian counterpart and we were delighted when a second answered from close by.

We bumped into a few small flocks of birds – gnatcatchers and vireos were prevalent along with a selection of woodpeckers and a couple of Great Crested Flycatcher with their distinctive 'wheel' call. And eventually we hit a purple patch. A mixed warbler flock came our way – highlights included a Black and White Warbler that was so close you could touch it, a very smart male Black-throated Green Warbler, Northern Parula, a very showy White-eyed Vireo and then two young Raccoons snoozing together in a tree close to the boardwalk allowing everyone to get photos and views in the scope.

A few more wetland birds were added along with a rather impressive alligator and the warblers continued with a first winter Black-throated Green and the ever smart Yellow-throated Warbler plus a couple of Pine Warblers, Carolina Wren and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet.



The drive across to Homestead took in the vast expanse of the Everglades – Big Cypress National Preserve first and then the Everglades National Park itself. We stopped for a brief leg stretch at Shark Valley but it was very clear that a wet winter had led to higher water levels and birds therefore dispersing across the wider landscape. It was eerily quiet as far as herons and egrets were concerned. Instead we found a nice Eastern Phoebe and admired a large Alligator hauled out by the path with its mouth open in a rather menacing manner. Careful scanning of the vegetation on the way back revealed a much cuter and less threatening baby that was only a few inches long.

## Day 8

**Tuesday 13th February**

### The Everglades National Park

The Publix in Homestead is just over the road from the hotel and so our first drive of the day lasted all of two minutes. The car park here had a large flock of Cattle Egret in it and is also noted as an easy spot to find Common Mynas. So, whilst everyone was shopping, the scope was set up on a pair so that people could appreciate them as they returned to the minibuses.

We drove down towards the Everglades, noting Purple Martins on the way and a pair of Red-tailed Hawks nesting on a telecommunications tower. We stopped at the C-111 canal just short of the Park entrance and immediately found a pair of White-tailed Kites. They were distant but we later got to see them perched up in the scopes. Over the road there were a couple of Tropical Kingbirds on the fencing around the pumping station. The abandoned farmland here was full of birds – grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds and Cowbirds all abundant and plenty of raptors including hundreds of vultures and American Kestrels. Just as we were leaving, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher appeared on the wires right in front of us, so we piled back out and were able to admire what is a stunning and scarce species.

In a break with tradition, we headed next to Mahogany Hammock. A mixed flock gave us something of a run-around but we did manage to pick out our first vivid yellow Prairie Warbler with another Black-throated Green for good measure. We were hoping that the resident pair of Barred Owl would be co-operating but despite hearing a call, there was no sign of an actual bird.

The cluster of buildings at Flamingo mark the most southerly point of the mainland United States and we spent the middle part of the day here. Before having lunch though, we couldn't resist going to see the Manatees in the marina and we had a lovely moment when we discovered that the taps used to fill the freshwater tanks of boats were perfect for quenching their thirst. Three Manatees crowded beneath us, huddling together so that all three mouths could sit directly beneath the flow of water.

Over lunch, we ascertained that there were no crocodiles in the spot where we normally see them, close to the Osprey nest. Instead there were two hauled out on the boat ramp, allowing us to have unobstructed views and take as many photos as we desired. We chatted to a National Park Ranger who told that the largest of the two – a huge fourteen-foot male – was forty years old and called 'Serial Killer' after his habit of killing any other crocodiles in the area, barring his favoured female who was hauled out a short distance away.

We had an ice cream and a birdwatch from the recently re-opened visitor centre and a wander around the exhibits. There were Pelicans, Skimmers and waders offshore along with a few heron species. A Spotted Sandpiper was a

new bird for the trip and there was a third American Crocodile hauled out on one of the pontoons. Luckily it was in a separate marina to the Serial Killer.

After all our previous success, sadly Barred proved to be an owl too far. We followed a photographic report that they were now showing and went back to Mahogany Hammock. We had a chorus of hoots from both the male and female and the male flew through some dense undergrowth showing himself to just two of us. But that was it and so we cut our losses and ended the day with a short walk at the Anhinga Trail. Like everywhere else in the Everglades this year, the water was high and wetland birds had dispersed. But the water was as clear as ever and some of the group even got to watch an Anhinga swimming underwater. There were a couple of Alligators and several Purple Swampheens looked superb in the late afternoon light.

We drove back to the hotel, adding a bonus Least Bittern that flew across the road in front of us and then we headed out for the final dinner of the trip.

## Day 9

Wednesday 14th February

### A Hammock, several parks and a Baptist Hospital, Miami Airport

In a change to previous years, we decided to start our day by heading back towards the Everglades National Park and a regular spot called Lucky Hammock. Our scheduled flight time was later this year so it made sense to have an early pre-breakfast outing and allow those who wanted it the chance to lie in and pack at a more leisurely pace.

Lucky Hammock always seems to have some good birds. We pulled up just as it was getting light and wandered down the track towards the woodland. A Sharp-shinned Hawk showed well and there were plenty of catbirds, mockingbirds, jays and other common species. Once we got to the Hammock itself there were a few good birds kicking about such as Prairie Warbler and Northern Parula. However, we were not prepared for the view back along the pylons towards the vehicles. A flock of birds on the lines contained an incredible twelve Scissor Tailed Flycatcher, three Tropical Kingbird and two Western Kingbird. Another result of El Niño maybe..?

Down on the side of the track there were several Painted Buntings feeding and a Brown Thrasher showed briefly. A couple of Great Crested Flycatchers were given a high degree of scrutiny as there had been both Brown and Ash-throated Flycatchers reported over the previous few days.

We wandered back towards the vehicles and set the scope up on the Scissor-tailed Flycatchers which were now sat in a nearby bush. However, a birder was heading our way and coolly reported that he'd had a Vermillion Flycatcher near the road. This was something to be followed up straight away so the scope was left for people to enjoy the Scissor Tailed Flycatchers and a brisk walk to the road was successful as a couple of minutes later, the superb male Vermillion Flycatcher was picked up preening in a small tree. This was an absolute stunner and the third and final of the three 'most wanted' trip species for one of the group.

We watched the flycatcher for a few minutes but it was now definitely time to head back for breakfast. However, we couldn't resist watching a pair of White-tailed Kites which headed our way and gave us close views over the adjacent abandoned farmland. It had been a superb start to our final day.

With breakfast and packing out of the way, we took in the nearby Publix and its Common Mynas and then drove the twenty minutes to Castellow Hammock Park. With us arriving slightly later this year, we didn't have to wait at all for our first Hummingbird – a Ruby-throated. We soon started to get our eyes, and ears, in and also picked up the spots where birds were resting between feeding sorties. A couple of Northern Parula were moving through the trees and we got our best views of this species of the whole trip.

This year, the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds had been joined by a couple of overwintering Rufous Hummingbirds, much to the delight of the Park manager who reported that visitor numbers had gone up dramatically on the back of it. He showed us the favoured spots and it wasn't long before we had one and then a second Rufous Hummingbird, perching up in the low bushes. These would normally be found much further west, breeding in Alaska and northwest Canada and wintering in Mexico.

Our next stop was Matheson Hammock State Park. Laura was flying back early so Matthew took her to the airport whilst Toby and the rest of the group sat in the shade of the trees, had lunch and took a little wander, looking for warblers and vireos. They found a nice selection, with the bonus of a Red-headed Woodpecker and lots of Red-headed Agama and Green Iguanas. Once Matthew returned there was also another new species for trip – and also for Matthew and Toby. Two Red-masked Parakeets flew into the top of a nearby palm tree and allowed us excellent scope views. It was not a species we were expecting but is one of the many parrot species that have become established in the wider Miami area.

A brief visit down to the sea with its view of Miami Beach didn't bring us much other than a few waders, Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants. That and a quick history lesson about Stiltsville which could be seen in the distance. With little to detain us, we headed to Tropical Park where we failed to find Spot-breasted Oriole but did add Yellow-chevroned and Mitred Parakeets overhead, several American Kestrel, Turkey Vultures raiding a bin and an Anhinga that caught what looked like a Bass that was far too big for it to swallow!

Our last stop was the Kendall Baptist Hospital, a site that normally can be guaranteed to give us good views of parakeets. Not today though. So, we took the time to reorganise our bags and had a go at finding a Canada Goose for Rob who needed one extra species for 160 for the trip. Alas, his list was destined to finish on 159. I think everyone else was secretly pleased to not end the trip with a Canada Goose though!

And then it was time to make the final drive to the Airport. We filled up with petrol and realised that the hotel of our Florida residents Diane and Joe was just around the corner which allowed us to drop them at the door and say goodbye. I think we would all have happily adopted them as honorary Brits and brought them home with us though!

We parked up in the rental return and worked out that our final trip mileage was an impressive 1,242 miles, taking us in a wide 'S' shape back and forth across the State and enjoying some incredible species and experiences along the way. All that was left was to check in, do a final species log and check out the duty free.

## Day 10

Thursday 15th February

### London Heathrow

Our flight back was less than half full, meaning we were able to stretch out and relax somewhat. Another winter storm was sat out to the east of Florida and sending strong winds across the Atlantic. Whether it had an effect or not, the flight arrived back a good couple of hours early and we were soon through passport control and into the baggage hall. With relatively few passengers, things were again speedy and it was soon time to bid each other our final farewells and head for home, reflecting on an action packed and wildlife filled trip.

### Colour Ringed Birds

Of interest, the leaders stopped in at Merritt Island on the day the clients arrived and noted several colour ringed (or banded) birds. These were photographed and details sent off to the North American Bird Banding Programme. We received the following information back:

Species	Ring (Band) No.	Age when Ringed	Date Ringed	Location	Notes
Black Skimmer	1094-82018 AGC	Chick	24/08/2022	Near Lido, New York State	Seen in the parking lot at Parrish Park, Merritt Island
Black Skimmer	1024-26946 C85	Chick	01/08/2022	Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina	Seen in the parking lot at Parrish Park, Merritt Island
Black Skimmer	0844-74663 E62	Chick	20/08/2018	Near Lido, New York State	Seen in the parking lot at Parrish Park, Merritt Island
Black Vulture	0738-10344 ULH	Adult	19/02/2021	Near Titusville, Florida	Seen on the roadside on Merritt Island

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## Species lists

Birds (h = Heard only)

E=Endemic, I=Introduced		February 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Black-bellied Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna autumnalis</i>				✓	✓			
Egyptian Goose - I	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		1	2	✓				3
Muscovy Duck - I	<i>Cairina moschata</i>			✓	✓	2	2	1	✓
Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>			2			1		
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>	✓		✓	✓				
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓							
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	4							
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>	✓							
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓							
Mottled Duck	<i>Anas fulvigula</i>			✓	✓	✓			
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓							
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>	5+							
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>	3	4		2				
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	✓				✓			
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>	✓				✓			
Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>	3							
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	1							
Hooded Merganser	<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>	3							
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>		3				3+		
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus colubris</i>					1	1		7+
Rufous Hummingbird	<i>Selasphorus rufus</i>								2
Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove - I	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>		✓		4				
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaidura macroura</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaidura asiatica</i>			1	✓	✓		1	✓
Sora	<i>Porzana carolina</i>	1							
Common Gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	✓		✓	✓				1
Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio martinica</i>		1	✓	✓		1	✓	
Grey-headed Swamphen - I	<i>Porphyrio poliocephalus</i>			1	✓				
American Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	4							
Sandhill Crane	<i>Antigone canadensis</i>		✓			2	3	✓	
Limpkin	<i>Aramus guarauna</i>		3	3+	h				
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	✓		✓	✓	1			2
Horned (Slavonian) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	1							
American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>					4			
American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	✓							
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓		✓		✓			
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>					✓			
Wilson's Plover	<i>Charadrius wilsonia</i>					2+			
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

E=Endemic, I=Introduced		February 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Piping Plover	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>					4+			
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓		✓					✓
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	2				✓			
Stilt Sandpiper	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>	✓							
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓				✓			✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓				✓			
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>	✓				✓		✓	
Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>					✓			
Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>	✓							
Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>					✓			
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>	✓	✓	6+	1				
Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>							1	
Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>	✓							
Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>	✓				✓		✓	
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>	✓				2			
Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>	✓				6		5	
Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>	✓		1					
Laughing Gull	<i>Leucophaeus atricilla</i>	✓							
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	✓							
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			2				1	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1							
American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>			4+					2
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	✓		1+	✓			1	1
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		2	
Cabot's Tern	<i>Thalasseus acutiflavus</i>			1					
Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Wood Stork	<i>Mycteria americana</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>			3		2			
Anhinga	<i>Anhinga anhinga</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
American White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Roseate Spoonbill	<i>Platalea ajaja</i>	✓		✓	2				
American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>			1			2		
Least Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus exilis</i>			1				1	
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				3	1			
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>			1		3			
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>	✓		✓	✓			2	1
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reddish Egret	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>	3				7			
Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

E=Endemic, I=Introduced		February 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>	✓						✓	
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-tailed Kite	<i>Elanus leucurus</i>							2	2
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>						1		1
Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>			1	1	1			2
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>	2	2		✓			✓	3
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	2	10	1	1		1	2+	
Snail Kite	<i>Rostrhamus sociabilis</i>		3						
Red-shouldered Hawk	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	2	✓	1				2	
Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>					2			
Great Horned Owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>			3					
Eastern Screech Owl	<i>Megascops asio</i>					1			
Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>			h			h	1 (2h)	
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Red-headed Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes erythrocephalus</i>		1+						1
Red-bellied Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes carolinus</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	h	✓
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus varius</i>		✓		1		1	1	✓
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>	1	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>			2	1	3+	✓		
Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara plancus</i>		5		10+		✓		
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Monk Parakeet - I	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>				4+				
Yellow-chevroned Parakeet - I	<i>Brotogeris Chiriri</i>								3
Nanday Parakeet - I	<i>Aratinga nenday</i>			2					
Mitred Parakeet - I	<i>Psittacara mitrata</i>								5+
Red-masked Parakeet - I	<i>Psittacara erythrogenys</i>								2
Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vermilion Flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus obscurus</i>								1
Western Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>								2
Tropical Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus melancholicus</i>				1			2	3
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher	<i>Tyrannus forficatus</i>							2	12
Great Crested Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus crinitus</i>						4+	1+	✓
Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blue-headed Vireo	<i>Vireo solitarius</i>				1	2+	✓	✓	✓
White-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo griseus</i>		1				✓	✓	✓
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Florida Scrub Jay - E	<i>Aphelocoma coerulescens</i>	✓							
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fish Crow	<i>Corvus ossifragus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>					h	✓		
Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



E=Endemic, I=Introduced		February 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>			✓	✓			✓	
Purple Martin	<i>Progne subis</i>			✓	✓			✓	3
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Corthylio calendula</i>		1				1		
Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>		1		1	1	✓		
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>							1	
Blue-grey Gnatcatcher	<i>Poliophtila caerulea</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brown-headed Nuthatch	<i>Sitta pusilla</i>		2						
Grey Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>								1
Common Myna - I	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>							✓	✓
Common Starling - I	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eastern Bluebird	<i>Sialia sialis</i>		6+						
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			
House Sparrow - I	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>		✓						
Swamp Sparrow	<i>Melospiza georgiana</i>		2						
Eastern Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella magna</i>		✓					✓	
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>		✓			2		✓	✓
Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Boat-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Louisiana Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia motacilla</i>				1				
Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>			2	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>			✓	✓				1
American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>			1	2			1	
Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>			1	1		1	1	4+
Palm Warbler	<i>Setophaga palmarum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pine Warbler	<i>Setophaga pinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellow-throated Warbler	<i>Setophaga dominica</i>				1	2	2+		1
Prairie Warbler	<i>Setophaga discolor</i>							1	3+
Black-throated Green Warbler	<i>Setophaga virens</i>						2	1	
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>	1		✓		✓	✓	1	✓
Lazuli Bunting	<i>Passerina amoena</i>					2			
Indigo Bunting	<i>Passerina cyanea</i>					✓			
Painted Bunting	<i>Passerina ciris</i>	5+		2	1	2	1		6+

## Other vertebrates

E=Endemic		February 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<b>Mammals</b>									
Nine-banded Armadillo	<i>Dasypus novemcinctus</i>	1							
West Indian Manatee	<i>Trichechus manatus</i>					4		6+	
Northern Raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>		1				2		
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>		1		2		2		
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	30+				1			
Marsh Rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus palustris</i>				1				
Eastern Cottontail Rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>		1						
Eastern Gray Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		1	2	✓	✓	✓		✓
Bryant's Fox Squirrel	<i>Sciurus niger</i>		1						
<b>Reptiles/Amphibians</b>									
American Alligator - E	<i>Alligator mississippiensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
American Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus acutus</i>							3	
Florida Red-bellied Turtle	<i>Pseudemys nelsoni</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Peninsula Cooter	<i>Pseudemys peninsularis</i>	1							
Florida Softshell Turtle - E	<i>Apalone ferox</i>			✓					
Southern Banded Watersnake	<i>Nerodia fasciata</i>			1					
Brown Watersnake	<i>Nerodia taxispilota</i>				1				
Green Iguana - I	<i>Iguana iguana</i>			✓	✓				2
Red-headed Agama - I	<i>Agama agama</i>								✓
Eastern Fence Lizard	<i>Sceloporus undulatus</i>				1				
Brown Basilisk - I	<i>Basiliscus vittatus</i>				1				
Green Basilisk - I	<i>Basiliscus plumifrons</i>				1				
Green Anole	<i>Anolis carolinensis</i>						✓		✓
Cuban Brown Anole - I	<i>Anolis sagrei</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gecko Sp.							✓	✓	✓

## Invertebrates

		February 2024							
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<b>Butterflies</b>									
Gulf Fritillary	<i>Agraulis vanillae</i>			✓		✓			
White Peacock	<i>Anartia jatrophae</i>			✓			✓	✓	
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>					✓		✓	✓
Julia Heliconian	<i>Dryas iulia</i>			✓					
Zebra Heliconian	<i>Heliconius charithonia</i>			✓					✓
Viceroy	<i>Limenitis archippus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Ruddy Daggerwing	<i>Marpesia petreus</i>			✓					
Clouded Sulphur	<i>Colias philodice</i>			✓	✓				
Orange Sulphur	<i>Colias eurytheme</i>		✓						
Orange Barred Sulphur	<i>Phoebis philea</i>				✓	✓			

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024							
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Cloudless Sulphur	<i>Phoebis sennae</i>		✓						
Eastern Tiger Swallowtail	<i>Papilio glaucus</i>			✓		✓			
Black Swallowtail	<i>Papilio polyxenes</i>		✓						
Atala	<i>Eumaeus atala</i>			✓		✓			
Long-tailed Skipper	<i>Urbanus proteus</i>			✓					
Silver Spotted Skipper	<i>Epargyreus clarus</i>				✓				
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓			✓			
Cabbage White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>				✓	✓		✓	✓
<b>Dragonflies</b>									
Common Spreadwing	<i>Lestes sponsa</i>			✓					
Roseate Skimmer	<i>Orthemis ferruginea</i>			✓					
Blue Corporal	<i>Ladona deplanata</i>						✓		
Halloween Pennant	<i>Celithemis eponina</i>						✓	✓	✓