

FLORIDA KEYS GETAWAY-OCTOBER 16-17

LEADER-PADDY CUNNINGHAM, BIRDING ADVENTURES

As the saying goes, you had to be there. I woke up on Monday to head to work and my mine floated back to the slowly lapping waves crashing across the rocky shore, the swaying rusty grass field with Key West on the horizon and a blinding blue sky with 400 Broad-winged Hawks spiraling upward in a single swirling kettle. Four hundred flew higher and higher, the Broad-winged Hawks would rise and then shoot out, spreading out against the cloudless expanse. Only to do it again right over our heads. Breathtaking. Awe inspiring. The weekend could of been rain drenching and windswept with Hurricane Paula only 100 miles away. But our potential nightmare turned into a birder's dream, a late season fall out with heavy winds keeping the raptors still on the peninsula.

Our trip started out at the Card Sound Bridge with a bright flash of a Golden Cuban Yellow Warbler lighting close by for all to see. We lucked onto a great warbler flock with Prairie, Prothonotary, Palm, and Common Yellowthroat. The Yellow-throated Warbler with its' black and white strips, accented with shocking yellow, gleaned along the Green Buttonwood for close views. The surprise was a suspected rare Mourning Warbler seen along the Mangrove canal with a distinct gray throat and yellow under tail. Magnificent Frigatebirds flew overhead sharp angled, and long tailed.

At the Key Largo State Botanical Site we spooked a Chuck's-wills Widow who darted down the tropical tree-lined shady trail. American Redstarts fanned their tails feeding on the ground and branches. A Mangrove Cuckoo was heard twice calling and made a shadowy brief appearance retreating to deep forest. Traveling south along US 1, we stopped to gawk at our first great kettle of 200 raptors including Northern Harrier, Broad-winged, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Peregrine Falcons, and Turkey Vultures.

One of primary destinations was Curry Hammock State Park and the Hawk Watch International site. Newcomer Nick Campbell remarked on how could researchers exclaimed, "That's a first year Peregrine Falcon" seen at least a mile away. Paddy provided expert information on how flight patterns such as falcons angle wings and rapid beats, distinguish them from the more boxy rectangle wings and flap, flap, glide of accipiter's. While birding from the second story platform shade, a juvenile Bald Eagle and a rare Swainson's Hawk flew over.

Along the highway south a great stop at a mangrove pond produced a dancing Reddish Egret and 6 other wading birds. It was also our best shorebird stop also with Short-billed Dowitcher, Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, Black-bellied Plover and Least Sandpiper. On Big Pine, Dorothy was great at spotting the tiny Key Deer and we saw 10, including a male with a full rack of antlers. On No Name Key, White-crowned Pigeons landed in a nearby snag and we also saw a Red-shouldered Hawk and Great-crested Flycatcher. A short hike in the refuge to the Blue Hole gave us great looks at a White-eyed Vireo which we had been hearing all day and Black-crowned Night Heron. All birders said "when", and we headed for a true Key West dining experience at the Half Shell for lots of seafood and the local scene. Dragging into the hotel Linda, Paton and I so tired we debated back and forth who would sleep on the pullout and laughed until we cried in seeing a spiral staircase to the second floor to the beds and bathrooms. A really great day, but the best was yet to come.

The morning arrived cool from the first front of the year, as we headed to Fort Zachary Taylor State Park. In the hammock a Hermit Thrush and Baltimore Oriole made a brief appearance. In the Australian Pines were lots of

warblers in small flocks-Magnolia, Palm, Pine, Prairie, Black and White. A Broad-wing Hawk had spent the night in a close tree and was still sleeping with closed eye lids. We hit the mother lode in the back shrubs with Chestnut sided warbler, Northern Parula, and the very rare Bay-breasted Warbler. Paton White's life Black-throated Green flew right over our heads landing very close with a little phish encouragement. Later another flock included a beautiful male Black-throated Blue Warbler and Ovenbird walking along a log. A beautiful mocha colored Indigo Bunting proudly sat on a small bare shrub while our spectacle of Broad-wing Hawks swirled over our heads.

The weekend had an impressive 19 species of warblers in all, a good count for this late in the season. But it was the raptors that we had come to see and see them we did with more than 2,000 of 13 different species. The group saw a total of 90 species, with most of the group seeing close to 80. I have been to Cape May and Kiptopeke in October for Hawk migration and I can tell you I have never seen the number of raptors or a kettle of 400 birds of one species so close. It was overwhelming as you watched in amazement of the grandeur of nature. We certainly cannot recreate a hurricane for next year, but if this year is any indication, there are always wonderful things to see in the Keys. Don't miss it next year.