

## **Florida for the birds**

By Paul Knowles

The truth is, you don't actually have to make a specific effort to watch birds in Florida. It's going to happen, whether you try or not.

That's because Florida – with its unending seacoast, the mysterious Everglades, central farming country, and various rivers, estuaries and inland lakes – offers ideal and greatly varied habitat for birds. Human snowbirds – we Canadians who migrate as faithfully as many of our feathered friends – will encounter a huge number of unfamiliar, exotic birds in this southern climate.

Most visitors have spotted the more obvious Florida birds – the bulky brown pelicans tumbling into the intracoastal waterway to catch fish, and the stately egrets and ibises of various hues and sizes.

But there is so much more to be found here, and there are excellent spots for birding all over the state. As well, there are a number of bird rescue centres that allow an upclose- and-personal experience with the inhabitants – some being prepared for release and many too seriously injured or imprinted on humans to ever be set free.

### **Bird rescue centres**

For visitors on a quick trip, rescue centres and sanctuaries may be the best opportunity to see an interesting variety of Florida fowl. One good site is the Mary Keller SeaBird Rehabilitation Sanctuary, part of the Marine Science Centre at Ponce Inlet, south of Daytona Beach.

At the other end of the state, the fascinating Florida Keys Wild Bird Rehab Center, in Tavernier is operated and funded by volunteers, led by the unstoppable Laura Quinn, who founded it in 1984. Quinn and her team are dedicated to saving endangered birds, nurturing wild ones, and educating anyone who will listen. Visitors will see permanent residents such as peregrine falcons, kestrels, many kinds of owls and hawks, egrets, herons, and, with a bit of luck and good timing, beautiful, wild Roseate Spoonbills, who show up for feedings.

During a recent visit, a yellow-crowned night heron – rescued by the centre but released years ago – had returned for a visit, and was spending his days perched on a post along the walkway.

This place – like the other rescue centres in the state – does important work. One recent year saw over 800 birds brought in for care and rehabilitation.

### **For birders**

Serious birders – or the inexperienced looking for a new, environmentally friendly experience – will probably want to go where the birds are. The good news is, wherever you are in Florida, you are near some fantastic birding opportunities.

The vast majority of Florida State Parks feature birding. In all, 128 parks – from Perdido Key at the western tip of the “panhandle” to Fort Clinch, the most northerly Florida park, to Fort Zachary Taylor on the Dry Tortugas off the Florida Keys – list the activity among their attractions (see [FloridaStateParks.org](http://FloridaStateParks.org)).

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission publishes guides, including the “South Florida Birding Trail.” The area included in this guide is south of an imaginary line drawn between Sarasota on the Gulf side, and just north of Jupiter on the Atlantic coast; it lists 116 locales for birding. There are three other guides, covering the Panhandle, East Florida and West Florida.

Birders can venture forth on foot – always taking care to realize this is the home of alligators, snakes and other denizens of the wild. Or they can take advantage of the many waterway tours.

For instance, there are tours by airboat at attractions such as Billie Swamp Safari, in the heart of the state between Fort Lauderdale and Naples, or on lakes around Orlando. On the Atlantic side, the Marine Discovery Centre at New Smyrna Beach offers discovery ecotours of Indian River Lagoon, with a variety of birds, including bald eagles, osprey, little blue and tri-coloured herons, white pelicans, and many more.

On the Gulf side, cruises out of Charlotte Harbour travel through well-preserved mangrove islands.

If you go birding on foot, you have a full menu of choices, from the casual to the highly adventurous. For example, the many species of birds inhabiting Ding

Darling National Wildlife Refuge, on Sanibel Island, can be enjoyed on foot, by bicycle or – and this is unusual – from your car, as you slowly wend your way through this excellent sanctuary that is as much water as it is land – a great habitat for an abundance of species.

## **Highlights**

There is so much opportunity for birding in Florida that a description of the possibilities can end up reading like a rather dry encyclopedia entry. But that is far from reality.

On numerous trips to the Sunshine State, we have experienced many moments of sheer delight because of birds – beautiful, unusual, unexpected.

As we waited for an airboat ride south of Kissimmee, we were treated to the presence of several wood storks – dramatic birds that seem to come from an earlier age, the time of pterodactyls, perhaps.

Driving through the interior, we stopped to “visit” with a pair of tall sandhill cranes.

Touring the impressive Kennedy Space Centre, on the northeast coast, we saw bald eagles in a nest that has been inhabited for decades, not from the space shuttle launch pads.

Hiking in the early morning through the Babcock/Webb Wildlife Management Area, near Punta Gorda, I was shown rare red-cockaded woodpeckers, and literally flocks of bluebirds.

Looking skyward on a catamaran out of Key West, we spotted those rare and amazing magnificent frigatebirds.

Pausing on the trail through the Ding Darling Refuge, I was entranced by the sight of Reddish Egrets, birds that constantly dance – there’s no other word for their movements.

As we were dining at Ponce Inlet, a yellow-crowned night heron took his regular fishing spot on a post not more than four feet from where we sat.

The birds mentioned are, of course, just a sampler. Depending on the location, you may see American oystercatchers, blue grosbeaks, scarlet tanagers, white pelicans, boat-tailed grackles, willets, dunlins, moorhens, scrub-jays, indigo buntings – and an unending variety of other fabulous feathered creatures.

*For more information about birding in Florida, see [visitflorida.com](http://visitflorida.com).*

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