



Mother Great White Egret with babies

FLORIDA BIRDS: *Seducing Photographers*

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Photographers who live in or visit Florida cannot escape being seduced by the diversity of birdlife there—400 species of birds are native to Florida. I became a Florida “snowbird” six years ago. It took only a short time to discover that birds were

the subject of choice in local camera clubs. Fine bird images provide tremendous impact; the birds are graceful, colorful and beautiful, and they are always fishing, eating, flying, mating, building nests, and nurturing their young. This makes them very interesting but challenging subjects. Another reason for their popularity may be the absence of other types of subjects in this green and flat tropical land with little weather or geographic diversity.

It has taken several years for me to more routinely make acceptable bird images. I am not a patient photographer, and, in the beginning, I accepted the challenge of bird photography only “kicking and screaming.” More often than not it takes an inordinate amount of time to get an acceptable image; I would rather be shooting *something* than waiting a long time for the desired shot. I also have an aversion to lugging around heavy equipment, and this is a significant part of bird photography. In spite of these tendencies, like most Florida photographers, I have been seduced.



Immature Black-crowned Night Heron with crab



Great Blue Heron

First, the bad news. The extraordinary bird photography is done by professionals and amateurs [1] who are well educated naturalists with knowledge of the birds, their habitats and their rituals, and who love just “being with them;” [2] who are local residents or who at least know Florida well enough to know very explicit locations to find very specific birds; [3] who have and who are able to carry very large lenses and tripods, especially for the small birds (many are shooting 600 to 1200mm) and, most importantly, [4] who are infinitely patient and extremely committed observers willing to wait perhaps more than two hours for the shot they seek (e.g. a heron catching his lunch).

Now, for the good news. Those of us who are neither naturalists nor residents, and who have neither the ultimate equipment nor the “patience of Job,” can have a little bit of luck and a great deal of fun seeking the best bird shots we can make—and some of these just may be wonderful. In the process, we can enjoy being in some of the most unique ecosystems in the world.

There are attractive wading birds, raptors, shore birds, and other tropical wildlife all over Florida. Here I focus on three prime locations in Southwest Florida: *Shark Valley*, a visiting area toward the center of the Everglades, *Audubon Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary* near Naples, and *Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge*



Tri-color Heron

on Sanibel Island. Each of these ecosystems is different from the other two, and all are thrilling to explore—especially the very first time. Most of the wading birds can be found at all of them, but some kinds of birds are more prevalent at one or another.

Shark Valley

Near the middle of Tamiami Trail (US Route 41) as it crosses Everglades National Park is a shallow, slow-moving body of water called the Shark River Slough, critical to helping preserve the Everglades. The visitor center includes a tram ride, an observation tower, nature and bike trails, and superb bird viewing. The birds, busy fishing along a narrow slough (that is also filled with alligators), ignore the many visitors.

Hérons, Egrets, and Bitterns, all members

Cormorant mates



of the Heron family, live here. Bitterns are very shy birds and more difficult to find. All varieties of Heron (Great Blues, Little Blues, Tri-Colors, Green Herons, Black-Crowned and

Yellow-Crowned Night Herons) can be seen at Shark Valley. Great Blue Herons are less afraid of humans and willing to come quite close.

Young birds often look quite different than adults of the same species. For example, young Little Blue Herons are white with blue streaks. The immature Black-Crowned Night Heron who, in the image, has just caught a crab for lunch, is brown and white speckled. His parents are black with white bellies.

Anhinga and Purple Gallinules feed at Shark Valley too. The black and white male Anhinga and the black female with a buff chest and neck lack oil glands for water proofing, so they

must hold their wings out to dry after swimming for fish. The colorful Purple Gallinules are vegetarians and often walk lightly over floating lily pads searching for their food.

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary

This beautiful place must not be missed. It is near Naples about 18 miles east of I75 on route 846 (Immokolee Road), and it is Audubon's premiere bird sanctuary. The swamp includes the largest towering stand of old-growth Bald Cypress trees in the nation, and a two mile boardwalk winds through diverse ecosystems providing an image of the Florida of long ago. This lush, humid swamp with ferns of varied shades of green provides endless reflections for striking images. The Wood Stork is the only stork in North America, and a large colony of them nests at Corkscrew; the brown and white speckled Limpkins nest here too. The storks, over three feet tall, feel around in the muck of the marsh for potential food. They seem homely at first, but, before you know it, you are fond of them.

There are usually large colonies of White Ibis with their curved orange beaks busy feeding in the swamp or the nearby marshes. With luck you may spot a Barred Owl, Red Shouldered Hawk, Pileated Woodpecker, or a Painted Bunting feeding near the comfortable and informative visitor's center. Watch for reptiles and amphibians too. The swamp is alive!

Ding Darling Natural Wildlife Refuge

Sanibel Island, off the mainland from Ft. Myers, Florida, looks and feels like a tropical paradise, and it is. Its beaches are wide and pristine, its flora colorful and lovely. Ding Darling Refuge provides a six mile, one-way drive that is heaven



Male Anhinga drying wings

for bird watchers. This ecosystem near the sea has large lakes and sloughs around which the Roseate Spoonbills, Brown and White Pelicans, Cormorants, Anhinga, Great White Egrets, Snowy Egrets, and an occasional Reddish Egret feed. Seeing a flotilla of White Pelicans will make your day. These birds feed in groups along the surface of the water. The Brown Pelicans behave very differently; they soar high, fly fast, and make spectacular dives into the water to catch fish. Reddish Egrets attract the fish beneath the shade of their large wings, and then they chase them frantically.

Spoonbills feed from the water's surface like the White Pelicans. They eat in colonies moving their wide flat bills back and forth as the group moves across shallow water. Because of their bright coloring, the Spoonbills seem to be everyone's favorite at Ding Darling. The visitor center here always has a superb collection of bird photography.

Many wading birds, especially White Ibis plus Snowy and Great White Egrets, are found along the estuaries near or on the Gulf Coast. The water background and the reflections water provides are wonderful for the shots in early morning and evening light. Sanderlings, Whimbrels, Royal Terns, Black Skimmers, Stilts and different species of gulls, provide fine photo opportunities on whatever beach you may find them. One of the most prevalent raptors along the Gulf Coast and in the Everglades is the Osprey. Mates build their nests high atop trees and poles and carry the fish they catch back to their nests in their talons. It is quite a site—and quite a shot, if you are quick enough.

Equipment

Long lenses help to create the most dramatic shots. To fill the frame with a bird carrying out the routines of daily life usually requires a 400mm lens or more. This is especially true at Ding Darling. At both Shark Valley and Corkscrew Swamp, 300mm, even less, may be sufficient. Bird photographers typically want to “tell a story” by shooting birds catching breakfast, mates passing sticks as gifts or building their nests, mothers feeding their young, the preening and primping during breeding season, males and females mating, or birds in flight. However, a beautiful bird, quietly posed in a lovely setting, is still irresistible. No other animal exudes such grace. Particularly with wonderful light such shots can have tremendous impact and artistic flare. Images of birds that show their wider habitat are also appealing.

You will want your tripod for many settings,

however, if you have image stabilization, hand holding your equipment may be easier for catching birds on the move. The need for long lenses and the often dark backgrounds require 200 or 400 ISO equivalent. For birds at rest 100 will often work fine. Pay attention to background and contrasts, and spot meter the white birds especially—adding a stop or two to your shot. It is bright in Florida and easy to over-expose images.

Sensitive Habitats to Preserve

I urge all those photographing the fauna and flora of tropical Florida to behave in ways that respect these unique, fragile habitats and these wonderful, rare animals. Both are seriously at risk. For 5000 years, a “river of grass” flowed a half mile a day from Lake Okeechobee toward the tip of Florida. This river, 100 miles long and 60 miles wide moved slowly through the Saw grass. Since the 1940s, that flow has been disrupted by canals, dykes, and agricultural development. Bird population has dropped more than 90% (it went from 1.5 million to 70,000 between 1935 and 1972 alone). The Everglades Restoration planned by the federal and state authorities will take 36 years and cost 14 billion dollars. I hope I have whetted your appetite for visiting and appreciating the treasure of southern Florida. This unique environment and these magnificent birds must be preserved for future generations to know and enjoy. Perhaps our photography can contribute to that preservation challenge. 🌿

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Wood Stork in muck