

Florida 30th January to 10th February 2020



Air Plants (*Tillandsia* spp) Everglades

Tania and I decided to visit Florida for a short break before we were married in February. With the onset of Covid-19 this was probably the right way to do it!. We booked a flight with BA from Gatwick to Tampa. We hired a car via BA and asked for a Ford Edge but got a Dodge which was adequate. We also asked for a Sat Nav which was essential however the screen cracked and wasn't covered by the car insurance, travel insurance or contents home insurance – it ended up costing us \$500US on top of the charge for hire – not cheap so beware. It would have been cheaper to buy a sat nav ... which we ended up doing anyway.

British Airways service was lacking in many ways so we would recommend avoiding them for flights. Our return flight was delayed by a day due to bad weather back in the UK.

The idea was to see Manatees in the West, Northern Right Whales in the East and a few wintering birds in the South.

Friday 31st January.

On the first night we stayed in a horrible hotel in Tampa by the airport which had cockroaches as roommates and very noisy drunk women as housemates. However, the surrounding area was good for a few garden birds before and after our self-service breakfast which was included in the cost but basic.

We travelled south to the Big Bend Power Plant where Manatees gather around the warm water outflows in winter. We got there before it opened as the gates only open from 10am but this gave us

time to check out a few birds around the entrance including one of only two Loggerhead Shrikes we saw as well as the obligatory Grey Catbirds that were at almost every stop during our trip to Florida.. The entrance to Big Bend is free, but the Manatees are somewhat distant. It does have a café where simple foods can be purchased. A few heron species were close including a rather obliging Dark Crowned Night Heron. We then travelled to the Retreat at Crystal Manatee (www.crystalmanatee.com). This is not a traditional hotel but lodges. Simple modern clean rooms with a fridge, sink and shower/toilet. A basic self-service breakfast was included and taken in an additional communal room. We left our bags and went for a short walk to the marina area before it got dark. A distant manatee was the best sighting.



Grey Catbird at the entrance to Big Bend Power Plant Manatee viewing area



West Indian Manatee at Big Bend – this was the closest an animal came



A Black crowned Night Heron that was very obliging under the boardwalk at Big Bend Power Plant

Saturday 1st February.

A much longer and extensive walk around the marina and King's Park area before breakfast gave a few birds including a very cooperative Red shouldered Hawk.

We then travelled to Crystal River State Park. Many Sandhill Cranes on route as well as Red shouldered Hawks and American Kestrels.

Crystal River gave some excellent close views of Manatees. This was certainly the best place for them that we visited. The animals are attracted in winter by the warm upwelling springs. A Nine banded Armadillo was very obliging along the river trail affording some photo opportunities. Also here we saw the only Cedar Waxwings we came across during the holiday. Walking along the Pine Island trail Scrub Jays were easy to find. A Nine banded Armadillo also appeared on the trail too. On return to the car both Horned and Barred Owls were heard but sadly not seen.



Crystal River Manatee. The water is very clear here and when the wind didn't ripple the water photography of animals under water was possible

We drove onto The Coral Sands Hotel at Ormond Beach just north of Daytona. This hotel was much more traditional and there were facilities to make breakfast in our room. The balcony enabled sea watching to be done from just outside the room.

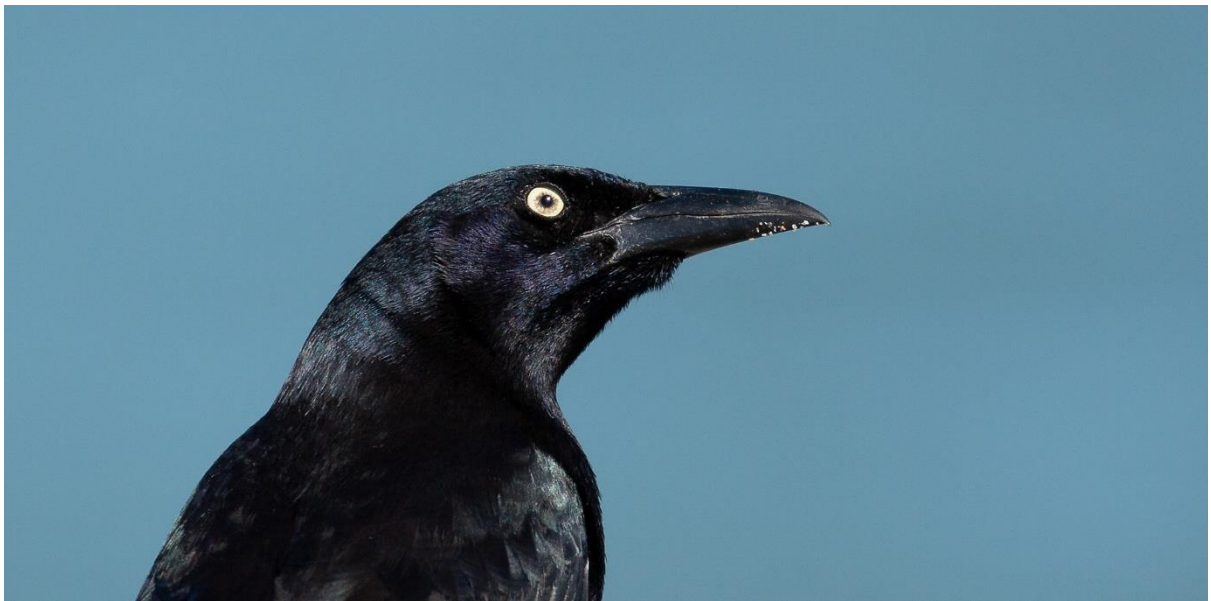
Sunday 2nd February.



Brown Pelican on Flagler Pier



Boat Tailed Grackle at Flagler Pier



Common Grackle at Flagler Pier

After a sea watch and a walk on the beach we drove North to Flagler Pier. The pier had a lot of fishermen and during a long sea watch we did see a distant blow although little else but we had good close views of Boat tailed and Common Grackles as well as Brown Pelicans.



Willett Flagler Pier



Fosters Tern Flagler Pier



Royal Tern Flagler Pier



Ring Billed Gull Flagler Pier

Monday 3rd February

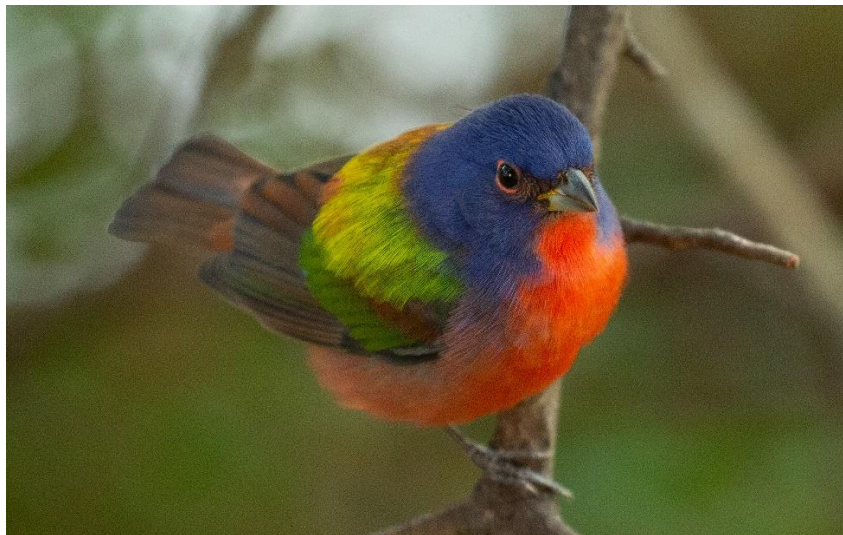
A watch from the balcony first thing. The best sighting was two Bottlenose Dolphins.

Driving West we called at Deep Creek Preserve and walked part way along the Yellow route. This was a good area for several Woodpeckers, Warblers and Vireos.

On the way back in Daytona we called at Bird Island and then turned South to Lighthouse Point Park where we ate in a restaurant with a resident Great Egret.

Tuesday 4th February

We drove South to Merritt Island and drove two trails: Biolab Road and Black Point as well as the trails around the visitors centre. The feeders there gave excellent views of painted Buntings and Red winged Blackbirds. Lots of obliging Ospreys, waders and egrets and ducks with occasional American Alligators. Very distant Bald Eagles were seen and Northern Harriers. A Redhead and Cinnamon Teal were unregular visitors to the area. As we exited several Scrub Jays were seen around the park gates.



Painted Bunting at the reserve centre on Merritt Island



Cinnamon Teal at Merritt Island

Wednesday 5th February

We left our accommodation on the coast and made our way south towards our accommodation in the outskirts of Miami, calling in at Corkscrew Swamp on the way. It's been 28 years since I last visited this reserve and although the visitor centre and car park had been extended and improved the boardwalk remained ostensibly the same and had been well maintained.

The entrance fee was quite large (\$14 each [valid for two days]) for such a small reserve. We managed to see a number of Woodpeckers and other birds and Anoles were common, but the best sighting was a couple of Raccoons and a Limpkin. Amazingly a Carolina Wren was the only one we saw.

In the car park on closure of the reserve we saw a Summer Tanager in trees above the car. We eventually found our accommodation which was much less than it was cracked up to be but it was amazingly clean and tidy. Breakfasts we took in a nearby Spanish Café which was remarkably good and evening meals taken in various restaurants. The plan was to travel down into the Everglades on a daily basis from our base here.



Pileated Woodpecker at Corkscrew

Thursday 6th February

After breakfast we drove into the East entrance of the Everglades and called at the Ernest Coe Visitors Centre. The latest news and maps were freely available here.

Our first call was at Royal Palm Hammock walking first the Anhinga trail. American Bittern here was a good find as was Purple Gallinule. A series of butterfly sighting were both here and the Gumbo Limbo trail. A nice sighting of Northern Parula and Great Crested Flycatcher were memorable.



American Bittern on Anhinga Trail



Loggerhead Shrike – Everglades



Yellow Throated Warbler – seen at the Visitors Centre veranda

A drive to Long Pine Key with a walk-through trail was not very productive but a sociable Palm Warbler amused us for a while.

We then called back at the Visitors Centre and sat on the open veranda for a while. Above us in the roof space was a Yellow throated Warbler. The only one we saw.

A visit to a small pond by the river crossing nearby on our way out of the park was productive with what turned out to be a dead Burmese Python and another Great Crested Flycatcher. A little further on we met a couple of birders who had just been robbed. While we were talking to them we watched a Loggerhead Shrike pinning prey on a barbed wire fence.

Friday 7th February

A drive around the Tamiami Trail took all day travelling East to West, stopping at each interesting place.

There were lots of Alligators and Turtles on the Loop Road. Some interesting sightings including three Snail Kites from the air boat ramp areas along the main road close to Shark Valley.

A Prairie Warbler was the only one we saw as was a Cape May Warbler.

As we popped back out onto the main road there was a visitor centre opposite with a boardwalk which proved productive. A couple of Savannah Sparrows were our only sighting. A couple of Killdeer and a Night Heron here were quite confiding.



American Alligator on the Loop Road



Savannah Sparrow at the end of our visit to the Loop Road

Saturday 8th February

We drove down to Flamingo at the far end of the Everglades Road and then made our way back calling off at various points. In Flamingo the Osprey nest on the Quay is probably unbeaten for viewing the species. The last time I visited Florida the now derelict hotel in Flamingo was a thriving



Osprey at Flamingo



Osprey returning with food for a young in the nest

centre. It has been in the current condition for some time; since Hurricane Andrew in 1992. This shows the lack of investment in the National Park. This is also reflected in the state of the boardwalks.

Eco pond our next stop was without doubt a shadow of its former self and very disappointing. Apart from a few White eyed Vireos the site held very little.

The Campground gave us opportunity to watch more Ospreys and a confiding Dark Crowned Night Heron. Tree Swallows were in good number here.

Mrazek Pond further back up the trail was full of Herons and Egrets including a White Phase Great Blue Heron.



White phase Great Blue Heron



Great Egret Snake Bite Trail



Rosette Spoonbill on Snake Bite Trail



Cottonmouth ... appropriately on Snakebite Trail

Snake Bite Trail, the next stop, was full of Egrets and White Ibis plus a few Rosette Spoonbills. From time to time small flocks of foraging warblers passed us by. The most amazing encounter however was with a Cottonmouth beside the path which almost bit another passer-by.

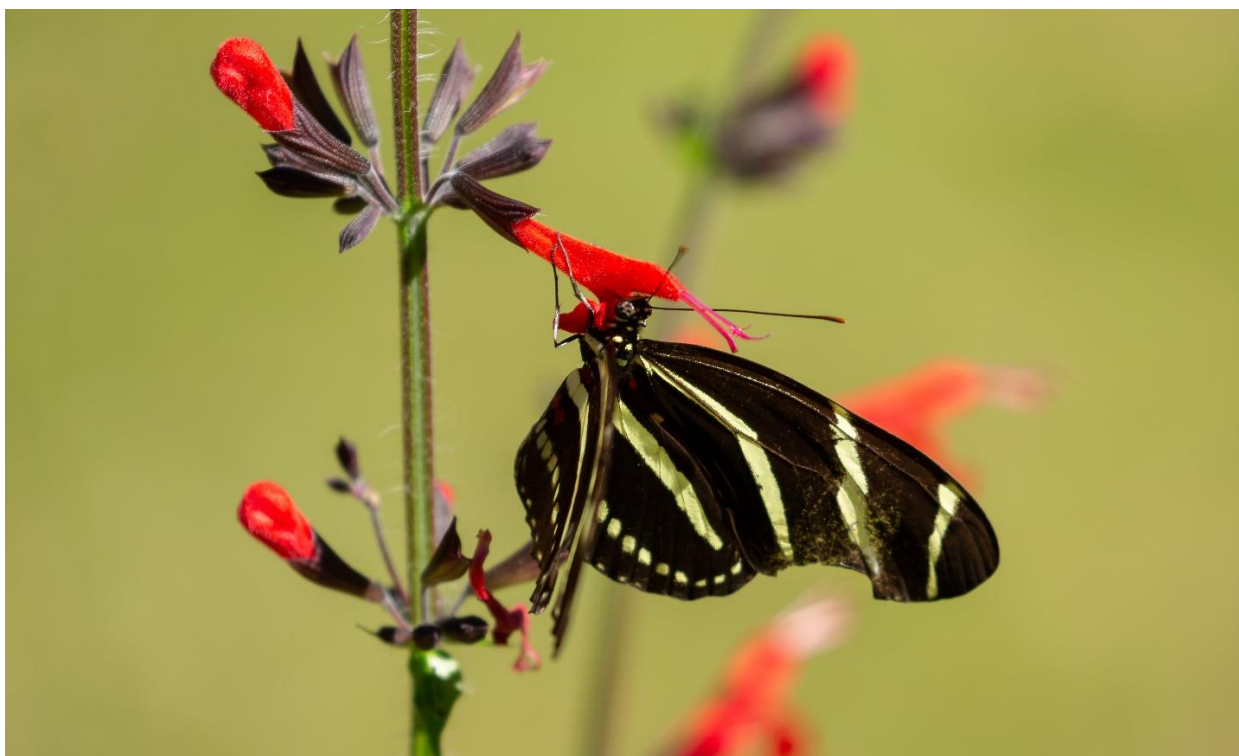
Mahogany Hammock a little further towards the entrance gave us little so we made our way home.

Sunday 9th February

An early start back to Tampa was punctuated with a stop at Boyd Hill Nature Reserve a few miles from the airport (entrance fee \$3). The drive up country was interesting with roadside sightings of Limpkin and Bald Eagle. At Boyd Hill a few woodland birds including a Downy Woodpecker and several butterfly species and 3 Lesser Goldfinch were the best of a relatively quiet area. On arrival at the airport our flight was delayed due to bad weather back in the UK.



Monarch Butterfly at Boyd Hill Nature Reserve



Zebra Longwing at Boyd Hill Nature Reserve

Monday 10th February

A day spent in the overnight hotel provided by BA and the airport. Little else was seen. The flight back to Gatwick was a fast one with a full-on following jet stream.

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