Virginia Key Birding: Reminiscence and Excitement

by Robin Diaz

Gary Milano of DERM envisioned a restoration project on Virginia Key seven years ago and started the wheels of funding and permitting. When a reasonable bid pulled everything together, he plunged ahead with the project, albeit quietly, in September 2007. He calls it a "true restoration" with the restored zones incorporated into a city master plan for Virginia Key. The lower-than-expected bid enabled Gary to expand the project from 50 acres to 65 acres, plus hardwood hammock reconstruction. The abandoned area was so dense with exotic invasive vegetation that the work crews never knew what to expect. They had to work through years of neglected and abandoned habitat with its accumulated trash. Several stands of 80-year-old Red Mangroves were a great surprise.

The project, Virginia Key Ecosystem Restoration Area, incorporates 3 large systems (wetlands, tropical hardwood hammock and dune/coastal strand), as well as several isolated freshwater ponds and hand-planted marsh areas. When a shallow saltwater channel is opened in the near future, the marshes will become brackish and the Spartina grass and Black Needle Rush will host wintering birds. The project is within the new Virginia Key Beach Park, open sunrise to sunset with no entrance fee. Turtle lights in the parking area are an important feature, since nesting Loggerhead Turtles use the nearby beach.

It's my good fortune to be a part of the monitoring team for this restoration project. I record bird and other wildlife sightings, as well as observe changes in the habitats. So far, the bird list is quite impressive with a few surprises. Some of the interesting birds seen during the past four weeks are: Least Bitterns, Roseate Spoonbills, 3 falcon species, Sora, Black-necked Stilts and nesting Common Ground-Doves. Egyptian Geese frequent the area and the Great Black-Hawk routinely makes its presence known. Other interesting critters are also present: Florida Red-bellied Cooters, Iguanas, Tarp in the large pond, a leucistic raccoon and an American Saltwater Crocodile.

South Florida birders fondly reminisce about the fabulous Virginia Key mud flats and sightings of a black-hawk, whose provenance remains a mystery. Virginia Key in the 1970's and 80's was the place to bird during migration. These birders will find the restored areas just as interesting – perhaps even more diverse – as the "good old days." Birders newer to the hobby will find the boardwalk and restored habitats exciting and refreshing spots to bird. The best aspect of this new birding hotspot is that you never know what will turn up!
The Bananaquit is a common and abundant bird throughout its range, which includes the West Indies (except Cuba), Central America and much of South America. I saw hundreds during my recent visit to Trinidad and Tobago. Though they breed in locations as close as the Bahamas, they are rarely found in Florida. The mid-February discovery of a Bananaquit in an upscale Ft. Lauderdale neighborhood was thus major news not only in south Florida but throughout the North American birding community. Found by an out-of-state birder, this colorful little bird delighted hundreds of local and visiting birders during its three-week stay. In mid-March, birders visiting the Dry Tortugas found and photographed another West Indian specialty, a Loggerhead Kingbird. This is only the second verified North American record for this species, the first being just last spring. This bird remained on Garden Key in the Tortugas through the end of the month.

South Florida has always been one of the better places in North America to see a variety of wintering warblers, with close to twenty species possible in and around Everglades National Park. A couple of warbler species were found during the local Christmas Bird Counts that, while unusual for Florida in winter, are now becoming regular for our CBCs. A Prothonotary Warbler was again found during the Coot Bay/Everglades National Park CBC. A Nashville Warbler was seen once again during the Kendall CBC, this time on the campus of the University of Miami. A Hooded Warbler was spotted along Hidden Lake Road during the Long Pine Key CBC, and remained for much of the season. Other not-to-be-expected CBC finds included Long-billed Curlew and Short-eared Owl, both seen during the Coot Bay CBC, and Horned Grebe on the Miami CBC. The Hialeah-area flock of Bronzed Cowbirds was found again this year during the Miami CBC. A Brown-crested Flycatcher was seen on Hidden Lake Road during the Long Pine Key CBC; a second bird was later discovered there, and both remained at that location for several months.

A surprising number of species from the western United States were found in Florida this winter. Many were seen during Tropical Audubon’s annual trip to North Florida in January, including a Say’s Phoebe near Lake Apopka and Broad-tailed, Anna’s and Rufous Hummingbirds, Western Tanager, Fox Sparrow and Bullock’s Oriole in the Panhandle. Several Horned Larks again wintered in Jackson County in the Panhandle, but could not be found by the TAS group.

Elsewhere, a Groove-billed Ani was found at Myakka River State Park in Sarasota County during January. In February, Lazuli Buntings were present in both Lee and Lake Counties. A Cassin’s Kingbird spent much of the winter near Stormwater Treatment Area 5 in Hendry County. The hundreds of birders who flocked to STA-5 in February were also treated to close-up looks of a Greater Flamingo. During March, a visiting birder reported a Golden-cheeked Warbler at Six-Mile Cypress Slough Preserve in Lee County, but the bird could not be relocated and was possibly misidentified. Closer to home, a possible Hammond’s Flycatcher was reported in December at Long Key Natural Area in Broward County, but that bird was also never confirmed. In Miami-Dade, a Yellow-headed Blackbird was found at Pump Marsh in December and a Western Tanager was at Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park during January. A Dickcissel, along with Shiny and Bronzed Cowbirds, were regularly visiting a Homestead feeder throughout the season.

Several rare-for-Florida gulls appeared in the state during the winter months, especially at landfills in the Daytona and Cocoa Beach areas. California, Glaucous, Iceland and Thayer’s Gulls were recorded from both locations during the season. In January, an Iceland Gull was seen north of Jacksonville. A Glaucous Gull was found in Key West during February. A Great Cormorant was discovered for the second consecutive winter at John U. Lloyd State Park in Broward County; another wintered at Ponce Inlet in Volusia County. Four Razorbill and Dovewas reported from Ponce Inlet during January; also seen there this winter were Purple Sandpiper and Brant. In early March, two Brant were spotted by visiting birders near the Card Sound Bridge in Key Largo; possibly the same two birds were later seen on Key Biscayne. Other unusual waterfowl found in the state this winter included Ross’s Goose in Jackson and Manatee Counties, a White-winged Scoter seen off Black Point in early March and a Snow Goose, first reported from Cutler Wetlands this fall, which reappeared at that location in mid-March.

Finally, all is apparently not yet lost for the family of Smooth-billed Anis that resides in the area south of Ft. Lauderdale International Airport. For the past couple of years, anis could be consistently found in weedy fields near a warehouse on Old Griffin Road. In January, one of those fields was bulldozed, and the anis seemed to disappear. In late March, they were rediscovered in an unplowed field at this same location, and are now being reported regularly again. How long they can hold on there is anyone’s guess. This species, while still common throughout its range in the Caribbean and Central and South America, has mysteriously disappeared from just about all of its former range in Florida, and sadly may be on the brink of extinction from the state.
Tropical Audubon Society
Member’s Questionnaire

In order to better serve the needs of our community, your TAS Board of Directors needs your help. Please take just a few minutes to complete this questionnaire about the goals, activities and program topics that you would like us to consider for next year. Please clip, fold and return it to us at TAS by the end of the summer. We thank Audubon of Martin County for this questionnaire.

Why did you join Audubon? (Check all that apply)
__ To get Audubon Magazine
__ To promote conservation
__ To attend field trips
__ To learn more about birds
__ To meet people with similar interests
Other ______________________________

What type of meeting topics do you find the most interesting?
__ Birding
__ Conservation issues
__ Habitat preservation or restoration
__ Natural history and wildlife
Other ______________________________

Please check the conservation issues that you believe should be priorities for us:
__ Protection of birds
__ Protection of Biscayne Bay
__ Protection of wetlands
__ Energy conservation
__ Land acquisition and habitat protection
__ Recycling/solid waste management
__ Protection of endangered species
__ Environmental education
Other ______________________________

Check if you have ever contacted a governmental official or agency about a conservation issue as a result of:
__ A monthly program meeting
__ An article in our newsletter
__ Public media
__ Another conservation group
__ Information from our website

I would attend the Birding 101 course if it focused on:
__ Birding by ear
__ Plumage variations
__ Backyard birds
__ One family group
__ Local birds by month
__ Habitat & its birds
__ Migration influences
__ Field work
__ Rarities
__ Right place wrong bird

If it were held on: Weekday _____ Days _____ Nights
Weekend _____ Days

What field trip or workshop would you attend if it focused on:
__ Wildlife photography
__ Creating backyard wildlife habitats
__ Citizen’s role in local decision-making
__ Identifying plants and animals
__ Habitat restoration work
Other: ______________________________

What types of field trips are you most interested in attending?
__ Weekend trips
__ Weekday trips
__ Canoe/kayak trips
__ Boat trips
__ Birding
__ Hiking
__ Plant ID
__ Local trips
__ Distant locations
Other: ______________________________

In which of the following would you be interested in participating?
__ Assisting at the Tropical Audubon Office
__ Assisting with fund-raising
__ Assisting with grant writing/administration
__ Assisting at community events & outreach
__ Assisting with program meetings
__ Assisting the conservation committee
__ Assisting the education committee
__ Assisting with public relations
__ Assisting the treasurer
__ Assisting with field trips
__ Assisting with hospitality
__ Bird-a-thon
__ Christmas Bird Count
__ Conducting or organizing bird surveys
__ Contacting elected officials
__ Helping with a “telephone tree”
__ Management of TAS library & properties
__ Organizing letter-writing campaigns
__ Representing Tropical Audubon at community mtgs
__ Serving on the Board of Directors
__ Writing an article for the newsletter
__ Becoming a docent to give tours at DTH
Other: ______________________________

Name: ______________________________
Phone: ______________________________
Yes  I would like to get field trip reminders, volunteer advisories and updates electronically.
Email: __________________________________________________________________

Yes  I would prefer to get my newsletter off the website. (Don't send me a newsletter)
Name: ________________________ City ______________ ST _______ Zip __________
Email: __________________________________________________________________

Yes  No  Tropical Audubon should develop and publish a Handbook for members?

Yes  No  I think that the chapter newsletter, the TAS Bulletin, is an effective communication tool for the membership. Please list any suggestions for improvement of the TAS Bulletin.

______________________________________________________________

Please list your suggestions for future program meetings, topics, field trip destinations or any other suggestions.

______________________________________________________________

FOLD

Tropical Audubon Society
5530 Sunset Drive
Miami, FL 33143

www.tropicalaudubon.org
Jim Kern, a former board member of Tropical Audubon and the founder of the Florida Trail, and his brother Rich, a former film lecturer for the National Audubon Society, are assembling partners to buy 490 acres of virgin cloud forest in the Savegre Valley of Costa Rica.

On Wednesday, April 9 Rich Kern presented his film Empires of the Sun at the Tropical Audubon meeting. Rich explained that while making the film he and his wife Judy learned about a population of quetzals in the high mountains along the path of the Savegre Valley, about 50 miles SE of San Jose. On a later trip Jim Kern learned about the available tract. The property adjoins the new Los Quetzales National Park and is also close to two popular eco lodges that cater to bird watchers: The Savegre Mountain Hotel and the Trogon Lodge.

Jim Kern first tried the concept of preserving wilderness land through private ownership in the early 70's when he, his brother Rich and a dozen of their friends bought 300 acres along Florida's Fisheating Creek. The owners bound themselves to a set of rules that would keep the land undeveloped for future generations. Today the property is still pristine and enjoyed by its owners.

For more information, contact…

jakern@aug.com

You’re Invited to a Movie Extravaganza!
Wind Across The Everglades

The Institute for Regional Conservation (IRC) and Tropical Audubon Society (TAS) join forces to bring you Wind Across the Everglades. This 1958 classic movie, never released on DVD or video in the U.S., stars Burl Ives, Christopher Plummer and Gypsy Rose Lee. Get a glimpse of Miami in its pioneer days as you’re transported to a conservation battlefield where the Audubon Society takes on the Cottonmouth Gang to protect wading birds from plume hunters. The battle gets nasty as elements of the Everglades become weapons… beware death by manchineel!

When: Thursday, May 8; 7:00pm
Where: Doc Thomas House
5530 Sunset Drive
Tickets: $20 at the door

What Our Friends Are Doing

Florida Native Plant Society

The Dade Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society meets at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, 10901 Old Cutler Road (South entrance) at 7:30. Meetings are free and open to the public and include refreshments starting at 7:15, plant raffle and discussion of the raffle plants (lots of neat, hard-to-get stuff!). For more information see http://dade.fnpschapters.org or call 305-255-6404.

May 27 program: "Man-o-War, Manatee & Mormon Key: Places Names in South Florida's National Parks" by Larry Perez of the National Park Service. June 24 program: "South Florida Native Plant Horticulture" by Jeff Wasielewski, Horticultural Consultant and Arborist.
On Sunday, April 27, Tropical hosted a large and enthusiastic group of members and friends for our annual membership meeting, now called the Wingding! This year, we welcomed Paul Souza of the US Fish and Wildlife Service who spoke on restoring our Everglades, our common history and our vision for the future. Mr. Souza spoke eloquently about the role that groups like TAS play, and we were delighted to have him come share this special day with us.

After the keynote address, TAS was proud to honor Richard Grosso, general counsel of the Everglades Law Center, as recipient of the TAS Polly Redford Citizen Service Award; Emilie Young, retired director of the Miami-Dade County's Environmentally Endangered Lands Program, as recipient of the TAS Dan Beard Government Service Award; and Brother Milledge, new TAS Board Member and extraordinary volunteer, as recipient of the TAS Board Appreciation Award. The awardees collectively have invested decades of work toward protecting the environment in South Florida.

The event concluded with recognition of our Birdathon teams and a fabulous silent auction. Many TAS members and supporters helped to bring the event together and we are grateful to them all. Thanks to one and all for making this event a great success! We hope you make plans to join us next year...

TAS Workdays
at the Doc Thomas House

Want to learn about native plants, help Tropical maintain our native landscape at the Doc Thomas House and get your hands dirty? We need you!

When:
Thursday Evenings; and
Saturday’s during the Summer on
May 17th, June 21st, July 19th & Aug 16th

More Specifically:
Thursdays from 4:30-8pm and
Saturdays 8:00-12:30pm

What: Pineland Planting and Restoration

This is a great opportunity for students to earn community service hours and for families and friends to work for a GREEN cause together.

Water and tools提供的, please bring clothes that can get dirty, closed-toe shoes, sunscreen, hat and gloves.

For more information:
E-mail volunteer@tropicalaudubon.org
Check our website: www.tropicalaudubon.org
or call 305-667-7337.