



The snowbirds are coming!

Winter is a great time of year for birding and wildlife viewing in Florida. Resident bird species are joined by snowbirds seeking refuge from the harsh Northern climate, which significantly reduces their food supplies. Florida's winter is not as harsh, and food supplies are therefore more plentiful. Great!

Florida's largest birding and wildlife festival takes place every January in Titusville. This will be the Space Coast's 15th annual festival and visitors from all over the world will flock to Brevard County to participate. The Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail will be represented there, so stop by our booth and say hello! We will have trail guides and merchandise for you.

Andy Wraithmell became our new Information specialist in November and will be promoting our wildlife viewing programs, managing newsletter publication and subscriptions, the Wings Over Florida program, our loaner optics program and editing our FWC wildlife viewing and GFBWT website pages.

This edition of the newsletter features birding trail hotspots for the winter season, a species spotlight on the Crested Caracara, a new feature called "On the trail," trail news and event information. We will be producing quarterly newsletters from now on. The winter and summer editions will be electronic only and our spring and fall issues will be both electronic and printed.

We hope that you have a great winter season enjoying the many wonderful wildlife viewing opportunities Florida has to offer.

Happy viewing!

–Great Florida Birding & Wildlife Trail and Wildlife Viewing staff

Species spotlight: Crested Caracara

By Andy Wraithmell

As the sun rises over the prairie, Turkey Vultures begin to soar over their roost, awoken by the stench of rotting flesh drifting by on the morning breeze. They quickly find the source of the stench – a dead hog – and plummet to the ground to enjoy what will be a communal breakfast. Black Vultures spot their close relatives' descent and fly over to join them in a dawn feast. The breakfast gathering is anything but amicable; the vultures squabble and bicker, disturbing the morning peace! The noise carries to a nearby hammock and attracts the attention of a dozing Crested Caracara perched in a cabbage palm. He stretches his wings and takes to the air, covering the ground between his roost and the breakfast melee in no time at all. Once on the ground, the caracara walks boldly among the vultures, scattering them in all directions. The male caracara tears off a large chunk of flesh from the carcass and begins to dine. The vultures mistakenly creep back toward the dead hog, but the caracara is not interested in sharing and a fight breaks out.



© Danny Bates

Crested Caracara in flight

The male caracara wins and the disgruntled vultures are forced to stand back and wait their turn. Eventually, his appetite satisfied, the caracara takes to the air and lands upon his favorite perch, an old fencepost alongside a dusty road in Osceola County.

Identification & behavior

The Crested Caracara is not a difficult bird to identify if you get a good look at one. The dark cap and body contrast with a pale face and neck, giving it a distinctive bi-colored appearance when perched – even at a distance. Its large hooked bill is two-thirds orange and one-third gray for mature birds, while juveniles have a mostly gray bill for much of their first year. In flight, caracaras exhibit five distinct pale areas of plumage: a patch on each outer wing, one on its head and one on both sides of its tail. The birds hold their wings flat when gliding, and their wing beats are shallow and stiff. Caracaras are aggressive; they have to be. Unlike the Turkey Vulture, they do not possess the ability to smell carrion – their preferred source of food – so they often arrive late at a feed. Aggressive behavior is therefore necessary to ensure they get an ample share of the available food before it disappears into the bellies of other species. Most of their day is spent perched in trees or on man-made structures, such as fence posts and telephone poles. If the need or opportunity arises they will often hunt for live prey: mostly easy to catch insects such as crickets and beetles, or reptiles, such as snakes and lizards.

Breeding & distribution

In Florida, their loosely constructed nest is almost always built in the tops of cabbage palms, and the female typically lays one to four eggs. Incubation lasts for four weeks, and the young caracaras fledge four to eight weeks later. The Florida population is estimated to be as few as 400 birds. At one time, caracaras were common in the prairies of central Florida, but their numbers declined as favored habitat was converted to housing developments, citrus groves and improved pastures. Today, both the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service list the caracara as Threatened. They are most abundant in a six-county area north and west of Lake Okeechobee (DeSoto, Glades, Hendry, Highlands,

Okeechobee and Osceola counties). Their stronghold is privately held ranch land, and biologists are working with landowners to better understand the needs of this enigmatic raptor.

Where do I find them?

Crested Caracaras can be found at several birding trail sites. Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area, Dinner Island Ranch Wildlife Management Area, Forever Florida, Joe Overstreet Landing, Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, Prairie Bird Loops, Ritch Grissom Memorial Wetlands at Viera (Viera Wetlands) and Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area are all reliable sites to see the Crested Caracara. Scan open fields, look for feeding vultures and scope cabbage palms and fence lines for best results.



© Karla Brandt

Crested Caracara are found year-round in Osceola County

Birding Trail Site Highlights: Snowbird influx

Winter is here and the snowbirds have arrived. Large numbers of birds from the North, particularly ducks and songbirds, will now reside in Florida until March and April, when the urge to migrate takes them back North. Lakes, marshes, coastal bays and rivers will play host to over 20 species of duck, while our hammocks, forests, prairies, scrub and backyards will host phoebes, kinglets, warblers, catbirds, sparrows and finches. There are plenty of trail sites that offer excellent winter birding and we have chosen four of them to provide you with ideas on where to go over the next three months.

Panhandle (#57): Three Rivers State Park

Pine and hardwood uplands with big, old live oaks and loblolly pines characterize this park on the south shore of Lake Seminole. This lake is actually a reservoir created at the confluence of the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers, where they form the Apalachicola. The opposite shoreline lies in Georgia. The lake itself plays host to the largest wintering population of Canvasback (up to 500 most years) in the state. In winter, it is not unusual to see over 15 species of duck from the park's shoreline, as well as Common Loon and Horned Grebe. The picnic area often

© David Moynahan



Fox Squirrels are regularly spotted at Three Rivers State Park

has wintering Brown Creeper and Golden-crowned Kinglet, and the steep slopes and gullies along Lakeside Trail and Half Dry Creek Trail are good for Winter Wren. Occasionally, both Red-breasted Nuthatch and Pine Siskin can also be found. The park is also a great place to see Fox Squirrels and White-tailed Deer, so keep an eye out for them alongside the roads.

www.floridastateparks.org/threerivers/

Phone: (850) 402-9006

Open: 8 a.m. to sunset
(full facility campground)

Admission: \$3

Nearby trail sites: Torreya State Park (#56) & Sneads Park (#58)

East (#102): Joe Overstreet Landing

As you drive down Joe Overstreet Road, look in the pastures for Whooping Cranes, Sandhill Cranes and Wild Turkeys. The latter can often be seen in good sized flocks of over 20 birds during mid-morning hours, particularly after a recent rain. Eastern Meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrows, Loggerhead Shrikes and Eastern Phoebes vie for attention as they perch on roadside fence posts. Crested Caracaras are seen frequently from the road. Check areas with cabbage palms and cattle. At the end of the road there is a small park-campground that affords views of the eastern side of Lake Kissimmee. This area is good for Limpkins, Bald Eagles and Snail Kites. In winter there is often a small flock of Black Skimmers, and ducks, such as Blue-winged Teal, are typically present.

Nearby trail sites: Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area (#103)

West (#22): Big Bend Wildlife Management Area: Hickory Mound Impoundment

The long entrance road passes through private land on an unimproved road until you reach the management area, so take your time; the wait is well worth it, once you reach this truly wild area. Good dike roads surround the impoundment and offer fine vantages of the brackish marsh, scattered islands of palms and oaks and the many wintering ducks and shorebirds. At high

© Meaghan Manning



Black-bellied Whistling Ducks are regularly encountered at Dinner Island Ranch WMA.

tide, ducks such as the Redhead and Lesser Scaup fly in from the Gulf and marshes to bathe and preen in the impoundment water. Mixed shorebird flocks roost and feed in suitable areas. The southernmost edge of the dike overlooks neighboring saltmarsh, affording opportunities to view Seaside Sparrows and Clapper Rails; the northernmost edge tunnels through thick, gorgeous coastal hardwood swamp, where songbirds, such as Blue-headed Vireo, abound. Hunting at Hickory Mounds is typically low key. Check the site website for information on hunting seasons. www.MyFWC.com/viewing/recreation/wmas/lead/big-bend

Phone: (850) 838-9016

Open: dawn to dusk

Nearby Trail Sites: Aucilla WMA: Aucilla Sinks Trail (#21)

South (#46): Dinner Island Ranch Wildlife Management Area

This excellent and often overlooked site has a little bit of everything: hardwood hammock, freshwater swamp, prairie, and pine flatwoods. Drive or bike Hilliard Grade and walk the reclaimed cattle penning lanes watching for Burrowing Owls, Sandhill Cranes, Wild Turkey and Crested Caracara. Look for Roseate Spoonbill, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks & Purple Gallinules in wet

areas. Oak hammocks at the end of trails offer refuge for wintering songbirds, and sparrows; meadowlarks and shrikes perch in the roadside brush. Seasonal hunting does take place here. Check the site website for seasons before planning your trip.

www.myfwc.com/viewing/recreation/wmas/lead/dinner-island/

Phone: (863) 228-7238

Open: dawn to dusk

Nearby trail sites: Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest & WMA (#45)



© Meaghan Manning

The Yellow-rumped Warbler is a winter resident

On the Trail

By John Thomson

“Is that another Fox Squirrel?” Cheryl asked as soon as we had pulled off Canoe Creek Road. Brent and I each peered to the right.

“Sure is,” Brent replied, spotting the rodent in question.

“Wow, I can’t get over these guys,” I mused out loud. “I know they’re squirrels, but because of their size they remind me of cats!” Only in close, comfortable company do I let such deep insight leave my mouth.

We had spent the morning exploring Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area, successfully locating Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers. With at least 65 species on the day’s list, and the clock approaching 1:30, we were about ready for some lunch in nearby St. Cloud. However, no birding trip to the Three Lakes area is complete without a drive down to Joe Overstreet Landing on Lake Kissimmee. So we denied our stomachs for another hour to see if we could find anything interesting or new for the day. I had driven Joe Overstreet Road several times during the past six years, but Brent had only been once and Cheryl hadn’t even heard of it. Naturally, I sprang into “tour guide” mode.

“I usually get Common Ground-doves somewhere along here,” I informed them, “and there have been reports on the Birdbrains listserv about Burrowing Owls.” Unfortunately neither species made an appearance.



John Thomson began birding around the Chicago area in high school. He now lives with his wife in Orlando, where they sometimes partake in birding (his thing) and geocaching (her thing). He has a particular fondness for the crow family, his favorite being the Green Jay.

I pulled over to scan a field of cattle that a few years earlier had hosted a large flock of American Pipits, but the bovines grazed unaccompanied. The Crested Caracara that had so handsomely perched on the fence right next to the road on a previous visit failed to show. Thankfully, there were several other feathered creatures to keep us entertained. We saw a few Mottled Ducks and Eastern Meadowlarks, as well as waders around the ponds and in the pastures near the boat launch: Wood Storks, Cattle Egrets, White and Glossy Ibises were plentiful. We added Killdeer for the day, and also a male Northern Harrier.

When we reached Lake Kissimmee, birds I had seen there in the past were absent this time; wintering ducks, Snail Kite, Purple Gallinule, Limpkin, Whooping Crane, Forster’s Tern, Black Skimmer are often present.

We scanned the area for several minutes, noting a Loggerhead Shrike, but our growling stomachs sent us back to the car. When we cleared the trees and entered the more open pastureland, I spotted a bird flying low. Even 100-or-so yards away, the white wing patches and distinctive shape of the Crested Caracara were obvious. Delighted, Brent and Cheryl brought up their binoculars. The bird careened until it gracefully landed in one of the dead oaks. I stopped the car, and we all got great looks. Satisfied that a drive down Joe Overstreet Road is never a waste of time, we headed to St. Cloud for lunch and an afternoon of more exploring.

Florida winter festivals & events

January 14, 2012

Manatee Awareness Month
Manatee Springs State Park
Phone: (352) 493-6072

January 12 – 16, 2012

Everglades Birding Festival
Hollywood
Phone: (954) 805-6810

January 25 – 30, 2012

Space Coast Birding and
Wildlife Festival
Titusville
Phone: (800) 460-2664

February 17 – 20, 2012

Great Backyard Bird Count
www.birdsource.org/gbbc/

February 25, 2012

Southwest Florida Burrowing
Owl Festival
Cape Coral

March 17, 2012

Wild Azalea Festival
White Springs
Phone: (386) 397-4462

Trail News

The FWC's Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail is pleased to announce a new Rural County Initiative. In an effort to assist Florida's rural counties and Rural Areas of Critical Economic Concern (RACEC) with their nature-based tourism programs, nominations are being accepted until February 10, 2012 to add new sites to the Birding and Wildlife Trail network. Florida has 32 rural and RACEC counties across the state. A nomination form is available on the GFBWT website. Visitors from around the world come to Florida to see our unique wildlife and exceptional scenic places! Nominate one of your county's outstanding wild places today!

For more information contact:

Mark Kiser
Birding and Wildlife Trail
Coordinator
(850) 488-9478

We are Blogging!

Check out our new wildlife viewing blog called "On the Trail". The aim of our blog is to share the many different aspects of wildlife viewing, whether that is watching birds, photographing butterflies, snorkeling with gar in our beautiful freshwater springs or watching dolphins play in the surf. This blog will have all that and more. Staff and volunteer contributors from all over the state will be sharing adventures, information and photographs with you. We hope that this will help encourage and enhance your own wildlife adventures. Visit our new blog at www.onthetrailmyfwc.blogspot.com

Contact Us:

Anne Glick, section leader
anne.glick@MyFWC.com
850-922-0664

Mark Kiser, coordinator
mark.kiser@MyFWC.com
850-488-9478

Andy Wraithmell, information specialist
andy.wraithmell@MyFWC.com
850-488-9453

Chantal-Marie Wright,
information specialist
chantal.wright@MyFWC.com
850-488-8755

CAN YOU IDENTIFY THESE DUCKS?

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Make your check payable to Wildlife Foundation of Florida and please include "GFBWT" on the memo line. We recommend you purchase merchandise before December 14th in order to receive your gift in time for the holidays.

Thank you!

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