

Florida 2017

2/4/17

The 2017 trip to Florida began bright and early (3:45AM) on 1/29/17. It was 28 degrees when we left and there was little temperature change through Chicago where we had a slight dusting of snow along the way. We were spared the boredom on the northern Illinois landscape by darkness and not long after dawn we stopped in Mount Vernon to break the fast. Shortly after that the views improved as we drove through the rest of Illinois and the long stretch of Highway 24 east. As usual we spent the first night in Dalton, Georgia.

The destination for the next day was the Kaczmareks'. The usual main event of day two of the trip is the race between the car's speedometer and the temperature gauge. "Tachiture" is the point at which the temperature gauge equals the speedometer at the designated speed limit. Unfortunately we were not to reach tachiture on this day. As we approached Florida and its welcoming center I tried not to notice any birds; hoping not to record the likes of an English sparrow as my first trip mark for the year. While driving into the welcome center I kept my eyes toward the small pond near the entrance where I had seen more typical Florida birds in the past. Unfortunately I did see a possible blackbird fly into a tree but intentionally didn't identify it. Then I saw a snowy egret in the pond. The blackbird was then id'd as a common grackle. Success?

I was amazed at the changes along Highway 52 heading to New Port Richey from the interstate. I usually see many of the long-legged wading birds before I get to Kaczmareks but, because of large construction zones, few birds were noted. As usual I did mark a few birds en route but far fewer than normal.

I visited Green Key on the morning of 1/31/17. It was low tide and shallow water extended for quite a distance. Although there were shorebirds at a distance, no positive id's were made (possible lesser yellowlegs at a distance). I saw a few species through an opening along Green Key Rd. This included what I thought was a sandwich tern. Later I examined photos that I had taken to confirm the id. That location also provided good looks at hooded mergansers, roseate spoonbills and a yellow-crowned night heron among other species. A walk through the Boy Scout Park added little to the morning but an unidentified hawk was seen as I left the area.

After a couple of days at the Kaczmareks' we arrived at the condo early in the afternoon of 2/1/17. In keeping with what has now become a tradition, I visited the Big Cypress Bend (Fakahatchee) boardwalk on the morning of 2/2/17. It was a reasonably good opening morning with 25 species being recorded for the date. *Bidens alba* and dogwood (probably *Cornus foemina*) were the only plants seen in bloom. The awakening sunlight brilliantly lighted the red fruit of what I identified as the dahoon (*Ilex cassine*) but my photos did not show the bristle tips of the leaves as described in Nelson (1996). While there I met a free-lance photographer from Tennessee and we compared notes for a while.

Later in the day, Ann and I went into Naples and I was able to add several trip marks which, along with those seen at the condo itself brought the trip list to 53 after only one day of our stay.



On the morning of 2/3/17 I visited TenK and met the same guy from Tennessee (possibly because I had suggested the marsh trail to him). I also met another birder by the name of Tom Allen. As he and I talked it became apparent that we had met before. It turned out that I had met him several times last year when he was checking a python trap along Shell Island Rd. Twenty-seven bird species were recorded for the morning and I also saw several of the common butterflies including the common buckeye, gulf fritillary and white peacock. Several alligators



were also seen along the marsh trail; one with its mouth wide open, possibly ventilating.

Ann and I went to Tigertail beach in the afternoon and crossed the lagoon. It was the worst birding at Tigertail that I can recall. There were few birds of any kind on the near side of the lagoon and the only shorebird that I saw for the afternoon was a ruddy turnstone. I did see a reddish egret, though, and got some good close up photos of a royal tern. No burrowing owls were seen at any of the sites we passed on Marco Island this day.

I didn't do any serious shelling while we were at the beach but I did pick up quite a few scallops. I know that several different scallop species are found in the area and I wanted to see if I could id some of them. Today I used Witherington & Witherington (2009) and Rehder (1995) to identify three possible species among those collected [rough scallop (*Lindapectin muscosus*), Atlantic bay scallop (*Argopectin irradians*) and Atlantic calico scallop (*Argopectin gibbus*)] but these id's are tentative at best at this time.

A few birds have been active around the condo. On 2/3/17 I got some very close photos of a red-shouldered hawk sitting in one of the oaks. It was back again this morning, picking up something from the lawn outside the lanai. The oaks outside the lanai have also produced a blue-grey gnatcatcher and some warblers, possibly including a yellow-throated warbler. That id was confirmed today when the bird (or another of the species) returned.



This morning (2/4/17) I went to Eagle Lakes Park. The water level was pretty low. I got a count of 35 bird species for the morning but missed many common species; will I ever get a count of 50 at this site?

Grey squirrels, raccoons and white-tailed deer (almost hit me) are among the mammals seen so far on this year's trip.

2/9/17

Shelly & Dan joined us late into the night of 2/4/17. The next morning I added two trip marks at the list (yellow-bellied sapsucker & tufted titmouse). The titmouse was also an addition to the condo bird list. Usually, when there is company, B&B has to be put on hold. Shelly and Dan, though, were interested in seeing some of the

natural areas so the birding and botany continued during their stay.

We took them to Shark Valley on 2/6/17. There we recorded 20 species of birds including most of the long-legged wading birds. The limpkin and snail kite were added to the trip list. We took the tram for the 15 mile tour and the guide called out an American bittern but I never saw it. He also reported a great white heron but I didn't see that either. We walked along the road for a while and I was disappointed not to see any of the purple gallinules I've seen there in the past. It was one of the better trips to Shark Valley, though. We saw a lot of alligators including several females with young.

On 2/7/17 we went to the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Water levels were much lower than last year. We pretty much saw all of the long-legged waders that we expected but saw very few of the song birds. We did see both of the night herons, though, and added several trip marks including the sand hill crane, pine warbler and painted bunting (two males and a female). I also saw a couple of the striped mud turtles (probably *Kinosternon baurii*)



that was identified by Jan Tomlinson last year along the west main gate of the Fakahatchee strand). Alden et al (1998) includes the common mud turtle (*K. subrubrum*) but that species apparently lacks the stripes seen on the back of those turtles that we saw. A total of 21 species of birds were seen. This was one of the first time that I confidently identified the pond apple (*Annona glabra*). There were many of them growing in the cypress swamp. Two of the *Sagittaria* species were in bloom [lance-leaved (*S. lancifolia*) and grass-leaved (*S. graminea*)] as well as the pickerel weed (*Pontederia cordata*).

We drove to Marco's South Beach for some sun bathing on 3/8/17. Only 6 species of birds were seen; again no shorebirds. In the past I've seen neat photos of water birds with the waves breaking behind them. I Tried to get such photos with several of the royal terns along the shore. A few of the photos were somewhat successful. We also saw several bottle nose dolphins; some of them pretty close to shore. A few shells were collected; these given to Shelly as souvenirs of her visit. We returned to Marco Island later in the day for dinner. There I saw English sparrows and added them to the trip list, bringing it to 77.



Dan and I visited the

Fakahatchee boardwalk this morning (2/9/17). 20 species of birds were recorded for the morning. We noticed that the eagle nest revealed by the signage along the boardwalk was empty but we did see two eagles on our way back from the gator hole at the end. These were the first I had seen for the year but Ann and Dan had seen them earlier on the roof of one of the homes at the POI. This was my second trip to the boardwalk this year. On both occasions there was a large number of robins in the trees. Last year I had all I could do to find one robin during the whole trip.

Later in the morning we went to Everglades City for the best eggs ever. After breakfast we checked out the power station where Ann and I had seen nesting great horned owls last year. We did see one owl on the nest and I added another trip mark.

Fred and Alyce Townsend had stopped by the lanai on the afternoon of 2/8/17 and we compared early birding notes as usual. They indicated that a crocodile was being reported along the TenK marsh trail, right across from the observation tower. Shelly, Dan and I went looking for it early this afternoon (2/9/17). We didn't find the crocodile but did see quite a few relatively large alligators along the trail. We also saw 21 species of birds including one that I believe to be a Caspian tern. This was added as the 80th mark for the 2017 Florida trip. Shortly after that Shelly and Dan packed up and left to visit the Flanagan's. Listening to them compile their bird lists before they left was quite a pleasure. During their stay 15 bird species were added to the trip list.

Shortly after Shelly and Dan left I took Cooch outside and saw a ruby-throated hummingbird in the flowers of an orchid tree behind the condo parking area. This became the 81st trip mark for the year. It was also the second new condo bird recorded this year, bringing the total number of condo birds to 57.

2/13/17

Water levels still seem to be a bit high this year except, of course, when compared to last year. Dan and I noticed that at the gator hole at the end of the Big Cypress Bend boardwalk on the morning of 2/9/17. Large numbers of fish (possibly bullheads) seem to be accumulating there, suggesting that there could be an aggregation of wading birds as the water draws down. TenK also has high water levels. I noticed that when I walked the Marsh Trail on the morning of 2/10/17. Few of the wading birds were found in the area of the observation tower. Further along the trail, though, there were huge numbers of great egrets with a few other birds mixed in (great blue herons, etc.). I was still not able to find the supposed crocodile across from the tower that morning. I did see a large crocodilian across and just beyond the tower but I could not convince myself that it was a croc, having to look through the mangroves and not getting a really good view. TenK continues to be the focus of several possibly interesting sightings. Besides the possible crocodile, one of the neighbors indicated to Ann that a python was seen there as well.

A loggerhead shrike was seen along Newport Drive on 2/11/17 and added to the trip list.

I went to the Briggs Boardwalk on Shell Island Road on the morning of 2/13/17. Water levels were high there as well. Without checking previous records, it was one of the better birding experiences for that location. Twenty-one species were recorded including a Lincoln sparrow which was both a trip mark and a Florida mark. I don't generally see many sparrows down here. Pranty (2005) suggests that this species is a rare resident of the southern half of peninsular Florida. That and a few other trip marks for the morning brought the trip total to 85. As I was leaving the area I was attracted to a bird that looked likely a possible Florida scrub jay. It was pretty much in the location that Fred Townsend saw and photographed one last year. Unfortunately, the bird was between me and the sun and I never got a definitive look before it flew down into the scrub.

I dropped Ann at Marco's South Beach later in the day and checked out Tigertail. I only took a brief survey of the near side of the lagoon. Again there was only one shorebird to be seen; this time the black-bellied plover (trip mark 86). On the osprey observation deck I met a local photographer by the name of Gregory Dupignac who lives in Chokoloskee. I found his photos at National Geographic Daily Dozen Your Shot (<http://yourshot.nationalgeographic.com/profile/113862/>) and he had some very nice stuff. I then went on to Mackle

Park and only saw a few birds. Ospreys were feeding over the lagoon. No martens were found and no sightings were recorded.

2/14/17

In the past (especially last year) I've found that if you want to see warblers around here, Kirby-Storter is the place to go. On 2/14/17 I found that if you want to see yellow-rumped warblers, Kirby-Storter is the place to go. The only other warbler that I saw was the palm warbler. The place was dead; only 11 species seen for the morning, although two trip marks were among them (yellow-shafted flicker and eastern bluebird). I left the condo and drove through fairly heavy fog for most of the way there and the sun didn't come out till I was on my way back. The water level was lower than at the other areas I've visited so far on this trip and the alligator hole at the end of the boardwalk was nearly dry. Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) has taken over much of the pond and a couple of these plants were seen in bloom. CoCo plum (*Chrysobalanus icaco*) and climbing aster (*Symphotrichum carolinianum*) were also blooming. Although it is difficult to identify some of the plants from the boardwalk, I suspect that rosy camphorweed (*Pluchea rosea*), water dropwort (*Tiedemannia filiformis*) yellowtops (*Flaveria linearis*), pineland heliotrope (*Heliotropium polypjyllum*), beggarticks (*Bidens alba*) and marsh pink (*Sabatia stellaris*) were among those in bloom at the time. Huge flocks of tree swallows were seen at Kirby-Storter and again at the Big Cypress visitors center on the way back to the condo.



Late in the afternoon (2/14/17) Ann and I detoured to the Fritchey Road area on our way back to the condo. I was curious about the water levels in the area and wanted to see if a morning trip was warranted. When we got to the Habitat for Humanity property I saw a western kingbird sitting on the fence opposite the property. Such a sighting is suggested for the area by Pranty (2005) and my records show a similar one on 3/10/11. Several limpkins were also seen along the road but the

roadsides were dry.

2/15/17 was a Wednesday. When it's Wednesday, it's Breakfast Plus, Marco Market and beach. After dropping Ann at the south beach I went on to Tigertail to see if any of the shorebirds had arrived. Before entering the park I finally saw my first burrowing owl for the trip. Then, on the near side of the lagoon I did see the least sandpiper and sanderling and added them to the trip list. There weren't many other birds to see but I did make an entry into BD for the trip. Then I went under the S.S. Judge Jolley



bridge looking for a spotted sandpiper. Success — trip mark 94.

2/16/16

If my initial impression was that the water levels appear to be high this year I have had to revise that. Although TenK seems to have high levels, those at Eagle Lakes Park, Kirby-Storter and now the Fakahatchee Strand along Janes Scenic drive are low. I drove Janes Scenic Dr. to the east main gate (11) on the morning of 2/16/17 and it was bone dry for most of the way. Very few bird species (16) were seen along the way. A pair of alligators occupied a small depression at one of the culverts but that was about it. The alligators might have been a mating pair; one of them significantly larger than the other. The larger one (possibly the male) was exhibiting the strange behavior that I've seen before at the end on the Big Cypress Bend boardwalk. He rolled his front end and seemed to scoop up muck from the bottom of the pond. Then he seemed to let the muck run from his mouth. I thought he was possibly seining small food items from the mud — not sure. One seemingly young deer was also seen along the road.

The wildlife seems to be pretty active around the condo this year. Today (2/16/17) I saw at least four alligators along the shore of the west retention pond and another at the east pond. They all seemed to be of fairly good size and I'm wondering if there will be a bit of competition as the breeding season progresses. On two occasions I've seen hummingbirds in the orchid tree behind the parking lot and the oaks by the lanai have attracted yellow-throated warblers on several days.

This afternoon I drove over to the water treatment plant for the Port of the Islands. Beyond the plant, a right turn takes one onto Union Rd. which goes into the Picayune Strand State Forest. I drove along the road for a while and then encountered a fellow from the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission who indicated that vehicular traffic was not allowed on the road but hiking was permitted. From what I could see from this short experience, it seems like a good road for a morning hike. Apparently, there is a prairie about 1&1/2 miles along the road. On the way back to the condo I saw a kestrel and a cattle egret in the field to the east of the shooting range.

2/18/17

I blamed last year's high water levels for driving my bob whites from the area of the Picayune Strand where I had been seeing them in 2015. So I went to the area on the morning of 2/17/17 and could find no sign nor sound of them. The area is really dry this year. I could drive well beyond where I had been parking the car in the past. Even the road culverts along Sabal Palm Drive were dry with minimal water even at the drainage holes. The large number of great blue herons and egrets usually seen along the route was totally absent. Waves of warblers were seen but the only species seen through the binoculars was the yellow-rumped warbler. I drove very slowly (1-2mph) along the road hoping to see a red-cockaded woodpecker. It was a three woodpecker morning (yellow-shafted flicker, red-bellied woodpecker and downy woodpecker) but the target bird was not seen.

On the way back to the condo I detoured to the Fritchey Road area hoping for a second sighting of the western kingbird; no luck. I also drove along Lake Park Blvd but found relatively little water there and no birds of interest.

I went to TenK on the morning of 2/18/17 and recorded 31 species of birds. I did not see or hear a mangrove cuckoo which Fred Townsend had reported for the previous morning. Later that morning I went to the "Festival In The Woods at the Picayune Strand" which was held at the Sabal Palm hiking trailhead. I ran into Jack and Elaine Berninger there as well as Fred and Alyce Townsend (whom I had told about the event) at the festival. While I was there I went to three wildlife presentations:

1. Wild Turkey Observations and Migratory Bird Surveys In Picayune Strand was given by Ross Scott of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
2. Forest Management in the Picayune Strand State Forest given by Sean Allen, Forester of the Picayune Strand State Forest, Florida Forest Service
3. Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers in a Fire-Maintained Landscape, given by Monica Folk, PhD Wildlife Ecologist of the Milliken Forestry Company, Inc.

The presentation by Monica Folk was especially interesting. She gave a short background of the life history and ecology of the woodpeckers and then described some of the methods she has been using in their protection. She

also told us where in the Picayune State Forest we could find one of the clusters she had established. I Will check this out in the near future.

2/20/17

The bullheads (and whatever other fish were there) sure took a beating in the alligator hole at the end of the BigCypress Bend boardwalk this morning. What a morning. I sat by the alligator hole at the end of the boardwalk and watched a barred owl fish. This is the second time I've witnessed this behavior. I got a bunch of photos as 2 alligators, 2 great egrets, a great blue heron, 2 wood storks and small group of white ibises all fished in a hole that was drying up and concentrating the fish. The lighting was terrible and the shutter speeds so slow that I



couldn't stop much of the action but enough for the excuses! I think a better morning is yet to come; The pond continues to dry and concentrate the fish. I need to check back.

Among the plants seen in bloom on this day was the climbing aster (*Symphotrichum carolinianum*), Dogwood (*Cornus foemina*), beggarticks (*Bidens alba*) and fog-fruit (*Phyla nodiflora*).

Later in the afternoon Ann and I (along with Cooch) drove into the Picayune Strand from Beck Road trying to find the location of the cluster of red-cockaded woodpeckers that were described at the Festival In the Woods that I attended earlier. We had no luck finding the Audubon site.

2/23/17

I went to the marsh trail of TenK on 2/21/17. Thirty-two (32) species were seen for the morning. I never seem to get into the high thirties as Fred Townsend does when he goes there. I got photos of several immature black-crowned night herons. Judging by the pictures in Sibley (2000), one appeared to be a first summer bird. The spots were barely visible and there was a suggestion of the black crown forming. The others were more typical juvenile birds. I also noticed (and photographed) the aggression between great egrets when feeding. One was certainly

protective of what appeared to be its favorite fishing spot.

On 2/22/17 & 2/23/17 I went to several of the talks at the 13th annual Marjory Stoneman Douglas Festival at the museum of the everglades in Everglades City. I attended four talks on 2/22/17:

What Lies Beneath by Fiona Southwell

Learning Facts and Myths About Fracking by Mike Mitchell

Brief History of Agriculture In SW Florida by Dallas Townsend and

The History of the Loop Road by Cesar Becerra

And three on 2/23/17:

FCW Everglades Restoration Priorities by James Erskine

Pioneer/Warden Charles Mosier by Cesar Becerra and

America's Everglades: The Path Forward by Nick Penniman



All of the talks were interesting and informative. While I was there I again met Gregory Dupignac whom I had met earlier at Tigertail. He seems to be a friend of Cesar Becerra and has apparently worked with him on the Loop Road project. He's also involved with the museum. During her talk, Fiona Southwell talked about some of the invasive fish in the Big Cypress Swamp. One of the ones she showed and talked about was the mayan Cichlid. I wondered if that was the fish I saw the other morning (2/20/17) along the creek leading to the Big

Cypress Bend boardwalk. The photos taken that day seem to closely resemble internet photos of these cichlids.

Apparently, the fishing behavior of the barred owl that I have observed on two occasions is not an aberration. When I went to the Fakahatchee boardwalk on the morning of 2/23/17, I again saw a barred owl (perhaps the same one) pluck a fish from the gator hole. Not even a chance to raise my camera! As the water continues to draw down more birds seem to be taking advantage of the shallower water levels and the increasing fish concentration. This time there were several great egrets and quite a few (6-10) wood storks fishing there. I even saw at least four black-crowned night herons; one even showing a little aggression toward another. The apparent same two alligators were active as usual. The larger one seemed to catch a turtle but I didn't get a really good look. 18 bird species were recorded for the morning.



Matt and Nicole as well as their friends Keith and Cheryl arrived late in the afternoon of 2/23/17, perhaps putting the B&B on hold for a while.

2/28/17

I took the guests for a short walk along the TenK marsh trail on 2/24/17. We saw 24 species of birds, mostly wading birds, including two nicely colored roseate spoonbills. I also saw another Caspian tern. This time there was little doubt that we were seeing the American crocodile being reported across from the observa-

tion tower. It appears to be the same one I saw before but had been indecisive about. This time I got clear photos to confirm the identification.

Matt's friends (Keith & Cheryl) left on 2/25/17 and later that morning Matt and I went to the Big Cypress Bend boardwalk. It was approaching midday and there was little activity at the gator hole. Matt did spot a snake, though, which we later decided was most probably a banded water snake. Besides the possible mayan cichlids which I had previously seen in the channel leading to the boardwalk, we also saw sailfin mollies and another long, somewhat narrow fish.

We went to Clam Pass Beach on 2/27/17. On the way to the beach I saw the first swallow-tailed kite for the trip. It was flying over Hy42 beyond the Eagle Lakes intersection. My earliest record for this species was February eighteenth in 2000. Most of the birds at the beach were beyond the deep inlet so I was not able to get good looks. Among the collection of birds on the other side, though, I did recognize royal terns and black skimmers.

I collected a few shells from the beach at Clam Pass. Several of them resembled the turkey wings but appeared to be somewhat different. Checking in Witherington & Witherington (2009) suggests that I did collect one turkey wing but several of the other shells are possibly mossy arcs (*Arca imbricata*). This species had been in the Flocritters database but had not been collected before. The entry in the database was amended accordingly. A few other shells were also collected for later id. Most of these were species of scallops. Nicole found an apparent Portuguese man-of-war on the beach but it was unfortunately washed back into the gulf before I got to see it.

3/2/17

Matt and Nicole left for Fort Lauderdale on 2/28/17. I went to TenK the next morning (3/1/17) and saw more tree swallows than I had ever seen before. Thousands of them flew overhead and swarmed around several of the smaller red mangrove islands. Among the 33 species seen for the morning was the northern shoveller. Four of them were swimming below the observation tower, bringing the trip list to 97. This is 21 species behind last year's count for this date (13 species below the average from 2012 to 2016) and the lowest count for this date on record. This could largely be due to not yet having had a good shorebird day at Tigertail or a decent warbler day on this trip. I did not see the crocodile that morning; probably because I was preoccupied with the massive number of swallows. A single otter was seen along the path.

While I was checking out the teal for a possible green winged one I did notice one that had some green on the wing. I definitely noticed such a duck but thought I remembered that the blue-winged species had a small amount of green. Checking Sibley (2000) later I found that not to be true — I possibly had a green-winged teal after all. I will need to check this out again the next time I go there. Perhaps I can find the buffy streak in the tail that Sibley references for this bird.



On 3/2/17 I walked the Union Road through the entrance of the Picayune Strand. Earlier I was told that there was a prairie to be found about 1—1&1/2 mile along the road. What I wasn't told was that there was a fork in the road and, of course, I first took the wrong way. Not too far along the road I found some small trees with obvious hibiscus-like flowers. Interestingly, the trees had both red and yellow flowers. Later, using Nelson (1994) I id'd the tree as the Sea Hibiscus or Mahoe (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) and added it to the Florida plant database. The reference indicated that the flowers of this tree are yellow early in the day but turn red

by evening.

I then retraced my steps back to the fork and took the correct path to the road. Not too far down the road I came

to the prairie which stretched out extensively on both sides of the road. A variety of tree islands were interspersed throughout the prairie and the strand was visible in the background. Almost immediately I saw a deer with Bambi, complete with all its spots, trailing behind. Apparent periphyton was drying in much of the area and there were signs of this being pretty wet earlier. A number of plants were seen in bloom in the prairie and in the disturbed areas along the road. I added the area to the plant database as the "Picayune - Union Road Prairie" and updated the database for this area. Among these plants was possibly two of the butterworts as well as oth-



ers. I will need to return to the area to confirm the identification of these plants and add others to the database. The birding records for the morning make a distinction between those birds seen in the prairie itself and those seen in the Picayune Strand at large. Some herons and songbirds were noted along the initial walk along the wrong fork where I largely followed the edge of the canal. Among the birds recorded in the prairie was another robin, an immature bald eagle and another trip mark, the eastern meadowlark.

On the return trip to the car I found several alligators in the canal. Those further from the car seemed pretty small and still had yellow bands typical of the younger gators. A larger (5-6ft.) gator roared at me as I passed.

3/7/17

I drove the Turner River/Birdon loop on the morning of 3/3/17. 23 bird species were noted for the morning. There was a pretty steady flight of tree swallows all morning, although nothing compared to what I saw on the last trip to TenK (3/1/17). Lots of little blue herons (both white and blue and in between) were seen in the deeper areas of the Turner River Rd approaching Wagonwheel Rd and on that road itself. Unfortunately, no purple gallinules were seen. I didn't pay a lot of attention to the plants along the way but many apparent wild petunias (*Ruellia caroliniensis*) were seen in bloom.

The shorebirds finally came out to greet me at Tigertail on 3/4/17. Ann and I got there a couple of hours before low tide. We walked across the lagoon and found much of it reduced to mud flat. All of the common shore birds

not previously seen this year except the snowy and piping plovers and the red knot were marked. Surprisingly no willets were seen, though. I sat in the sand for a while and tried to get pictures of the ruddy turnstones probing in the sand. I wanted the photo to show that the bits of sand were actually in the air. With the sand as the background, the sand in the air just blended in with it. One shot at least shows the air born sand against the bird. The morning finally got me over the 100 species trip mark (103). I also thought I saw a forsters tern but wasn't certain and didn't mark it. A couple of the burrowing owls were also seen. On the way back to the condo I saw my second swallow-tailed kite for the year.



Ann's search image for sand dollars worked well for her. She collected nine along the sand dollar spit and also found a really big lightning welk. I picked up a piece of driftwood that had washed up on the shore. It was loaded with holes, apparently caused from bivalves that burrowed into it. Witherington & Witherington (2009) did not appear to include this shell. Later I searched the internet and determined that the likely identification was one of the paddocks, possibly the flat-topped paddock (*Penitella penita*) although the species is uncertain. I added this tentative species to the floccritters database.

On 3/6/17 I finally met up with the Berninger group for a hike along the west main gate of the Fakahatchee Strand to the Four Stakes Prairie and back. Before meeting the group I drove to the east main gate and then back again. I found a pretty photogenic red-shouldered hawk feeding on apparent frogs from the muddy roadside ditches. I was also happy to see one of the Everglades minks near the west tram; in fact, pretty close to the area that I had seen them in once before several years ago.

Our walk along the tram showed the area to be exceptionally dry. Jack pointed out a lot of hand ferns that were wilted for lack of water. He indicated that the number of these ferns seemed to be higher than he had seen in the past. Alligators were found in several of the few ponds seen along the walk. One large pair was seen with 15-20 young. Quite a few of the ruddy daggerwing butterflies were seen, especially on the way back to the cars. A few Palomedes were also seen.



A number of plants were in bloom in the prairie [prairie milkweed (*Asclepias lanceolata*), glades lobelia (*Lobelia glandulosa*), southern sneezeweed (*Helenium pinnatifidum*)] and others. One new plant, the skyflower (*Hydrolea corymbosa*), was also seen and added to the database. This was a new species for Jack as well. Several blooming coastal rosegentians (*Sebatia calycina*) were seen along the tram near the prairie entrance. These were identified by their spatulate sepals extending beyond the petals.

The plant database was updated for this location. The addition of the skyflower was also an addition of a new family to the database.

3/10/17

Ann wanted to gamble for a while on Tuesday (3/7/17) so I dropped her off at the Immokalee casino and went on to bird the area. First I stopped at Lake Trafford. Several of the common wading birds presented nice photo-ops, especially the tricolored heron and the limpkin. I then drove to the C.R.E.W. marsh trail and hiked the flatlands trail. The birding started out pretty good but didn't add anything to this year's trip list. Most of my time was taken up with plant identification. Early in the walk I encountered several plants in bloom that I found taxing (taxonomically speaking, that is):

One of these was a white, small-flowered plant that was clearly one of the violets. It had somewhat long linear leaves. The only possibility in Hammer (2014) was *Viola lanceolata*. This id was consistent with that of Taylor (1992). The AFP does show this species to be throughout Florida.

A small yellow-flowering plant was seen nearby. The flowers were abt 3/8" in diameter and found on an ascending inflorescence. The leaves were opposite, abt 1/4" long and somewhat ascending on the stem. Those at the bottom were dried up and brown. There were 5 petals and the sepals were shorter and pointed. Taylor (1992) suggested possible id of *Hypericum gentianoides*. Photos on the AFP seem to confirm this id. This plant was added to the plant database.

Another, somewhat larger flowered plant also reminded me of one of the St. Johnsworts. This was a taller plant (18-24") with yellow flowers each having 5 petals. The leaves were opposite and each leaf had small developing leaves in its axil. Each leaf had one main vein. The sepals were shorter than the petals and arranged between them. Older flowers showed a rusty color. Hammer (2014) suggested the roundpod St. Johnswort (*Hypericum cistifolium*) which I have id'd in the past.

An aster was also found in bloom. It appeared to me to be of the genus *Symphotrichum* but none of my references seemed to clearly identify it. It had flower heads with mostly 12-15 white ray flowers and yellow disk flowers. Its leaves were short and narrow and sparsely arranged. I used the AFP to compare all of the plants of this genus in Collier County but none of the photos were definitive.

A species of apparent Spermacoe also went unidentified.



The plant database was updated, especially regarding the location field, with the plants seen on this trip.

The water levels have still not provided the morning I've expected at the gator hole at the end of the Big Cypress Bend boardwalk. I went there on 3/8/17. There were quite a few great egrets along the channel leading to the boardwalk but only 5 or 6 wood storks and a few other waders at the hole. The morning did finally produce a couple of trip marks, though; an American redstart and a northern parula. Later in the day, several purple martins flew over the condo retention ponds, bringing the trip count to 106.

On 3/8/17 I also looked at one of the plant photos taken at C.R.E.W on the previous day (3/7/17). One of the plant photographed, but unidentified, on that day appears to be the graceful sandmat (*Chamaesyce hypericifolia*). The identification is based on photos in Hammer (2014) and Taylor (1992). This plant was added to the plant database. The species is listed by the IRC for the C.R.E.W conservation area as *Euphorbia hypericifolia*.

Before going to the Marco Island Shell Club's annual shell show on 3/9/17, I looked in National Audubon's Field Guide to North American Seashells (1995) to see if it included the piddock collected on 3/4/17. The reference included this species and indicated that it was common in California. No mention was made of Florida. At the shell show I talked to a couple of the officials who described the piddocks in general but offered no help in species identification.

On the morning of 3/10/17 I drove about 11 miles east from the junction of Hy41 on the loop road. Then I turned around and slowly drove back, pausing at each road culvert that had enough water accumulation to possibly attract wildlife. Although the lighting was bad and the shutter slow, I did find a pretty cooperative green heron for a few pix. I also photographed a few alligators along the way.



3/18/17

When I went to the Festival in the Woods at Sabal Palms earlier this year I got a one-day free pass for any of the Collier County parks. Ann and I used the pass to go to Delnor-Wiggins Pass park on 3/11/17. The park was quite a disappointment to me; not much more than five parking lots along the beach and a boat launch. We saw few shells and the birding was not so good. No shorebirds, no gulls or terns, no wading birds. One of the game officers said that it was full of shorebirds on some days but not so today. In fairness, I never did walk the nature trail but it didn't seem to offer anything I can't find in natural areas closer to the condo.

At an art show in Goodland that same day I saw photographs of Joseph C. Parisi of [FrameFocusShoot \(framefocusshoot.com\)](http://framefocusshoot.com). I viewed more of his photos on his web site and found them to be really great. Perhaps I'll consider purchasing one or more of them later.

There has been a brush fire in the Picayune Strand for several days. Recent news reports suggest that 7500 acres have been affected between Beck blvd. and Sabal Palm rd. Ann and I drove along Beck blvd on Sunday, 3/12/17, and saw some areas that were still smoldering. I'm hoping that the red-cockaded woodpeckers were not driven off by the fire or smoke.

I set up a walk along the Union Rd. Prairie with the Berninger group for March 20th. In anticipation of that walk, I emailed Sean Allen, forester with the Picayune Stand, to get some info about the prairie. He replied on 3/13/17

"If the prairie you are referring to is on the east side of the canal, then there is no name affiliated with that area. The prairie on the west side of the canal is known as Bad Luck Prairie. I will also mention that the prairie on the east side of the canal is not all FFS land. Majority of it is the Fakahatchee Strand. Unfortunately, I do not have any available publications in regards to wild flowers. May I suggest that you refer to

the University IFAS extension. They have an extensive online database, and likely electronic or print reference guides”.

Trevor joined us on 3/13/17. While he was sleeping off his journey on the morning of 3/14/17, I went to the TenK marsh trail. I got there before the sun came up, hoping to see large numbers of long-legged wading birds. I did see lots of white ibises clustered in three groups. Interestingly, a bunch of glossy ibises were segregated in the back of one of the groups and a group of six roseate spoonbills were isolated on one end of another group. Great egrets were mostly in the red mangroves rather than in the open water. The lighting was poor, obviously, but I did take a few photos of the groups. I didn't stay long after the sun came up but did manage to get 24 marks before I left. A couple of pretty bold black vultures provided pretty good close-up photos.



Matt joined us on 3/14/17. He, Trevor and I went to the Corkscrew Sanctuary swamp on 3/14/17. While we were there I noticed three orchids growing along the boardwalk. One was found growing on a tree along the main boardwalk near the junction leading to the feeders. This was possibly the Greater yellowspike orchid (*Polystachya concreta*). I came upon this possible id by looking at the photos of all of the orchids listed by the IRC for the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary (a couple of species had no photos). That species looked closest to the photos I took while we were there. The photo in Brown (2005), though, showed yellow flowers that I did not see. Other photos on the AFP web site were only somewhat similar; the id is pretty tentative and the plant was not added to the plant database. It appears that I have photographed this plant on several previous trips.

Another species was one I had seen in bloom in previous year's visits to Corkscrew (see photos for 3/25/13). This was probably the leafless beaked orchid (*Sacoila lanceolata*) and had been added to the plant database in 2013. A third orchid had also been seen previously. This was the Dingy-flowered star orchid which, according to Brown (2005) would be *Epidendrum amphistomum*. One of the park volunteers pointed out this orchid growing on one of the named cypress trees, the same tree that has the ghost orchid (which we did not see).

Not a lot of other plants were seen in bloom on this trip. One that I did see was likely one of the native thistles, possibly *Cirsium nattallii*. This species is shown for the area by the IRC.

The water levels were pretty low in the sanctuary. Only 24 bird species were seen including a swallow-tailed kite and a kestrel that were actually seen outside of the park itself. I finally did add the purple gallinule to the trip list (#117). It was seen along with a large concentration of long-legged wading birds in the area of the lettuce lake where there was still some accumulation of surface water.

We all went to Tigertail on 3/17/17, crossing the lagoon to the gulf shore and the sand dollar spit. Ann shelled, I birded and Matt and Trevor chased Pokeman. The tide was low and the lagoon was virtually one large mud flat. There were large accumulations of shorebirds but they were mostly spread, often at some distance. At one location there was a huge group of sanderlings (100+) but, unfortunately I had forgotten to bring my camera and missed a great photo opportunity. I wasn't able to add anything to the trip list on this occasion. In fact, I didn't

even bother to record the sightings on this Tigertail visit. Matt left for home after dinner on 3/17/17 and Ann and I got Trevor off to the airport this morning (3/18/17). Their visit was a nice mix of B&B and socializing.

3/20/17

After checking various internet sources it appears to me that the prairie along Union Rd is, indeed, part of the Fakahatchee Strand as suggested by Sean Allen in his earlier email. It may, in fact, be the Dan House Prairie located directly west (about 2 miles) of the Four Stake Prairie which I hiked to with the Berninger group on 3/6/17. I met the Berninger group at Union Rd on Monday, 3/20/17, and we hiked to the prairie. We walked quite a way into the prairie along the cut trail and recorded the birds and plants that we saw. Jack was amazed at the



<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Scientific Name</u>
Bachelor's Button	<i>Polygala baldunii</i>
Bluehearts	<i>Buchnera americana</i>
Coastal Plain Yellowtop	<i>Flaveria linearis</i>
Glades Lobelia	<i>Lobelia glandulosa</i>
Marsh Pink	<i>Sabatia stellaris</i>
Mexican Clover	<i>Richardia mexicana</i>
Oakleaf Fleabane	<i>Erigeron quercifolius</i>
Pineland Pimpernel	<i>Samolus valerandi</i>
Purple Thistle	<i>Cirsium horridulum</i>
Rosy Camphorweed	<i>Pluchea baccharis</i>
Simpson's Grasspink	<i>Calopogon tuberosus</i>
Small's Flax	<i>Linum carteri</i>
Yellow Stargrass	<i>Hypoxis juncea</i>

number of both Bachelor's button and Simpson's grasspink that we found in bloom. The plants in bloom are shown in the table to the right. In several cases (Stargrass, Pimpernel and Mexican clover) the species identification should be checked in the future. The species recorded here show some variance with what is shown for the Fakahatchee Strand by the IRC. The location field of this site was changed to the Dan House Prairie in the Florida Wildlife database and the database was updated for this location.



Twelve species of birds were seen on this morning including pretty close up views of low flying swallow-tailed kites. The birds, of course, were recorded in BD. A number of butterflies were also seen including the palamedes and the common buckeye.

The group seemed to enjoy this trip and, according to Jack, will repeat it in future years.

3/22/17

The marsh trail at TenK is really drying up. I went there on the morning of 3/21/17 to see large mud areas with tracks from alligators apparently moving to the deeper waters. At several spots along the trail I played the song of the mangrove cuckoo but did not hear any replies. I ran into the Townsends and they promised not to tell me if they saw or heard any of the illusive birds. I did manage a list of 33 species for the morning.

A pair of widgeons were among the 23 species of birds that I recorded for the Briggs Nature Center and Shell Island Rd on 3/22/17. I arrived at the nature center before it was light. In fact, I had to wait until the gate was opened at about 7:15AM. When I saw the ducks from the observation deck along the boardwalk, they were directly between me and the sun. The white areas, at first, looked light blue. After the sun rose a bit, the head markings became visible and the id confirmed. I noticed that the birds had been posted on the board of sightings for an earlier date. Later, when I was leaving the park, I stopped and looked for Fred Townsend's scrub jays but had no luck, even after playing their call with my iPod.



Near the end of the boardwalk (if a circular boardwalk can be said to have an end) I noticed a large shrub in bloom. It had red flowers that were long and tubular. I photographed the bush for later id. Checking in Nelson (1996) the plant appeared to be Scarlet Bush (*Hamelia patens*) of the Rubiaceae family. I noted that the leaves were opposite when I photographed the plant but the reference suggests leaves in whorls of 3-7. When I checked my photos later, it appeared that although the outer pair of leaves were opposite, those closer to the stem were possibly in whorls of at least three. That the petioles (and at least the origin of the veins) were red and "the blades often reflexed upward from the central vein" seemed to confirm the id. This plant had earlier been added to the plant database, having been id'd in 2015 along the Loop Road.

3/27/17

The Mudlaffs joined us on 3/22/17. Jerry and I went to the Otter Mound Park on Marco Island on 3/24/17. There was not a lot of stuff to see there. There were quite a few plantings nicely labeled for identification but there was no water access.

Jack Berninger had written an email to Eric Bauer to ask about the Dan House Prairie that we visited on 3/20/17. A portion of his reply read:

"Hi Jack, I went to look at the calopogon this morning, they are var. simpsonii which only occurs in extreme southern Florida. Yes you were in Dan House Prairie, don't know who he is, will try to find out."

This has been the year for fires in our area. Besides the brush fire which burned 7500 acres in the Picayune Strand there was one in the Big Cypress Swamp, closing Hy41 east of Hy29. When the highway was open again, Jerry and I drove out to see the damage. We encountered the burned area just north and west of Kirby-Storter. Some areas were still smoldering.



Dubbed the Parliament Fire, it has burned 26,371 acres in Big Cypress National Preserve and is 60% contained according to a news release of this date. The news release also reported on two other minor burns in the Big Cypress Swamp. There was also an apparent controlled burn in the Fakahatchee Strand between our condo and the Big Cypress Bend boardwalk.

4/6/17

The Mudlaffs left on 3/27/17 so I got a chance to resume my B&B the next morning. I decided to try, once again, for the mangrove cuckoo at the TenK marsh trail. I walked the length of the trail and played the bird's song at several places. No luck! Twenty-eight species were recorded for the morning but I have yet to see a black-necked stilt this year. On the way out of the trail the crocodile was sunning with its mouth wide open. I got several photos but the sun was behind the croc and I wasn't satisfied with the shots. The Noltes arrive tomorrow so serious B&B will be put back on hold for a while.



Although I did postpone serious B&B while the Noltes were here I did add two birds to the year's list during their stay. We took them for an airboat ride at Wooten's on (3/30/17) and I saw the first black-necked stilts for the year. Then on (4/3/17) we went on a Gordon River tour and saw the first least terns. Although I didn't record birds for the day, we went to Tigertail on 4/1/17 and I did get pretty good pictures of reddish egrets. I still did not see the piping or snowy plover, though. Ken had a nice swim up close and personal with a dol-

phin at Marco's South Beach on 4/4/17. They seemed to have a pretty good time and left for home on 4/5/17.

4/8/17

After taking a rest after the company I decided to head out to the Picayune Strand on the morning of 4/6/17. I wanted to approach the strand from the north (Everglades Blvd.) but I had had problems finding the entrance on the previous morning. Guided by my car's GPS I drove to Golden Gate Blvd. and then about 12 miles south to 52nd Ave. SE. Turning right I proceeded to Miller Ave. and followed that south to Stewart Blvd., a distance of about half of the north-south dimension of the strand. I must have passed the loop to Sabel Palm but did not see any marked access to it. I was surprised, though, that most of the intersections along the way were recognized by the GPS. I made a U-turn at Stewart Blvd. and retraced my path out of the park.

Although there were several signs warning of panther habitat, there were no signs of the panthers. I actually only stopped and got out of the car at several locations to listen for bobwhites (negative) and look at a few plants that were in bloom. One of these was likely the Flaxleaf False Foxglove (*agalinis linifolia*) which I have seen in other regions of the strand and recorded in the plant database with somewhat confused taxonomy. I need to examine this plant again to determine if it is a perennial with a rhizome and if its stem is terete (round) among other things.



Most of what I saw along the road appeared to be disturbed growth with a lot of cabbage palms. There were signs of the apparent work being done on the channels to restore sheet flow to the area. It would be interesting to visit the park in later years to see the results of those efforts.

I went to the Big Cypress Bend boardwalk on 4/7/17 and found things pretty dry. The channel leading to the boardwalk was reduced to a mere trickle along most of its length, the only real deep areas right before the beginning of the planks. This is where the bulk of activity was found. The pond to the right had a variety of wading birds including great egrets, snowy egrets, great blue herons, black-crowned night herons, green herons and immature white ibises. There was also a fairly large gator with at least ten babies that came to her before I confused my count. The pond across the path was mostly mud but two barred owls flew up from it and perched in the nearby shrubbery. There was very little activity at the alligator hole at the end of the boardwalk. Two alligators were there but they were pretty quiet. I did find another two barred owls there; apparently a female with a young. They perched close to one another and posed for a few pictures. I also finally saw my first northern waterthrush of the year.



Later that day, as Ann and I were returning from some shopping, I saw a crested (now apparently northern) caracara in a dead tree along the north side of Hy.41, near the agricultural area. I made a couple of U-turns to get another look and the bird flew as I approached. The white areas on the wings were clearly visible and I was quite sure I was not seeing a black vulture. I went back to the area the next morning (4/8/17) with the hope of getting a second look. The dead tree was between Six L's Farm Rd. and Riggs Rd. so I drove most of the length of those roads in an attempt to locate the bird. I then decided to go to McDonald's for a breakfast sandwich and some coffee. I drove back to the area of Riggs Rd. and parked along the large road shoulder to eat my breakfast and scan for the bird. Sure enough! The bird was spotted in a slash pine near the dead tree where it was originally found. I got fairly good photos of the bird (187) of which I kept 23 and added it to the trip's list.





4/15/17

I took advantage of some afternoon sunlight to photograph TenK's crocodile on 4/9/17 but had to shoot through the mangroves to get a clear picture. Little water was left on the side of the observation tower and the alligator trails were pretty evident. Few birds were present at the time.

Kaczmareks joined us on 4/10/17 and we took them to see the croc on the next day. Unfortunately, the croc was not out. The caracara was later seen in the same pine

tree that I found it in on 4/8/17 but I have not seen it since then. I also saw a couple of limpkins along Hy41 on 4/11/17. They have not been seen along that section of the road for more than a year. Kaczmareks left for home on 4/14/17.

With low tide scheduled for 10:22AM, Ann and I headed for Tigertail beach for a morning of birding and shelling on 4/15/17. Again there were lots of shorebirds but I still didn't get my annual marks for the piping and snowy plovers, red knot, magnificent frigatebird and prairie warbler; all possible for the location. I spent much of my time photographing groups of mixed shorebirds. I also observed something I had learned years ago in Cape Coral. At a bird photography presentation at Lakes Park I was told that larger birds sometimes take a dump right before they fly off, possibly to lighten the load. Check out the osprey.



The shelling was equally disappointing. Ann did pick up a mottled purse crab (*Persephena mediterranea*) that she thought was dead. The crab was later identified with Wiitherington & Witherington (2009). Unfortunately, back at the car, we discovered that it was actually still alive. I walked it back to the lagoon and tossed it in. A snowy egret immediately began to peck at it but I think the crab was too big for it to handle. I also found a possible batfish dried up in the sand. I didn't collect it, though, thinking that it still might be a bit ripe.



4/20/17

Where have all the cowbirds gone? I've played that theme in previous years and I have still to see one this year. According to Pranty (2005) the brown-headed cowbird is uncommon in the south peninsular Florida but I've seen them on most of my trips to Florida. Not so, yet this year. This remains one of the slowest birding trips so far on record. In fact it's on pace to have the lowest count of any of the years that we stayed in Florida for a full three months.

Mike joined us on Saturday, 4/15/17, the next day being Easter Sunday. We decided that it was probably too dry for a good air boat ride so on Monday, we scheduled a jet boat out of Tin City. This was a nice combination thrill/tour along the Gordon River. Certainly not a birding experience, I did notice several least terns along the way.



We took Mike to Tigertail on 4/18/17 and crossed the lagoon. Mike, who introduced us to the burrowing behavior of the coquina clams on his last visit, dug up a mole crab while we were there this time. It appeared to be one of the common mole crabs (*Emerita talpoida*) but I could not be sure of the species from the photos I took. In any event, I had not seen a mole crab before. Mike's digging in the sand suggested that such behavior in the future might expose other species not yet seen at the beach. I failed to see either of the two illusive plover species and, again, missed the frigatebird and prairie warbler. But Ann failed as well — no sand dollars.

While walking around the mangrove bushes at Tigertail I noticed a plant that appeared to be one of the glassworts. Taylor (1992) showed one species (*Salicornia virginica*) of glasswort, the perennial glasswort, in the family Chenopodiaceae. Taylor's more recent book (2013) lists two species, the annual glasswort (*Salicornia bigelovii*) and the perennial (*Sarcocornia ambigua*), both listed for the amaranth family. None of these are listed for Tigertail Beach by the IRC under either family. According to the AFP, both the annual and perennial species are in the genus *Salicornia* and, according to this reference, *Sarcocornia ambigua* is synonymous with *Salicornia ambigua*. This reference also suggests that, of the two species, only *S. ambigua* is found in Collier County but *S. bigelovii* is found in Lee County (where I once, very tentatively id'd this species previously). Given all this, the plant was added as *S. ambigua* to the plant database.



As we returned to the condo from dinner at dusk on 4/19/17, we again noticed limpkins along Hy41 near the intersection of Riggs Rd. In previous years, before there was construction in the area, we used to see them there often. This is the fourth time I've seen them in this location lately. And, when we left this morning to take Mike to the airport, we saw another one; perhaps they've returned to one of their favorite spots. With visitors now gone for the year, I have a couple of weeks to see if I can get this year's birding stats back on track.

4/28/17

I started on 4/21/17 with a trip to the Picayune Strand. I drove in on Sabal Palm Rd. to the point where I turn to the left. I've been assuming that at that point the road loops around and then again joins Sabal Palm rd so I drove about 4.5 miles until I met Miller blvd. When I made a U-turn car's Garmin gps indicated 78 Ave. SE so apparently I had met up with a point on Miller blvd that I had passed when I entered the strand from the north on 4/6/17. As I drove along this supposed loop I found several burned out area but, because they appeared to be somewhat isolated, I wasn't sure if they were from controlled burns or, perhaps, the recent fires in the area.



About 1.9 miles west of Miller blvd. I found what must be the second cluster of red-cockaded woodpeckers in the Picayune Strand. Several trees were marked with white paint and I could see the pvc pipes that were placed in the trees. Unfortunately, though, none of those woodpeckers were seen but I did add a red-headed woodpecker to the trip' list. I stopped and listened for bobwhites at several locations along the route but was unable to see or hear any of them.

I got a chance to see manatees in the channel when we went to have dinner with Suzanne Hermes on Saturday, 4/23/17. While we were there the drought came to an end; it rained heavily for quite a while. The results of the rain were visible along the Big Cypress Bend boardwalk when I went there on Monday, 4/24/17. The ferns were resurrected. Although there was no accumulation of water, the ground was moist and the greenery was a fresh shade of green. Buttonbush and wild coffee were in bloom as was marlberry. I also added the Louisiana water-thrush to the trip list. By my judgment, the white eye line was more distinct than in the northern species and the yellow hue less marked.

Later that day, after dropping Ann at Marco's South Beach I visited Tigertail for some missing trip marks. Negative! A dark morph reddish egret was present but it never came to the near side of the lagoon. Only a few shore-birds were on the near side so photo opp's were pretty much limited to a group of white ibises.

I went to TenK's marsh trail on 4/25/17 and was pretty much driven out by the mosquitoes and deer flies. This has been the worst year for mosquitoes in memory. Especially recently, I have had to spray down with repellent, often twice, during my birding outings and the mosquitoes have even limited people's visits to the pool and Cooch's morning walks. Recent rains did little to restore water to TenK and the birds were pretty much restricted to the deeper water of some of the channels. Those areas did produce a count of 22 bird species, though. There were no signs of the crocodile, the third consecutive such visit, and few alligators were present. Unless dramatic rains occur within the next day or two, this will probably be my last 2017 visit to TenK for the year.

For some time I have noticed the similarities in the behavior of reddish egrets and the tri-colored heron. Both of them prance in the water and spread their wings in an apparent effort to scare up prey and shade it from the glare of the sunlight. I've wondered if these similarities betrayed a close evolutionary relationship. When I went to Tigertail on 4/26/17, a tri-colored heron was on display on the near side of the lagoon and I got pretty good photos of this behavior. Not only did I notice the behavioral similarities to the reddish egret, but I also noticed similarities in their morphology as they display in apparent breeding plumage. Comparing the photos of the red-



dish egret taken on 4/1/17 with those on the tri-colored heron taken on 4/26/17, the two-tone beak and the long feathers along the back are particularly noticeable.

While I was at Tigertail, Ann spent several hours sun bathing on Marco's South Beach. While she was walking the shoreline, she found a couple of arc shells with peculiar stick-like structures attached to them. When she showed them to me I wondered if they might be some sort of soft coral such as a sea feather or sea whip. Witherington & Witherington (2009) did not show them, though.

On the morning of 4/27/17 I headed out early to the Belle Meade section of the Picayune Strand State Park to locate the red-cockaded woodpeckers known to be there. I walked the horse trail until I located the area at about 7:30AM. I located seven marked trees but could find no woodpeckers (except red-bellied ones). I followed Fred Townsend's advice and "accidentally" played their calls with my iPod. No luck! I stayed in the vicinity of the marked trees for about an hour but never saw or heard the target birds.

The area clearly showed the effects of what I believe was the Parliament Fire. The pines were scorched with only the tops of the tallest ones escaping the blazes. The groundcover showed early signs of recovery. Several varieties of ferns (sword and bracken) were sending up fresh fronds and a few plants were in bloom., backroot (*Pterocaulon pycnostachyum*) and possible hedge hyssop (*Gratiola ramosa*) among them. I also noticed one of the saw palmettos (*Serenoa repens*) in bloom. It seems to me that I've seen that plant in bloom shortly after controlled burns in the past.

On the morning of 4/28/17 I drove out to the Turner River / Birdon Rd. loop. As I drove along

hy.41, it appeared that the recent rains may have been heavier there; several of the roadside fields were again somewhat flooded. I could see the recent efforts to restore "sheet flow" along Turner River road. Areas of the canal along the roadside were filled in and various structures were placed across the water to divert water flow. At one of these sites I found a photo-cooperative limpkin seemingly feeding on fresh water clams. In fact, if you

look t the ground in the photos that I took, it appears that he (she) had a pretty good breakfast. I marked 23 bird species for the morning but several of the normal wading birds were conspicuously missing. I did add two trip marks for the morning, a common yellowthroat and a white-winged dove, both having been recorded there in previous years. These marks brought the trip list to 117, still well below the average.

4/29/17

With only two days left at the POI area and a trip count 8 below the previous average (this year will lower that average, considerably), I decided that my best chance for adding to the list was to visit Eagle Lakes on the morning of 4/29/17. So, that's where all of the cowbirds have gone! The morning not only produced a couple of brown-headed cowbirds but several bronzed cowbirds were seen as well. Not only was that a trip mark; it was a Florida mark too. Interestingly, Jim Krakowski included the bronzed cowbird in his checklist for Eagle Lakes on 5/28/17. I met Jim last year on Shell Island Road when we were both following up Fred Townsends's report of a Florida scrub jay in that area. The trip mark is now at 119, six shy of the average.

The photos I took this morning look more like another of Florida's many golf courses rather than the Eagle Lakes



that I'm familiar with. Water was confined to just a couple of areas and these were bereft of the long-legged waders generally seen there. I did notice a couple of vines growing on the ground. One of these had deeply palmately divided leaves and yellow five-parted flowers. An orange fruit was present on several plants. The plant was suspected to be of the Cucurbitaceae family and was later id'd with Taylor (1982) as the Wild Balsam Apple (*Momordica charantia*). The plant has been found at several other locations and is already in the plant database. The other vine had a deep red stem and simple, alternate leaves. No flowers were present and no efforts at taxonomy

were made. I also noticed that large portions on the lakes were now filled with very tall amaranth plants.

5/5/17

We left the condo on the morning of 4/30/17. We saw a limpkin on Hy41 in the vicinity where they have been previously seen. Just north of the Riffs Rd. intersection I saw a single caracara fly over the car. Hopefully, these sightings are a good omen for next year.

We stayed the usual two days with the Kaczmareks. I went to Green Key on the morning of 5/1/17. The tide was high and relatively few birds were seen. A reddish egret was pretty close for pictures but I didn't get anything better than I had previously. A single marbled godwit was seen, though, and the photos, although not great, were the best I have for this species. We left for home the next day (5/2/17) and saw the spring disappear when we arrived in Wisconsin the next day.

Summary

This has been a year in Florida quite unlike any of the others. Extreme dryness (following a year of record winter rains), fire and mosquitoes defined the year. On many days, especially in the later part of our stay, we woke to the smell of smoke outside of the condo; in fact, one time our smoke alarm even went off. The causes: most recently the Cowbell fire which burned over 21,000 acres of the Big Cypress Swamp and was not yet contained at the time of our departure. As for mosquitoes, it was the worst year we've ever had. Although early marks of yellow-crowned night herons and hooded mergansers and seeing quite a few robins early in the trip suggested that the birding would be good, I ended up with the smallest list of total species for any of the years that we have

stayed for a period of three months. I was not alone; Jack Berninger, Fred Townsend and Richard Johnson all found that the bird diversity was down from previous years. Only by these comparisons was it a bad year, though. I continued to add new plants to the Florida Wildlife database and even added a new location to explore (the Dan House Prairie). Finding a crested caracara near the condo and limpkins apparently returning along Hy41 lends a feeling of anticipation to next year's visit.