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MICK THOMPSON

Left: On a birding tour in the Everglades. Above: Vermilion Flycatcher

## What's That Bird?

*During my travels, I've always seen the signs for Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, sometimes in the most unlikely places. The time was right to learn more about the birds living in and flying over Florida.*

Start with Trail's official website, filled with excellent information for planning your trip. The trail is not a linear path, but a collection of local, state and national parks and wildlife refuges, where birdlife and wildlife is abundant. There are four sections: East, Panhandle, South and West, each listing sites by county. Also informative is the 2011 movie "The Big Year," based on a true story about birding obsession. And South Florida has a wonderful resource: the Tropical Audubon Society in South Miami, hosting monthly free birding tours and other activities, like Bird Day on Feb. 18, especially for junior naturalists and budding birders.

I took one of their birding tours, meeting at the Ernest Coe Visitor Center in Everglades National Park on a cloudy, coolish morning at 7:30 (warning: birding is an early-morning activity). About 30 participants were ready with binoculars and cameras with huge zoom lenses. TAS field trip coordinator Brian Rapoza led us to a spot just outside the park in the Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area. Here we spotted a Vermilion Flycatcher sitting obediently on the fence near the

pump station. Along the road, birders called out various species, including the Western Tanager, a bird rarely found in the Southeast and an exciting way to start the day. Scissor-tailed Flycatchers zoomed around and a dozen Sandhill Cranes flew overhead. Inside the park, we moved on to Hidden Lake, where a short hike took us to hundreds of coots gliding single file across the lake and an American Pipit wandering on the road.

After my birding expedition, I re-energized with a passionfruit mango shake at Robert is Here. Later that day I received the complete lists of birds spotted on the trip via the Cornell Lab of Ornithology eBird site, so now I am geared to officially continue my birding career.

Another day, I drove to the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, just west of the turnpike at Boynton Beach Blvd. This preserve is in the northernmost part of the Everglades, near urban development that's overtaking the farmland. Fortunately, more than 145,000 acres of Everglades ecosystem here have been preserved. The visitor center boardwalk is a half-mile walk that takes you past cypress trees, willows, ferns, lichen and

the sounds of woodpeckers and frogs. Beyond the cypress swamp are trails with wide views of wet grasslands, perfect for spotting waterbirds. At the kayak rental stand next to a canal was the biggest alligator I've ever seen. Near the turnoff for the Refuge is Bedner's Fresh Farm Market, a family-owned farm where you can pick strawberries and tomatoes and buy local produce and roasted corn.

The Florida Keys is home to a number of sites on the Trail. Spotting the stocky, big-headed kingfishers perched along the power lines along the Overseas Highway was a promising start. At the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center in Tavernier, a small refuge housing injured birds that cannot be released in the wild, a short boardwalk tour gives a close look at raptors, waterbirds and owls, and a great view of Florida Bay. Nine miles south is Windley Key Fossil Reef Geological State Park. Originally a quarry for keystone used for Henry Flagler's railroad in the early 1900s, this natural hardwood hammock and open areas provide a rest stop for migratory birds in the spring and fall. The Curry Hammock State Park (MM 56) hosts the Florida Keys Hawkwatch from Aug.-Nov. The nature trail on the west side of US1 gets mucky as you tramp around mangroves, but offers spectacular vistas of the bay. After hiking and ocean breezes, stop at the Square Grouper in Islamorada for a fish sandwich or Bad Boy Burrito for a Key West shrimp burrito.

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher



VIC PRISLIPSKY

## PLAN YOUR TRIP

**ARTHUR R. MARSHALL LOXAHATCHEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**  
fws.gov

**CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY**  
ebird.org

**CURRY HAMMOCK STATE PARK AND WINDLEY KEY FOSSIL REEF GEOLOGICAL STATE PARK**  
floridastateparks.org

**EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK**  
nps.gov/ever

**THE GREAT FLORIDA BIRDING TRAIL**  
floridabirdingtrail.com

**TROPICAL AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
tropicalaudubon.org