

## THE BAHAMAS

### Including Central Florida

**Saturday 12th May – Thursday 17th May 2012 (6 days)**  
**Central Florida Post-Tour Extension to Sunday 20th May (3 days)**

**Leaders: Matt Denton and assistant**

**Group Size Limit: 12**

**Tour Category: Easy**

A far-flung scattering of low-lying islands in the tropical Atlantic make up the Bahamas. If ever a group of islands typified the popular view of the 'desert island' then the Bahamas fit the bill – endless miles of white sand beaches, swaying palms, turquoise blue waters, coral reefs and the sun shining down from a blue, blue sky almost every day of the year! We only need to visit the attractive island of Abaco and the island of North Andros, in the northern Bahamas, in order to see the islands' five endemics: Bahama Woodstar, Bahama Swallow, the recently-split Bahama Warbler, Bahama Yellowthroat and the recently-recognized Bahama Oriole. Whilst searching for these five major specialities we will also be able to enjoy a series of predominantly Caribbean birds including the Bahamas form of the Cuban Parrot (which may in future be treated as a fourth Bahamian endemic), West Indian Whistling-Duck, Zenaida Dove, the beautiful Key West Quail-Dove, Great Lizard-Cuckoo, Antillean Nighthawk, Cuban Emerald, West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Pewee, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Loggerhead Kingbird, Red-legged Thrush, Bahama Mockingbird, Olive-capped Warbler, Western Stripe-headed Tanager and Greater Antillean Bullfinch. Interesting seabirds include White-tailed Tropicbird, Bridled and Sooty Terns, Brown Noddy and perhaps Audubon's Shearwater.

After exploring these idyllic islands, and after so much sun and sea, never

mind such relaxing and enjoyable birding, it is going to be hard to drag ourselves away!

The optional extension takes us to Central Florida, home to the only Florida endemic species, the rapidly declining Florida Scrub-Jay. We will first visit Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, home to the largest remaining population of the species, and also a great place for seeing waterbirds close-up, and in particular herons, egrets, ibises and Roseate Spoonbills. Fish Crow and Boat-tailed Grackle are two endemic specialities of the eastern United States.

After moving inland to the Kissimmee region, we will explore the prairies, pine woodlands, scrublands and wetlands. Amongst the special birds here are four species endemic to the southeastern United States: Mottled Duck, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch and Bachman's Sparrow. We will also be wanting to see endangered Snail Kite, the beautiful Swallow-tailed Kite, Crested Caracara, the strange Limpkin and the Florida race of the Sandhill Crane.

The Bahamas and Central Florida offer a very attractive combination for anyone with an interest in the avifauna of this beautiful part of the world. Good standards of accommodation and food, and mostly easy travelling and birding conditions, make for a relaxing but highly rewarding journey.

Birdquest has operated tours to the Bahamas since 2004 and to Florida since 1982.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour begins in the afternoon at Miami International Airport, from where we will take a short flight to the island of Abaco in the northern Bahamas for a three nights stay at Casuarina Point.

**Days 2-3** The pleasant island of Abaco is the second largest of the Bahamas (after Andros), stretching about 180 kilometres (120 miles) from north to south. A series of coral cays dot the waters off the east coast, whilst to the west are the many mangrove islands and tidal flats of The Marls. Although Marsh Harbour and Treasure Cay have been developed as tourist resorts, there are not yet the large-scale developments of Nassau or Freeport, and much of Abaco is still very quiet, with large expanses of native pine woods.

Abaco offers the best birding in the entire Bahamas, with more specialities than any other island, including all three Bahamian endemics (although the Bahama Woodstar is easier to see on North Andros). Even the vicinity of our pleasant resort is splendid for birds, including endemic Bahama Swallows nesting in some dead trees. Other species we are likely to find here include White-cheeked (or Bahamas) Pintail, Turkey Vulture, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Bobwhite, Cuban Emerald, West Indian Woodpecker and, with a little luck, Clapper Rail. At dusk Antillean Nighthawks hunt overhead.

We shall be concentrating much of our time on the southern part of Great Abaco, as far as Abaco National Park and the quaintly-named Hole-in-the-Wall. The large expanses of pine woodland in this area are the headquarters of Abaco's remaining Cuban Parrots (here of an endemic

Bahamian subspecies, which may be split in future as Bahama Parrot) and we should obtain good views of these noisy birds as they head for their roosts. The endemic Bahama Warbler (recently split from Yellowthroated) and the endemic Bahama Yellowthroat can be found fairly easily in this fine area, while other specialities include White-crowned Pigeon, Zenaida Dove, the rather furtive but attractive Key West Quail-Dove, Mangrove Cuckoo, Cuban Pewee, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Grey and Loggerhead Kingbirds, Red-legged Thrush, Bahama Mockingbird, Thick-billed and Black-whiskered Vireos, Golden Warbler (split from Yellow), Olive-capped Warbler, Bananaquit, Western Stripe-headed Tanager (or Western Spindalis), Black-faced Grassquit and Greater Antillean Bullfinch. We may find Bahamas Woodstar here also.

More widespread species found amongst the pine woods or in more open habitats include Western Cattle Egret, American Kestrel, Eurasian Collared Dove, Mourning Dove, Common Ground-Dove, Smooth-billed Ani, Hairy Woodpecker, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Northern Mockingbird, Pine Warbler and Red-winged Blackbird.

We will also take a look out to sea from Crossing Rock and other headlands where we may see passing Least and Bridled Terns, and perhaps Sooty Tern and Brown Noddy. If we are in luck an Audubon's Shearwater will pass by offshore and there is even a chance for Black-capped Petrel if conditions are right. Beaches, headlands, small wetlands, mangroves and tidal flats can be checked for Least Grebe, Brown Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Magnificent Frigatebird, the beautiful White-tailed Tropicbird, Great and Snowy Egrets, Little Blue,

Tricolored and Green Herons, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Killdeer, the endangered Piping Plover and Laughing Gull.

**Day 4** After some early morning birding on Abaco we shall take a short flight to Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas on the island of New Providence and then a short onward flight to Andros Town on the island of North Andros for a two nights stay.

**Day 5** Several specialities that are absent from Abaco can be found on North Andros and in particular we will be concentrating on the endemic Bahama Oriole (now treated as a distinct species, rather than lumped in Black-cowled), as well as West Indian Whistling-Duck, Great Lizard Cuckoo and Black-cowled Oriole. We can also expect to catch up on the attractive but diminutive endemic Bahamas Woodstar if we missed it on Abaco. Other species we may add to the list here include Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, Common Gallinule (now treated as distinct from Common Moorhen), Wilson's Plover, Burrowing Owl and Shiny Cowbird.

**Day 6** This morning we will return to Miami airport where the tour ends.

#### **Central Florida Post-Tour Itinerary**

**Day 6** From Miami we will drive north to Titusville on Florida's Atlantic coast for an overnight stay.

**Day 7** The vast coastal marshes and open oak and sand pine scrub habitats forming Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge will be the focus of today's

birding. Our prime target species here is the endemic Florida Scrub-Jay and the refuge holds the largest surviving population of this rapidly declining species. We will surely get some excellent views of these inquisitive birds, which have suffered greatly due to 'development' of their preferred habitat. Two other important species we should see at Merritt Island are Fish Crow and Boat-tailed Grackle, both of which are endemic to the coastal eastern United States.

Elsewhere in the refuge, kilometre after kilometre of levees (raised dykes) traverse large salt and brackish water impoundments, allowing us to get very close to a wide variety of bird species, and providing some good photographic opportunities. Large numbers of wading birds congregate here and most of them are incredibly tame and approachable. These include the ungainly looking Wood Stork, now increasing again throughout Florida after reaching a low population ebb several decades ago, as well as numerous Great and Snowy Egrets and White Ibises. Great Blue, Tricoloured and Little Blue Herons and Glossy Ibises are only slightly less numerous and there will be a number of Green Herons stalking the shallows. Patient searching should reveal small numbers of impressive Reddish Egrets, present here in both dark and white colour morphs, as well as gaudy, carmine-coloured Roseate Spoonbills. Roadside channels hold Anhingas and American Alligators.

The wildfowl that spend the winter here will largely have left, but we should find a few lingering individuals.

Mudflats and lagoons attract shorebirds including Black-necked Stilt, Grey (or Black-bellied) Plover, Lesser Yellowlegs, Ruddy Turnstone, Least and Western Sandpipers, Willet and Short-billed Dowitcher. Ospreys are often in view overhead and we should also see the impressive Bald Eagle, as well as Black Vulture and Red-shouldered Hawk. Other species are likely to include Clapper Rail, Royal Tern, Loggerhead Shrike, Common Yellowthroat and Eastern Meadowlark. During the late afternoon we will head inland to St Cloud for a two nights stay.

**Day 8** Central Florida was once a wilderness of prairies, pine forests, scrublands and wetlands, but intensive development by humans has changed all that, and nowadays some of these habitats, especially the native scrublands, have been reduced in extent by up to 85%, causing the populations of many birds, including the Florida Scrub-Jay, to decline greatly. Species of particular interest that we will be wanting to see while we explore the region include Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch and Bachman's Sparrow (all three endemic to the south-eastern United States), the elegant Swallow-tailed Kite, Crested Caracara, the Florida race of the Sandhill Crane, the splendid Pileated Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Summer Tanager. We may also find Grasshopper Sparrow.

At Lake Kissimmee, or at one of the many other lakes in this region, we have a very good chance of seeing the rare and endangered Snail Kite (happily now recovered

to over 300 individuals in Florida after plunging as low as 30). We can also expect to see Mottled Duck (endemic to the southeastern United States), as well as Least Bittern, Black-crowned Night-Heron, the strange Limpkin and Purple Gallinule.

Other species of wide distribution we should encounter include Wild Turkey (positively common in this area), Burrowing Owl, Common Nighthawk, Downy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Kingbird, Great Crested Flycatcher, Purple Martin, Blue Jay, American Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Mockingbird, Brown Thrasher, White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos, Northern Parula, Yellow Warbler, Northern Cardinal, Eastern Towhee and Common Grackle.

**Day 9** After some final birding in Central Florida we will head for Orlando airport where extension ends around midday.

#### **Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The hotels/motels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus/passenger van or car. Roads in the Bahamas are rather variable in quality, but distances are short.

**Walking:** The walking effort is easy throughout.

**Climate:** Warm or hot, and mostly dry and sunny, though it can be overcast and it may rain. It will be rather humid.

**Bird Photography:** Opportunities are quite good.