

Photo Journal: September 1, 2007, Chokoloskee Bay (Everglades National Park)

This is Labor Day weekend, and today is the first day of Snook season, which is why we are here today. This means a lot of fishermen and a lot of powerboats are heading out to the gulf. We put-in at Chokoloskee Island Park marina, which has one boat ramp, meaning we share the space with large boats. We arrived very early (6:30 am) and met up with a couple of our fishing friends who had parked a trailer at the park and were spending the entire weekend in fishing heaven. This day was calm (and hot as usual), but with impending late morning, early afternoon storms on the horizon, typical summer day here.

We were on the water by 7 am and it would be an out-going tide all morning (high tide at 6:30 am). It would be a couple hours before the oyster bars revealed themselves and the birds out feeding among them. Eventually I would head south toward the roseate spoonbills that have been residing near Chokoloskee Pass for the past couple months. They would not be clustered on the oyster bar in the bay yet, rather, they would be hanging out in the mangrove canopies near the pass. I decided to take my time getting there as the morning sun began to rise and was not yet providing enough light for morning bird photography.

I took the back route to get there by crossing the bay and going in among the triangle maze of mangrove islands. I call this area the triangle because the area is bordered by Chokoloskee Bay on the northeast side, Sandfly Pass on the west side and Chokoloskee Pass on the south side, forming a triangle within these borders. During the summer, this is the area I spend my time paddling around looking for photo opportunities. As I paddled along with mangrove islands, I noticed the sun coming up over Chokoloskee Island, just on the other side of some mangrove. It was a bright orange ball in a cloudless horizon. I pulled out my camera and wiped off the lens which always fogs up as soon as you expose it to the humid air. The sun was rising fast so I had little time to get a decent shot before the sky lost its red glow. I positioned my canoe in front of some mangroves where the sun had not yet risen above the canopy. I let the boat drift with the current along the mangroves and got some shots before the sun rose too high. The mangroves were nicely silhouetted with the orange sky. In post-processing stage, I played with one of the photos, first making it black and white with Adobe Elements and then using Picasa software to add color to a specific area of the photo. Here's the Picasa version.



After the sunrise photo session, I continued on toward Chokoloskee Pass. In the bay, the boat traffic was not bad and mostly in the distance as they headed out to the gulf via Rabbit Key Pass. I headed back out to the bay and could now see the red specks in the mangroves ½ mile away. I headed in that direction but not directly toward the roseates. Rather, I kept a distance between me and the mangroves where they were roosting in great numbers. I did this because the out going tide would drag me toward the mangroves in no time. By getting a distance, I could line up where I wanted to be relative to the birds and get my camera ready as I let the current move me directly toward the birds. This works very well here in

Chokoloskee Bay because the morning light is to my back. By the time I arrived at the roseate palace, it would be perfect lighting.

This is the third time this summer I have photographed this specific population of roseates. Today, I would have the least amount of luck. For some reason, they were more skittish than usual and even with a comfortable distance between the water and the high mangrove canopy, they would not stick around. I managed a couple of shots, but nothing like on the other days.

While heading toward the roseates, I noticed several brown pelicans in flight around a small mangrove island situated between Chokoloskee and Rabbit Key Passes. I decided to head over there after the roseate photo session. This island is a popular nesting area for brown pelicans in the winter. They would not be nesting now, but seeing several of them flying around was an indication that they have returned for the winter. I expected to see dozens of them hanging out in this island. Unlike brown pelicans, white pelicans do not roost in the trees. Soon, the white pelicans will be returning as well and it is the oyster beds in the bay where you find them.

I approached the brown pelican island in a round-a-bout way in order to get myself lined up with the best lighting and the current. I let the current move me closer to the pelicans once I got into the best lighting position. It was difficult shooting the birds that were nestled in the mangrove branches because they blend so well. So I concentrated on those birds that were taking off or landing. Here is one of those shots. This is also my favorite brown pelican shot I've taken so far. The bird is about to land in the mangroves.



Getting closer to the island caused some distress for the birds and several of them took off toward another small island near by. I headed in that direction and managed to get another flight shot along the way. Here's one where a bird is beginning to take off.



Soon, I heard a large powerboat near by, coming out of Chokoloskee Pass and then I heard a voice. It was my friend, Capt. Charles Wright, with a group of eco tourists on his boat. He has a great business in the 10,000 Islands for people who want to fish, photograph, camp, or simply tour the area. You can check out his website at: http://www.evergladesareatours.com/birding_tours.htm. I call Capt. Wright “the angel of the Everglades” because he has helped us on occasion while paddling in some very remote areas of the Everglades. He has delivered ice and wine on occasion or checked up on us when he was in the area. It’s comforting to know that he is a VHF-call away if we needed help. We’ve also hired him to shuttle us to or from various points. It’s fun running into him among the 10,000 Islands, a kindred soul sharing this vast playground of wilderness.

By now, the tide had been going out for a couple hours and some of the oyster beds were exposed above the water line. I hung out awhile near the large oyster bed where the roseates would soon be. While there, a Forster’s tern (at least I think that’s what it was) was diligently dive bombing the water for fish. I thought I would try to photograph it as it dived within 100 ft of my boat. In the air, the bird would get into a position before a fast descent into the water. As soon as it did that, I got focused on the bird and then aimed directly below at water level anticipating the bird’s dive. I wasn’t able to capture the bird’s contact with the water, but I did get one shot of the bird in flight. Here’s a significantly cropped shot. I also rotated the photo 90 degrees.



After waiting awhile, I decided the roseates would probably not show up with my boat near by. So I headed toward the northern area of the triangle. My fishing buddies were on the bay, along the edge of the mangrove triangle and I passed them as I headed toward the northern point of the triangle. I spotted an osprey flying in the area of the point. This particular bird owns this section of the islands; I’ve spotted him in the same area each time. That’s the nice thing about being familiar with this area, you begin to recognize individual birds and you know where they live. The osprey had perched high above the canopy and was surveying his kingdom when I came up below around the point. I managed to get a few shots and below is one with direct eye contact. The side light managed to catch one of the eyes.

After rounding the point I headed over to an area where oyster and sand bars are numerous. At low tide, I could not get inside this area, but today, I still had that opportunity. There were several ibises and an occasional heron feeding on the oyster bars. Back inside the triangle I found a large sand bar where ibises were feeding. The tidal current was very strong through the pathways that wind through the islands. I took some shots of the ibises and explored the area a bit more. By now, the clouds were darkening in the horizon and it was already 11 am. Amazing how time goes so fast out here. My fishing buddies were already heading back to the marina, so I headed in that direction as well. There were some brown pelicans hanging out on the pilings of an old dock near the marina and I hung out and took some photos as I waited for a powerboat to get into the water.



Today, the highlight was the brown pelicans, one of my favorite subjects to photograph. Like the ibis, brown pelicans seem very common. My photography friend Daniel and I had a conversation recently about how some birds are more wary of humans than others. I once ranked birds on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most skittish or wary of approaching humans. I placed great white egrets and blue herons at 10 (I created this scale from my paddling experiences, I disregarded boardwalk photography). I had ranked brown pelicans as a 3, especially those that hang out near the marinas. The population I photographed today out on the bay was a bit more difficult to capture, but even so, most of them did not fly away at the drop of a hat. Ibises are much like that too. On Biscayne Bay and here, I've been able to get very close to them as they are feeding. Daniel thought that this is because ibises will eat just about anything; they are urban birds in many ways. For instance, I can photograph ibises any day I want, they are right outside my house. Brown pelicans are opportunists as well, waiting for a hand out when fishermen are cleaning their fish on the docks or their boats. Basically, ibises and brown pelicans are more use to humans. Before you disregard these birds as too common or dare I say, boring, give them a chance. Frankly, I find them more interesting to photograph than a great white egret any day. When preening, ibises get themselves into comical body positions and facial expressions. The same with pelicans, they can vary themselves in endless ways. As a tribute, here's one shot of a brown pelican, taken awhile back with my Canon Powershot.



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