

I've been praying for a clear day for so long I can hardly remember what a blue sky looks like. The past few weekends have been overcast, generally rainy and quite windy. To top it off, our attention was on tropical storm Noel that barely edged the east coast of Florida and turned its northwesterly route back to the east and toward the Bahamas. Florida got lucky again this hurricane season (it isn't over yet!), but the close brush with Noel gave us 40+ knot winds on most days this week. By Friday, things had started to calm down and we were ready to get out on the water on Saturday.

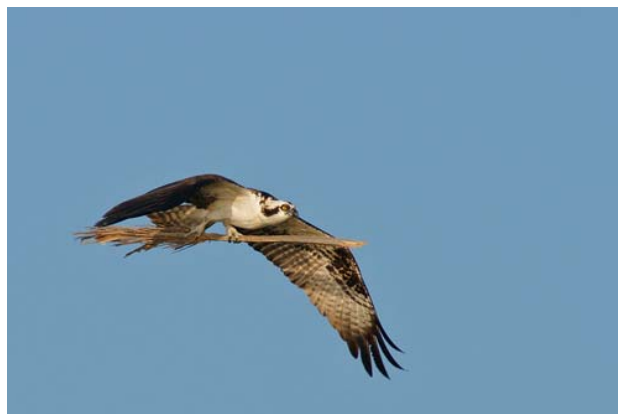
Today, we would have a low tide at 6 am with an in-coming all morning. The winds would be coming from the north, so from the Flamingo put-in, we would stay shielded from the wind (expected to be about 10-15 knots) by staying close to the mangroves along the shoreline of Flamingo. There would be plenty of opportunities in that area for photography.

We got on the water by 7:30 am. It was a very comfortable temperature, probably high 60s, low 70s at the most. The beautiful rose-colored sun was glowing over the horizon as we pulled up to the put-in. I had brought my tripod expecting to arrive before this time, but unfortunately, I had only about 1 minute of good sunrise photography. So, I let that one go and got my boat and gear ready for the water. I suppose every sunrise or sunset is unique but I don't get upset if I miss an opportunity for a shot. After all, everyday offers a sunrise and a sunset.

Today I brought both cameras, the A700 attached to the 300mm and the A100 attached to the 18-70mm. I thought I would have some opportunities to get some wide angle shots, in which I like to include the canoe bow. There would be several kayak fishermen here today and for every fisherman present was a brightly colored kayak, orange, yellow, blue and white. Birds would be the priority today, but I can always count on the fishermen for photo opportunities.

Despite the winds, the water was not very choppy today, probably because of the mangrove wall protecting us. I proceeded from the campground where we put in, and headed toward the marina, about 0.8 miles away. If you look at the map above, you can see the channel coming out from the marina. To the right of it out in the open water is a small round island. That is the area I was heading toward. At low tide, there is a large sand flat usually full of birds near the island. When I was here in August, I captured a reddish egret in the morning light on that sand flat; very beautiful. Heading toward the marina area I spotted a couple great blue herons, always on the alert and never letting me get too close. Then I spotted a couple osprey, usually you hear them before you see them. Near the old lodge the osprey were flying around and I noticed that they had a nest behind one of the buildings. I stopped in front of the lodge where there is about 200 feet of open shoreline. Just then an osprey swooped down toward the beach and picked up some beach debris and flew off toward its nest. It happened so fast I only managed a couple

shots and both were blurred beyond keeping. I decided to stake out and hang out for awhile. The osprey was obviously building a nest and would most certainly be back to get more nest material. Soon an osprey appeared and was holding a very long stick. I managed to get some shots, one a keeper. Here it is.



It would be a busy osprey day. I spotted several osprey nests near the ranger's station and marina. In fact, there is a nest firmly planted on the boat lift. There is also a nest on the green marker near the marina channel heading out to Flamingo Bay. All the nests I spotted, except for the one on the green marker appeared to have an osprey couple in residence. Soon, mating season will begin for these birds and come spring, there will be babies to feed. Osprey parents are quite vigilant, not letting their babies out of sight for very long. In the meantime, I was content with looking for osprey in the sky. Not only were they busy building homes, but it was a good fishing day for them as well. I got a couple shots of an osprey with fish in talon flying overhead, but only managed mediocre images at best. You can anticipate an osprey's flight because they are quite vocal when busy fishing or nesting. As soon as you hear one, get the camera ready and look to the sky.

In the meantime, there were several terns and gulls, willets and plovers flying around and feeding on the shore. I continued along the shoreline and crossed the channel leading into the marina. I arrived at the island near the marina and continued following the mangroves on one side, the island on the other. Today, the sand flat near the island was covered with water, so no wading birds today. Along the mangroves, I spotted some brown pelicans, a white ibis, several little blue herons and a great blue heron.



I took a few shots here and there as I continued to watch the sky closely for osprey. I expected that there would be several birds on the island and as I got closer, I noticed a kayak fisherman taking advantage of the mangrove shallows along the island. I also noticed that his close presence made several brown pelicans nervous as they flew off the island two or three at a time. I noticed that most of them flew toward a more distant island, about ½ mile away into the gulf. I would head over there soon.

After coasting along the mangrove shoreline, I decided to head out toward the distant island. I would be more exposed to the wind, but the water did not seem too choppy, so I wasn't too concerned. Besides, it is shallow enough I can put the stake-out pole in the water if I wanted. As I headed out to the island, I noticed a large flock of white birds in the distance. This would be the first of many white pelican flocks I would spot all morning. It seemed that there was a sky-road that they took coming in from the south and heading north to some roosting spot north of the mangrove shoreline. To where they were heading I haven't a clue; I would watch them soar over the mangroves and then disappear somewhere north of the marina. I also spotted a large flock of gulls in the middle of the gulf, not close to any piece of land. There would be several cormorants hanging around as well.

Soon, I was east of the island, with the sun behind me and the wind blowing me further south. There were several dozens of brown pelicans and cormorants and although I never got more than 100 ft from the island, they would get startled and several would fly off, circle around and some would be brave enough to come flying back. It was at this point that I realized something annoying about my camera (something I eventually fixed). I was shooting on aperture priority mode (I almost always do) and a nice feature is that I can use the rear control to change the aperture. But, the rear control is located where my finger always seems to touch the camera when I am picking it up or setting it down. Therefore, I would be changing the aperture without wanting too. In other words, this great feature was turning into an inconvenience. I decided I would train my finger not to touch the control! I would find my aperture at f22 or some ridiculous value as I started to shoot a beautiful brown pelican in flight. I didn't want to take the time to figure out how to fix this, but after getting home and looking at the manual, I took care of the situation.

Either because of that, or the wind moving my boat quite briskly, I blurred some of the best pelican shots I ever had. I had 3 continuous shots of a bird that filled the frame so well, but unfortunately, they are all throw aways. Such is photography in a canoe. When it was all said and done, I did manage a few decent shots and here is one:



I started to head back to the other island, but detoured over to the flock of gulls in the water. They didn't seem to mind me too much so they never flew away. I was kind of hoping they would take flight as a mass flight shot of gulls is much more interesting than a group of floating gulls. I got back over to the mangrove shoreline and honed in on the osprey. I watched several of them and continued to try to get a good flight shot. I headed in the direction of the put-in, and shortly after passing the ranger station and

rounding a mangrove corner, I spotted a great white heron in some mangrove branches. Excellent lighting and once in the right position, would be perched nicely for full view. I kept a distance of about 50 feet and he was quite still in this protected area. Surprisingly, the bird did not seem to mind me so I set up for several vertical shots. The bird was very cooperative and didn't seem to mind my presence at all. After several shots, I started paddling away and immediately spotted an osprey flying by with a fish. Wow, it decided to land in a branch just above the white heron. I had to go back there for this! I got back into the position I was in earlier and watched the osprey as it perched on a branch with its fresh catch. I was hoping it would start tearing the fish apart but it didn't. Rather it stood with the fish in its talons and stayed alert to what was going on around him. Occasionally, the osprey would bend down and look at the bird, but never once picked at it. I believe the bird is waiting for the fish to die or maybe I made it too nervous. It seemed very alert and while I managed to photograph it in good light, after about 10 minutes or so, it flew off into a higher mangrove. Here are two shots, one of the white heron and one of the osprey with what looks like a small snook:



I got back to the put in after having used up my 2G of memory. By the way, I never use more than 2G at a time, kind of paranoid about losing all those photos. To me, it is easier to deal with a loss of 150 photos than 1500. It was a great day on the bay. After looking at the photos, I've decided that I am very happy with the new A700. The vivid colors are great and it's ease of use (correcting exposure, changing ISO and drive mode, auto exposure lock, etc) with some very nice updates on the controls.

After loading up the boats, we headed over to the Anhinga Trail and stopped at Mzarek and Nine-mile ponds on the way. I wanted to check them out for birds, but there were none to be seen. We ate our lunch

at the Anhinga Trail and watched all the northerners coming in to tour around the Everglades. The water levels are very high and for that reason or perhaps because of the higher than normal temperatures we've been having this fall, there were very few birds. Up close, I spotted a couple anhingas and a couple little blue herons. I did find a green heron, but it was too hidden for a photograph. Some gators were swimming around and we spotted several gar and a soft shell turtle, and even a small tarpon (about 1 ½ ft long). How it got there I have no idea. As far as photographing went, I managed one close up of a little blue heron, mainly for the beautiful background (blue water and green water grass). I did manage my first successful butterfly shot. This is a gulf fritillary.



It was a great day overall, the blue sky was a nice change of pace and I'm finally feeling comfortable with the camera. I did take care of the aperture dial so no problems there. I am looking forward to taking it with me on our kayak camping trips that are coming up very soon. I'm starting to plan my strategy. But before that, I have more canoeing planned; Chokoloskee Bay next weekend if all goes as planned and the weekend after an overnight trip on Fisheating Creek.

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