

Photo Journal: October 13, 2007, Biscayne Bay from Blackpoint Marina; with a new camera

Today would be a challenge; I had several things going against me. First, it would be a windy day, steady winds at 15 and gusting to 20 knots, continuously worsening as the morning wore on. Second, it was over cast, low lying dark cumulus clouds covered the sky for the majority of the morning. Third, I would be taking out a new camera, the Sony A700 which I received in the mail one day prior and had very little time to get acquainted with. And the last thing, which I did not know until after getting on the water, is that a powerboat would cause me some frustration as its noisy motor managed to find it's way within close proximity of about 5 dozen roosting egrets that I was about to capture. I was squaring up to shoot the egret community with a few moments of front light available and beautiful gray skies in the background behind the white feathers, and the noisy boat killed that opportunity as the skittish birds began to fly away, one by one, then two by two, and so on until all the birds were in the air flying toward a distant point never to be seen again on this morning. I watched them fly away, leaving me and the stupid powerboat on the edge of the lagoon where the birds were quietly roosting prior to all the mayhem. Here's a flight shot of the birds as they make their escape.

We arrived at the put-in around 7 am and took our time unloading and gearing up as we waited for a friend to arrive. At last, we were on the water by a late 7:45 am. Without clouds the sun would be intensely over the horizon by now, but today, there would be a constant overcast. I headed out through the ¼ mile creek toward the bay. The water level was high by now, the in-coming tide having had 2 hours to work its way in, not to mention the westerly winds that was supplying the tide with greater momentum and drive. The creek was deep with water as I paddled toward the opening.

Today, I would have two cameras with me, both Sonys. I have been using the A100 and now had a second, the A700, an upgrade. Having two cameras on board would allow me to use two different lenses, both available on a heartbeat. I wanted to test the new A700 today and get use to having two cameras, but today would not be the best day for a test. Nevertheless, as I paddled through the mangrove tunnel, one camera was secured in the pelican case (the A100 with a 70-300mm zoom lens) and the A700 attached to the 300mm AF telephoto plus 1.4X teleconverter was inside two dry bags, tightly closed. By the way, the A700, with or without a lens attached, will not fit in my 1300 pelican case.

As I paddled through the protected creek and got closer to the bay, I could see the water whipping up and moving fast across the open bay. This would be a challenge for any kind of photography, not to mention that I was learning to use a new camera. The clouds were still dark, so the light was low and diffuse. I decided to stay close to the mangrove shore line and follow it north as it led me toward a small lagoon area where there would be some protected spots behind several mangrove islands. This had been a good spot for several wading birds at low tide, maybe I would get lucky today and find some in the mangrove canopies. This morning, the water would be too high for birds to be wading and fishing. I would have to search for them among the mangroves. As I headed in that direction, I noticed something in the distance that looked like a large group of white birds in the mangroves; egrets perhaps. I headed toward the protected area and noticed a couple powerboats nearby. It is possible for powerboats to come in this close when the water is this high, but rarely do I see more than a flats boat with a trolling motor around here. Today, there were two boats, one loaded with a group of very loud men, and another with a man and two boys. The boy boat did not have a trolling motor; rather, it was equipped with a very loud motor manned by one of the boys.

The wind was heading directly at me from the north as I paddled diligently toward the protected area. I hadn't brought out either camera; they both remained hidden in water proof containers. I'm not very confident in the canoe with several thousand dollars worth of camera equipment on board and decided to wait it out before pulling out a camera until I got inside the creek where the water would be much calmer. The waves were not terribly high, but it was enough to keep me on edge.

The only birds I could see were several high flying terns and vultures. I did spot an osprey and could hear its tell-tale high pitched screech hidden in the mangroves as it circled back into hiding. Ospreys are majestic and bold, but their voices are not. Rather, they have a surprisingly high pitched squeek that is

recognizable from any other bird of prey. That distinction is what makes that sound unique, you have to appreciate that about them.

I got closer to the protected area and paddled inside a creek where I would be protected from the wind. The vultures were swirling around behind me (waiting for something?) and I thought I would anchor and maybe catch one in flight. Vultures are beautiful and graceful in flight, never disregard these birds. They ride the thermals with their very large, wide wings and today, they would head into the wind and stop in mid-air, as if they were on a treadmill. Then they would swoop around in circles a few times before doing it again. I anchored at the stern and allowed the tide to move my bow in the direction of the current, allowing me to face the area where the birds had been flying. As soon as I got into position, I noticed there were no more birds flying around. I sat and waited a few moments, but no birds. I decided to get the smaller lens and camera out and sat for awhile in this calm spot. On the other side of the mangroves I could hear the boy boat, it sounded like it was coming around the mangroves and would be in sight any second. I decided to head to the other side of the creek where I would come into the area where earlier I had spotted the egrets in the trees. As I headed out of the creek, there was the powerboat on my right, moving along the edge of the mangroves. I would not have my usual peace and quiet today it would seem.

I ignored them and headed the opposite direction toward the egret tree. I was again heading into the wind as I spotted the egrets. They were about ¼ mile away and I decided to head a bit east of them toward a small creek where I would get my telephoto lens set up and get the camera settings where I wanted. I was still fumbling with the new camera, and decided to just take my time, the birds had no reason to fly away anyway. I paddled against the wind, constantly watching the birds and eventually got inside a protected area where I banked against some mangroves and got the big lens and new camera ready to go. I had taken a few shots with the other camera on the way there, the birds had spooked and all flew off the tree, swirled around for a few seconds and then landed back into the mangroves. I got a couple shot and realized I had not formatted my memory card. I decided to erase about 50 photos from a previous day as I sat in the mangroves. This took a few minutes, and another 3-4 minutes getting the new camera ready. I was in no hurry and besides, the clouds were shifting and I would have some nice sunlight in a few moments. And with the dark sky as a background, this would make for very nice lighting on the white birds.



Once I was ready, I paddled into a clearing that would bring me about 100 feet or so from the birds into an opening. Just as I rounded the corner and got into a position to drift toward the birds stealthily, the boy boat with its noisy motor slowly came up between me and the bird tree. The occupants were completely oblivious or could not care less. It was moving slowly as the engine was cut and it continued drifting. At first that didn't seem to be a problem or cause for alarm with the birds. So I started photographing the birds as they bantered about in the mangroves, about 30 of them. They were mostly

cattle egret with a few snowys to boot. All of a sudden, the boy boat's engine started up again and the boat proceeded to move closer to the bird tree. Well, that was it, the photo opp would soon be over, but not before I captured most of the birds in flight. I rifled off a couple shots and realized I did not have the camera in continuous shooting mode, so was limited in the number of frames I could shoot in the short amount of time I had. I managed one or two half-way decent shot before the birds flew off across the bay, to where I have no idea. I included one shot here. I wasn't entirely disappointed; this one at least illustrates the large number of birds that were roosting in the mangroves.

I decided to head back to the protected area where I would meander around for awhile, maybe run across the egret group again. I never saw them again, but I spotted a couple great blue herons here and there. They are extremely shy. I could not get closer than a few hundred feet before the bird would fly off to a more distant safe spot. That's typical for great blue herons, rarely have I gotten within 100 feet of these birds in the wild. The closest I've been has been at low tide on Biscayne Bay when I spotted one feeding in the shallows. It didn't seem to be bothered by me, but it made sure it had a comfortable distance from the intruding canoe at all times.

I did get a few shots of a vulture perched on some dead branches. The bird didn't mind me being right under him, so I took some shots, moved around a bit and took some more. He was giving a very nice profile but for the life of me, I could not get the exposure right. I spot-metered on the dark bird which resulted in over-exposed backgrounds. I adjusted the EV scale and that helped quite a bit. With the wave action under my boat, I never managed to get a sharp focus on the bird's face. None of the photos was worth keeping or showing here.

The winds had kicked up quite a bit so with both cameras around my neck, I decided to follow the mangrove shoreline back to my starting point. Surely there would be some birds along the way. Usually at the mouth of the creek there are several ibises, herons and egrets in the vicinity. With the high water levels, they would not be easy to find. I did find an immature blue heron that was standing in an opening on a mangrove branch. Not a photo to write home about, but I thought I got good focus on the bird's face and it was well exposed, unlike the earlier vulture shots.



After meandering around a bit, we decided to head back. As I meandered through the creek, the sun had come out again and was casting some light on the dark mangrove forest. I looked for snails and crabs and found a couple opportunities for photos. For a close up using the 420mm, I need a considerable distance and then try to spot focus on the tiny snail or crab. Not an easy thing to do. I managed one good shot, here it is. I love these photos of snails on mangroves. A few days later, I was at the Fairchild Tropical Gardens and came across a large rainbow eucalyptus tree. The tree's bark is colored with streaks of various shades of orange, red, and green. On the tree I spotted several snails. The snails residing closer to the tree's roots were dark, while the snails up higher in the more lightly colored areas, blended in with the light colors. And if you look at the photo here, one would conclude that snails are like

chameleons and can camouflage themselves. That's what I love about nature, everything has a deep quality to it, and sometimes, you have to work at finding that quality.



My first day with the new camera was not an entire bust. Having two cameras accessible to me on the boat was a treat, but unfortunately there was little or no opportunity to use a wider angle lens today. But I'll be back. In the meantime, here's one last photo of my friend, back in her boat after a long time out of it.



All Rights Reserved
©Constance Mier, 2007