

Photo Journal: August 18, 2007, Chokoloskee Bay (Everglades) at its finest

Summer is coming to a close for me as I head into another full year of teaching and research at the university. This summer has been particularly fun for me with new camera equipment and lots of trips to Biscayne and Chokoloskee Bays. The only area I have not been to yet is the Flamingo area of the Everglades park. Hopefully, I will be out there next weekend if all goes well. Labor Day weekend should also allow me to come back to Chokoloskee Bay and/or Biscayne Bay. Otherwise, any paddling I do will be fewer and far between until November. In November, we start our overnight trips to the Everglades and possibly some other areas further north. These will be primarily kayak trips in the glades, with a few canoe trips thrown in.

Today, we have calm conditions, an outgoing tide and what seems to be a cooler than usual temperature for summer. All in all, great conditions for a morning on the bay and exploring the mangrove islands that surround it. If you read my last entry for Biscayne Bay (August 14), you'll know I was having problems with the teleconverter I attached to my 300mm lens. Today, I left the teleconverter at home and while I would not enjoy the extra 120mm that comes with it, I would have an easier time focusing and the photo quality would be noticeably better. I was on the water by 7:30 am and first thing I did was head in the direction of Chokoloskee pass where the flock of roseate spoonbills are currently residing. I first saw them on July 14th (see photo journal for the story) and was anticipating them today. On that day the tide was low enough to expose a well known oyster bar near the pass. In the winter, white pelicans reside there, and in summer it is the roseate spoonbill that moves in. As I headed in that direction, I did not see any indication of birds, meaning the tide was too high to expose the oyster bed. This meant the birds would be roosting in the nearby mangroves. So I headed toward the mangroves and once close enough, spotted the notorious dots of red speckling the canopies. There were the reliable spoonbills, biding their time as the tide rolled out. It would be a couple hours before they had an oyster bar from which to catch a meal.

I paddled closer but kept my distance. Once lined up for the best lighting, I let the tide move me toward the canopies while I got my camera ready. I kept enough distance to comfortably get myself ready as I drifted closer. This allows me to take a better look and get into the right position for shooting. The birds were roosting high and many were further back where you cannot sight them from below. Shooting the roseates today would be more challenging than the last time. But, as usual, their bright red feathers and spoon-shaped bills make them great subjects despite the difficulty. There were a couple cattle egrets amongst them as well. Here are a couple shots from the day.





After harassing the roseates, I moved on and came inside some of the creeks that wind through various islands. I would eventually make my way back to where I started by doing a loop of sorts. My fishing companions were somewhere in there and I would most likely come across them at some point. Maybe if they are lucky, I can get lucky and get a shot or two of a fisherman making a catch. In the meantime, I wandered about, hung out near the mangroves for awhile looking for mangrove crabs to photograph. They are very, very elusive and would not have anything to do with that today. As I examined the mangrove roots for crabs I heard the tell-tale noise of a dolphin releasing air through its blowhole. It's a beautiful sound. It's like the sound you make when you get some water inside a snorkel and blow out forcefully. I heard it earlier today when I was photographing the roseates. As I was attempting to line up for some shots of the birds, I heard that sound of a dolphin, it comes about every 30 seconds or so. Whenever I heard the dolphin's breathing, it was closer. Great, now I have to choose between dolphin and spoonbill; as it were, the dolphins didn't get so close to me and passed by about 200 feet away. I wasn't about to try to catch them.

I heard them again back in the mangrove creeks and this time they were closer; there were 2 of them. The dolphins are feeding on mullets in shallow water along the mangroves. They move with the tide so these two were heading out toward the gulf. I followed them for awhile (not an easy thing to do) and for posterity, here is one of the shots I got of them. Not so close, but a nice shot of the mangroves anyway. I have another encounter with dolphins later in the day; that story will come later.



Eventually I come up on the spot where by now several oyster beds are exposed. As the tide rolls out, more oyster bars are above the waterline and become quite a hazard. If you are unsuspecting, you may be paddling along just fine in shallow water and all of a sudden, "scrrratch!" Like fingers across the chalkboard, you've just landed a sharp clump of oysters. Inside these mangroves, you can find yourself in a situation where you cannot get back to the bay the same way you came; rather, you have to go a long

way around to avoid the oyster beds. Today, I was in an area I am most familiar with and was close to the bay, so I would not have that problem. At this particular spot I came to, a great white heron resides, I've photographed him here before. Today, the bird was perched in the mangroves in his usual spot. By now, I have found my fishing companions who had come upon a snook hole near some oyster beds and mangroves; perfect for fishing. They had been hooking some relatively large fish before I arrived, so I hung out with them anticipating some action. As usual, the camera brings bad luck to the fishermen and with the slightest sight of a camera lens, the fish freeze and no longer pay attention to the fishermen's lures. At least, that's how it's perceived by my companions. So be it, I would not get any shots of humans in action, but there were plenty of birds successfully catching fish around here. I'd concentrate on them.

I came across an area that is great for bird shots with very large oyster beds, even at high tide. I found the usual white ibis, an osprey and some nighthérons. Here's a shot of the osprey, though not a close one.



I headed back toward the open bay, which by now had several oyster bars exposed where earlier a canoe could cruise across with no problem. Here, I found 3 yellowcrown nighthérons, each with an oyster island. They have been very generous this year to me, providing many great shots of them fishing. I find that if I catch the bird in the middle of a catch, it tends to not notice me. The concentration of the bird is exact and once it spots that crab, I am no longer an issue. This makes it easier for me to get closer without scaring it away. The tide pushes closer to the bird as I capture the action and eventually, if I don't anchor or paddle back, I do get too close and away the bird goes. Here's one of the shots.



After that, we headed back. I was able to capture a brown pelican in flight as it passed by. Here's that shot, converted to black and white. This is a juvenile brown pelican, kind of dull in color. I thought the black and white would enhance the detail in its feathers.



We got to shore and by now the tide had receded quite a bit. There were some shorebirds feeding near by (snowy egret, blueheron, plovers, sandpipers). We had gotten the car loaded up and my camera was snugly put away. Then all of a sudden the dolphins appear near shore. They come close to the shore during low tide and what they do is impressive. They move like torpedoes in the water toward the shallow end of the shore and make this incredible U-turn at full speed. This stirs up the fish and I can only imagine what incredible fish-catching is going on under water. They continue their feeding and after a few seconds of hesitation, I pull the camera back out and head over to the shore to get as close to them as possible. I take my clean sandals off and wade in the sinking mud and start shooting as soon as the action started up again. Oh my God! I'm out of memory! I start deleting those photos I know are losers and get myself some more shots. Here's one of the shots (significantly cropped) I managed before the memory card filled up. Notice in the photo there is a dolphins head on the right and another dolphin's dorsal fin to the left of it. It seems there are 2 dolphins going head to head! This is a common occurrence with the dolphins, so I figure next time I'll be better prepared for the action. I'll stay in my boat and wait for them; that's what I'll do.



This was another great day on Chokoloskee. If the shots I have here don't convince you of the diversity of wildlife one can easily spot during a very short paddle around the bay, here's one more. I consider this a tribute to the park and the cormorant the sentinel watching out for the park.



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