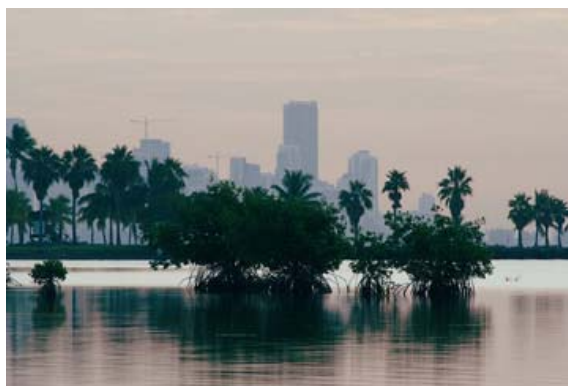


Photo Journal: July 22, 2007, a morning on Biscayne Bay at low tide

Two days prior to this trip, I purchased a telephoto prime lens from my friend Jack Rogers. The lens is a Minolta AF300mm/f4, so it's faster than my current zoom lens and can work very well with a 1.4X teleconverter, which I have not purchased yet as of this writing. I was anxious to test this new lens and had a few new issues to deal with. First, my camera with lens no longer fits into my pelican case. For today, I placed the camera with lens attached in a dry bag and covered that with a larger dry bag. This would suffice for now. The other issue I had was the added weight of the lens, approximately 3 lb. This doesn't sound like much, but I swear, 3 lb felt more like 10 as I held it in shooting position for several minutes at a time. I'll get use to it. In fact, it's a form of progressive overload training, going from a little Pentax Optio, to a Canon Powershot, to a Sony A100 SLR with 75-300mm zoom lens to the Sony with a real telephoto lens. My wrist and arm muscles will just have to adapt.

Let me add to my comment above, the muscles feeling fatigued while shooting should really not be taken lightly. Do you know what happens when muscles get extremely fatigued and you can feel that burn? They shake. And that's the last thing you want to happen while shooting. Supporting the lens without a tripod or monopod is fatiguing after awhile and when you are in a canoe or kayak, you can add the effects of paddling to that as well. True, you are not lifting massive weights, but there is an effect and should be given consideration when taking these types of lenses out on your canoe or kayak. I have considered getting a monopod built into my canoe but have not felt the need yet to do so. It may come to that someday, but for now, experience will train my muscles.

We arrived at Matheson Hammock Park around 6:30 am. This is a city park in Miami-Dade with a marina and a very nice put-in area for kayaks and canoes. From the put-in, you have a nice view of the Miami and Key Biscayne city skylines, hidden somewhat by the numerous mangroves and palm trees. This is a beautiful spot for sunrise photos and before getting out on the canoe, I set up my tripod for some shots. This morning was not the best for sunrise shots due to the massive clouds that had come across the bay and were now covering the horizon where the sun was rising. It did provide an interesting diffuse light that gave the city skyline a haziness, which was accented by the trees. Here's one of those photos:



Instead of putting the camera and lens back in the dry bags, I carried them around my neck as I walked my canoe out into the water, carefully. The nice thing about Biscayne Bay is that there are no rocks or oyster bars, just sand and grass. I got in the canoe and rested the camera on my lap. I put the lens hood in place so as to protect the lens from wayward water drops. I proceeded south and got some shots of several mangroves in the water. The morning light richens the color of these trees and their reflection. Here is an example:



I got no more than a mile when I came upon a couple of great white egrets taking advantage of the outgoing tide. Today, low tide was at 10:47 am, so the tide would be going out all morning, and the wading birds would be out in numbers as the bay became shallower near the mangroves. After capturing the two birds for awhile, I paddled a bit further and found an area speckled with at least a dozen tricolor herons, some still in their immature plumage, a great blue heron, a yellowcrown night heron, and the great white egrets. I parked my canoe and hung out with the birds for a very long time. Speckling the water were mangrove trees and the birds would find a good hiding spot behind one. I had an idea that I would get out of the canoe and walk to a better spot. I put the stake out pole in to hold my boat in place, got out and started to wade slowly toward the birds. No sooner did I start walking that I realized this was a very dumb thing to do. The canoe gliding across the water is silent, a person wading through water is not. So I retreated back to the boat and used my paddle to help me get in closer. By that time, I was in too shallow water to move without effort, I had to gently push my way through. Once I found a good spot I stayed put and let the birds get used to me. And they did, mostly. The tricolors were very cooperative and after awhile the great white egrets were able to ignore me and go about their business.

At this time of day, the lighting is excellent. As I was shooting in the direction of the mangroves, the rising sun was to my back. For the white birds, I stopped down about 2/3 and let the background go dark. The red mangrove roots and leaves show up nicely and provide a natural background against the white birds. The birds were all actively feeding and it was easy enough to capture them as they plunged their beaks and heads into the water and come up with a fresh catch; water snakes, puffer fish and crab is what I noticed to be the catches of the day. Here are a couple of bird shots:





At one point I got myself closer to the mangroves as my canoeing companion was passing by further out on the bay. Between us was a tricolor heron fishing. The backlight turned the bird into a silhouette and with the 300mm, I was able to get a shot of the bird catching a fish just as my canoeing friend passed by in the background. The Miami skyline added to the photo, here's one of those shots.



Unlike Chokoloskee Bay in the Everglades, oyster beds are not an issue on Biscayne Bay. This allows me to concentrate more on the photo subject and not as much on where I am going. The tides are not very strong here unless you get into one of the canals or creeks, so you can meander as slowly as you like, quietly approaching the wading birds. At lowest tide, you cannot get within 400 ft of the mangrove shoreline in some areas. The shallowness makes the water more interesting; it is so clear you can see the bottom all the time. Fish are hiding everywhere in the grasses and when spooked, their movement is quite noticeable. The puffer fish were quite active, especially around the wading birds. What is awesome to see are when larger fish come through, like schools of bonefish (you'll see their dorsal fins out of the water), tarpon (they move like bullets), sharks and rays. Occasionally, you'll see dolphin and manatee a bit further out in the bay. A guy we run into often (he's there practically every morning) spots manatee all the time. So they are there, but mostly in the winter time.

Heading back to the put-in I was able to capture some cormorants resting and drying their wings on some branches sticking out of the water. They let me get pretty close, about 15-20 ft without being spooked. Here's one shot:



We were off the water by 10 am this day, it was already getting nasty hot and the afternoon storm clouds were forming and starting to head our way. I was happy with how well the telephoto lens worked for me on the canoe. The images came out sharp and well exposed and I was able to capture a few flight shots. Here's one of a great white egret, flying by at eye-level. This shot won photo-of-the-day on myparkphotos.com. Why did it win? As far as display photos go, it isn't that spectacular, but understanding how a shot like this is successfully executed does make it a winning photo. Notice the background and its horizontal lines that run parallel with the bird (I didn't have to use the straightening tool in Photoshop for that). Also notice the feather detail, due to the 2/3 stop down and good focus. The eye of the bird is sharply focused and lit from the sun, exactly how you want it. These are elements that make a bird shot successful. Of course you should see the hundreds of photos I've deleted!

One last point about shooting wading birds from a boat; know the tides. I came out to this same spot 4 days later (see July 26) and it was high tide at exactly the time I put in. There were no wading birds until about 10 am and then, it was only one great blue heron. Low tide was not until 2:13 pm that day, so I was not on the water long enough to see the same number of wading birds I saw this day. But, high tide brings other opportunities, so read July 26 entry to hear all about that!



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