

Before heading out to Chokoloskee or Biscayne Bay, I always check the tides and ideally I want a low tide in the morning. According to the tide charts, today would be low tide at 6:42 am, perfect conditions. I expected to see lots of birds on the oyster bars, including the roseates, and I was also hoping I might see some white pelicans. Several days before, Chokoloskee was hit with tons of rain. By the time we arrived at 6:30 am, the rain had stopped and there were no cumulus clouds in the sky. But the sky was covered in a thin veil of clouds, making the lighting very diffuse.

What was to be low tide ended up being something different. It seems the rainfall had raised the water levels so much, low tide appeared to be high tide. In fact, the water was remarkably high. And it was suppose to be incoming tide all morning so it would be getting higher as the morning worn on. Long story short, there would be no exposed oyster bars and no wading birds feeding among them. The funny thing though, all morning the current was out going. What I suspect is that with so much water caught in the backcountry, it was flowing out as quickly as the tide could force it back in. No matter how many times I've been to this place, I'll never be able to figure it out completely. There are plenty of others who have been out here for years and even decades and hundreds more times than I and even they sometimes get confused. What can you do but go with the flow.

At the put-in, wading birds often hang out feeding on the oysters and crabs. Today, there was a willet, a snowy egret and a great white heron. I wondered if this was the same great white heron I have photographed on the other side of the bay inside the barrier islands. I hung around watching the heron as the morning sun began to peak over the horizon. The sky was clear at low horizon so the early morning light was beautiful. Soon, the sun would rise up into the sky that was covered in clouds, leaving me less light to work with. I watched the heron for awhile but he stayed low under the mangrove branches, with his back side to me. And I've been taking a piece of advice I've recently read; avoid shooting the butts of birds (I don't think it's necessarily a steadfast rule, but one that deserves some consideration). The bird was not being cooperative and would only show me his hind side, and in the meantime all other birds had flown off somewhere in the distance. So I moved on into the bay.

I decided to paddle toward the roseate island where I was certain I would not see them at this time, but there might be some other interesting photo subjects. The morning light was now on the mangroves lining the bay and the western sky above them was dark. This makes a nice contrast between the sky, mangroves and water. I took a shot with my telephoto lens but that was not the appropriate lens for this landscape. I wanted to see the sky and water in the same photo, sandwiching the golden glow of the mangroves. But at 420mm, I couldn't get that effect from where I was. Here's the shot I got, obviously without the water in the foreground.



This leads me to something I have been contemplating lately. I want to start taking two cameras out with me and my Canon Powershot doesn't do it for me anymore. I have my eyes on the new Sony A700 which is just now hitting the market. The only thing that makes me hesitate about buying that camera

now is that there is talk of another Sony, the A900, coming out later. Sony is going to try to catch up with Nikon in the DSLR market and I have a feeling I'll be going along for the ride. If I get a bit too anxious, I may be upgrading cameras every year for no justifiable reason! In the meantime, I try to keep it in perspective and I know that if I let it get out of control it can be costly beyond my needs. But back to the idea of a second camera, the idea is to have one camera with a wide angle lens and the other to go with the telephoto lens. I don't think that is too out of control.

For now, wide angle shots are not an option so I continue on toward the oyster bar near Chokoloskee pass where the roseates, and more recently the brown pelicans have been residing. I come to the oyster bar and at that time, only about 10 square feet of oyster bar is exposed, enough for a few willets and about a dozen or so other shorebirds to hang out. Near by dead mangrove branches were sticking out of the water with enough branches for several dozen shorebirds to stand with comfortable distance between each other. I drifted over and took several shots. The sky was still cloud covered so I increased the ISO to 800, something I really don't like to do. The photos are good, but a bit grainy as you would expect with some cameras. With the correct exposure, the photos should turn out suitably, so I kept it there most of the morning. Here is one of the shots of the shorebird ornaments. My next task was to identify these birds. In the photo below, I identified several ruddy turnstones (with the orange legs), at least one semipalmated sandpiper, and one willet.



I learned my lesson about identifying animals that I photograph. Shorebirds offer a formidable challenge, they all look the same to an uneducated eye. But once you start to pay closer attention to them, you begin to notice their differences. I'll continue to learn about them and my goal is to be able to identify a shorebird without having to look it up in my book. Shortly after moving to Florida I started learning names of birds, my first sighting being an anhinga. Soon, I learned the egrets and herons and it took some time to get where I could identify each of them correctly without referring to the bird book. I still need some help though when it comes to the juveniles. During the summer months is when you can photograph the juvy's and get to know them better. This summer, I've been privileged to see juvy little blue herons, green herons, yellow and black crown nightheron, tricolor herons, snowy egrets, and cattle egrets. Every single one of them I found on Biscayne Bay.

But I'm in Chokoloskee Bay now and the shorebirds are back in great number. After spending some time with the shorebirds on the branches, I headed over to the brown pelican island near by. The roseates, by the way, were nowhere to be found. I think they have headed into the backcountry where I saw them last year in November or maybe today they were further out in the gulf or down in Flamingo about 90 miles south of here. In the meantime, I would photograph the brown pelicans. I paddled toward the island and got myself on the side that allowed me to drift toward the island and with the morning sun behind me. The morning light was so diffuse from the clouds that I don't think it would have mattered at what position I was shooting, so I let the water drift my boat toward the island. The pelicans were hiding among the mangrove branches and several of them flew off to a distance mangrove patch as I approached

with my boat. I only managed a couple photos because the birds were mostly hidden or had flown off to another mangrove island. So I continued paddling around the area looking at the shorebirds and occasional pelican. After awhile I decided to head over to the north end of the bay where my fishing friends were fishing.

I paddled around without seeing any birds for shooting and wondered if I would have anything to take home. I came back out into the bay, in the direction toward the marina. That's when I noticed dozens of white birds (gulls/terns) busily flying around the area of the marina. In 2005, Chokoloskee Island was hit hard by hurricane Katrina and Wilma. In front of the Chokoloskee Island Resorts marina are several dock pilings sticking out of the water, remnants of once standing docks. These serve the pelicans well for roosting and keeping their eyes on the standing dock of Chokoloskee Island Park where fishermen clean their fresh catches. I haven't seen this many pelicans and terns since last winter, and now they are back in large numbers. Today, the pelicans were competing for their space with dozens of sandwich terns and few other gull-type birds. The terns were extremely active and I paddled toward the marina to get myself in the middle of all the hoopla watching them fly overhead from piling to piling.

I meandered around the pilings watching the terns as they continually fought over tiny spaces. The pilings were about 6-8 inches in circumference and every few seconds or so I would watch one tern on a piling defending its space, sometimes successfully sometimes not against an incoming enemy. When I first arrived, the sun was still behind a thin veil of clouds so I continued to shoot at ISO800. Soon the clouds burned off and finally, I had a nice sun light to work with. I knocked the ISO down to 400 and continued shooting. The morning light was nice, just right for shooting white birds.

For about 30 minutes or so, I anchored myself on a piece of dock and focused on two terns both situated on a piling that stood about 3 in above the water. One of the birds did not have the yellow tipped beak but was intent on getting the other birds attention. They seemed to have an amiable interaction, although I think the one with the yellow tip was more mature and appeared to be simply tolerating the other bird. Occasionally, the younger bird would make a funny looking gesture while the other stood still trying to ignore the other one's antics. I started seeing the pair as the Abbott and Costello of terns. I took several shots of the two interacting and at one point another tern came in to take over their space and I captured their fight. The two residents won the battle. Here are a couple shots of the two.





I continued shooting more tern conflicts and noticed that some pelicans were mingling with the terns. I concentrated on one particular pelican that had a couple terns hanging around him. I took several shots of him and noticed a odd looking orange object on the other side of his pouch. I paddled around to get to the other side and took a nice side shot of the bird. At home on the computer I was able to get a better look and noticed that the object was a hook stuck in the birds pouch. This is an unfortunate, yet all too common site out here. Pelicans go after fish and sometimes they hone in on fishing boats because they know there will be easy prey near by. This pelican appeared to have caught on a hooked fish and now is carrying the remnants of that capture. The good side of it is that the hook will eventually rust and disintegrate. Here is a shot of the hooked pelican. You can see the hook end stuck inside his pouch at the bottom right.



I must have spent a good 90 minutes with the terns and pelicans, right off the shore of Chokoloskee Island and right near the marina. I could just as easily gotten out of my boat and stood on land to get the same shots. But it was so much fun being in the boat right in the middle of all the action. The terns were so active and displayed several bird behaviors that are always worth photographing. With the exception of nesting, it seems bird behavior often involves some form of conflict and this behavior is quite appealing to photographers.

By noon it was time to come off the water and I headed back to our put-in. What started off being a bust ended up being the opposite. Terns and gulls, like brown pelicans and ibises are very common and not given much attention. But today, they showed me that they can be extremely interesting photo subjects. I think I could create an entire photo album just on tern conflicts. Here's one more of those shots.



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